



LARS AND THE REAL GIRL (Cert 12A)

Reel Issues author: Steve Williams

Overview: Offbeat comedy in which a lonely, delusional Christian man's life-size female doll becomes his unlikely bridge into fuller membership of a caring, Midwestern town.

Director: Craig Gillespie (2008)

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Running time: 106 minutes

Caution: Some sex-related content

PLOT SUMMARY

Lars is a lonely man, who lives next door to his brother and sister-in-law, Gus and Karin in a US Midwestern Town. Whether Lars is with his family, at work or in the local Holy Grace Lutheran Church, he finds it difficult to relate to people. It emerges that Lars' and Gus' mother died when they were young, and their father turned in on himself.

When Lars develops a delusional attachment to a life-size sex doll he calls Bianca, his family blame themselves for not spotting signs of his mental illness earlier. Lars' doctor suggests this is how he is communicating his needs and working through his issues.

Despite his family fears that Lars' delusion will further isolate him from the outside world, in general, it has the opposite effect. The local community embraces Bianca and she is invited to make her own contribution, welcome to church and on the school committee and even given a more suitable makeover.

Bianca becomes loved in her own right, not just as Lars' girlfriend.

As Lars struggles with sharing Bianca with others, this becomes a turning point in his delusion. He begins to believe she is dying, mirroring the loss of his mother. During this time, Lars becomes more open to others, especially co-worker Margo, and their relationship develops as Bianca's health deteriorates. The film ends with them at her graveside, looking out towards future possibilities.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Love - In the film, Lars has difficulty in forming loving relationships. He tries to cope with this through his delusional behaviour. His illness prevents him from seeing that people care for him unconditionally and loving them in return.

Mental illness - In *Lars and the Real Girl*, Gus and Karin adapt their lives around Lars' delusional behaviour. We may have little experience of mental illness. This tends to make it harder to understand what it is like to live with this type of condition.

Community - *Lars and the Real Girl* is set in a stable, happy community, where people seem to know and support each other well. In communities like this there is a welcome for all. They may be few and far between but they're worth striving for.

Hope - Many of the characters in *Lars and the Real Girl* maintain their belief in hope. Hope can be an attitude that makes the best of all circumstances or it can be a kind of naïve hope that is dependent on events and wishes things were different.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1 – DVD Chapter 7, 26:26 to 30:30, approx 4 minutes

Mental illness: Gus and Karin meet with Doctor Dagmar. Gus expresses his frustration at Lars' behaviour and the public shame he imagines it will cause them. But the doctor encourages him to look at Lars' delusion from the perspective of the sufferer.

Reflect (on your own)

Why do many people have a different attitude to mental illness compared with physical sickness? People often project their fears and insecurities onto others. Why are people often scared of those with mental illness?

Discussion (in pairs or threes)

- Those with mental health issues are often difficult to understand. Sufferers may hide their illness when possible, although many people are affected by mental illness in some way. How could we become better listeners to them?
- People who are different from us are often hard to deal with. Reflect on your own experience of encountering people from a different background. How did you react? In the light of the film, how might your reaction change in the future?

Creative activity (all together)

Discuss what you might do to help create a more positive response to people with mental health issues, for instance in a workplace or local church. This could be a list of guidelines, a poster or specific training you could arrange. Make a list of what you would include, or produce a draft version. (May need large sheets of paper and marker pens.)

Clip 2 – DVD Chapter 15, 57:50 to 59:20, approx. 2 minutes

Community: The locals see an opportunity to help Lars work through his delusion. Some of them begin to ask if Bianca can help volunteer around the community. Bianca brings out the need within the local community to care for and include others.

Group discussion

- Explore together what signs you see in the film of a healthy community at work. For example, one of the reasons is that people are willing to volunteer and encourage others, like Bianca, to help them. Opportunities come easily, indicating that the community is already active.
- Discuss the obstacles there are these days to building strong communities, for example, the fact that people often live, work and socialise in different places and have wider networks of friends beyond where they live.
- What are the values that good communities have in common? (Draw out factors such as respect and inclusion.)

Individual reflection

- How can people be helped to recognise the good in their own communities?
- Being willing to help others often means accepting help as well. Why can this be difficult sometimes?

Discussion (in twos or threes)

- In what ways can you imagine a real community doing something similar? How can these be encouraged without putting further pressure on people with busy lives?

- What are your experiences of volunteering? How were you supported to make a difference to others?

Creative activity

Imagine a bag filled with heavy objects. One person might be able to lift it on their own. But if another helps, it becomes easier. Its even easier with more people. What does this tell us about the value and strength of community? (If possible, try it out in practice!)

Clip 3 – DVD Chapter 17, 1 hour: 02 to 1 hour: 06:05, approx. 4 minutes

Love: Once Bianca becomes heavily involved in community work, Lars starts to react in a self-pitying way. He claims that no-one really loves him, which prompts an angry response from Karin. She reminds Lars that the way the community has freely embraced Bianca shows how much they love him.

As children mature and develop into adults, they learn to see love from the perspective of others, not just themselves. Objects of affection, such as toys, are usually superseded in importance by real human interaction. However, in Lars and the Real Girl, the main character feels prevented from making this progression because of unresolved grief from his childhood. He journeys from a selfish, immature kind of love to one that risks rejection, yet can provide something more fulfilling. For love to last, it needs to be mature in order to bear the weight of life's demands.

Individual reflection

Love is portrayed in the film as involving commitment, even pain sometimes. If love is an investment, what sort of rewards does it give? Why might a person withhold love from others, or use their love selfishly?

How does love relate to some of the other themes in the film (e.g. community and hope)?

Discussion in pairs or threes

- People develop loving relationships, but may 'love' their car or their job. Is this just a figure of speech, or does it disguise inner priorities? What is the right balance?
- Where else in life is risk needed in order to learn and grow as human beings? How might we encourage others to give and receive love?

Clip 4 – DVD Chapter 27, 1:37:15 to 1:39:02

Hope: At the funeral, Lars is finally able to accept the death of a loved one and seems to be letting go of his delusion. As Margo stands with him, this offers the possibility of developing their relationship. They both hope for a new kind of life that can come out of this death.

This scene, along with the whole film, shows the importance of making the most out of sometimes difficult circumstances. Hope is difficult to maintain when circumstances are against you. Society often gives the message that cynicism is the best way forward. If things will be the same as they have always been, raising expectations is dangerous and only leads to disappointment.

Individual reflection

- Are you generally an optimistic 'glass half full' or more pessimistic 'half empty' kind of person?
- What are the advantages of a hopeful view of the world? Why might pessimism be a safer option at times?

Discussion in twos or threes

- Where do you draw hope from? What are some of the reasons for hope that you can see in the world?
- What maintains the hope of the film's characters throughout?
- How can we use our experiences of difficulty to support others going through their own struggles?

Creative activity (all together)

Create a collage (either on paper, a noticeboard or using a computer) using newspapers or magazine clippings with words and images of hope. What kind of emotions are communicated through these?

GOD'S STORY

Mental health – Luke 4.31-37

Here, Christ separated the person from the condition, by accepting him, but not leaving him unchanged. Others may have found the man strange or offensive. Jesus cares for the individual and empowered people as part of his mission.

In Bible times, understandings of mental health were not as developed as they are now. As care for the individual was dependent on the person's circumstances, those with illnesses that prevented them from working were often considered burdens. Sickness was frequently linked to sin, but Christ was keen to disassociate this link (John 9.1–3).

Group discussion

- What stereotypes of people with mental health problems still exist today? How can these be challenged in our society?

- How can we care for the needs of those with mental health issues and include them, without having unrealistic expectations?

Community – 1 Corinthians 12.12-20

Paul criticised the notion that church congregations could form cliques. When people refused to recognise each other's gifts, they were not just detracting from the organisation, but also from valuing each other as uniquely chosen by God. Being a member of the body was also meant to help each individual fulfil their potential in Christ, to become more like him. Members were not meant to conform to each other's expectations. Differences should create diversity not conflict. Membership of some groups today is based on money or power. People can feel the need to compete to earn their place. But Paul suggests that if qualifications or status was the main criteria, there would be no-one in the group!

Group discussion

- What would you say if someone claimed that their role in the community detracted from their individuality?
- How might the recent rise of technology (e.g. social networking websites) strengthen or weaken community bonds?

Love - 1 John 4.16b-21

According to John, God's love is unique, because we did not deserve it. John wants us to treat others as God treats us. This love is practical, rather than being based on emotions or sentimentality. It involves reaching out to others and being vulnerable. Love brings us out of isolation, so that our opinion of

ourselves and the world is not the last word. Neither is love limited by our circumstances or background.

Group discussion

- How does this depiction of love challenge our own understanding and practice?
- How can we take steps to show love to those people we find difficult to accept?

Steve Williams is a graduate in Theology and Ministry, currently doing further study at Durham University

© Bible Society 2011 Permission is given to make up to ten copies for use within a single Reel Issues discussion group.