



THE SECRET OF KELLS

(Cert PG)

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Overview: A blend of British and Irish church history with Celtic mythology, this traditional animation presents a highly imaginative fictional story based around the Book of Kells. Perhaps the best known of early British and Irish illuminated manuscripts, the book's creation is seen through the adventures of young Brendan. The boy lives in a remote medieval outpost that comes under attack by the notorious 'Northmen', the Vikings. The fight is on to not only finish the book, but also protect it from the raiders, so that it might become a beacon of hope to the world, the book that turns darkness into light.

Directors: Tomm Moore and Nora Twomey (2009).

Producers: Les Amateurs/Vivi Film/Cartoon Saloon/France 2 Cinema.

Length: 72 minutes.

Cautions: Some scenes too intense for younger children.

THE FILM

A strange creature introduces the story. She claims to have 'lived through many ages' and seen many things. She has seen the Northmen invading Ireland, and witnessed the suffering they left in their wake. 'Yet I have seen beauty thrive in the most fragile of places,' she adds. 'I have seen the book, the book that turns darkness into light.' Such a mysterious introduction draws the viewer into an epic adventure set amid a virtual kaleidoscope of colour and imagery. The mostly hand-drawn scenes go against the grain of today's CGI-based animations. Yet by reflecting the intricate

nature of medieval manuscripts, the ornate drawings create a depth and atmosphere to rival the best of Disney's computer-driven output.

Young Brendan lives on a monastic settlement in ninth century Ireland. His uncle Cellach is the abbot. Cellach used to be an illuminator. But now he uses his artistic skill to design a defensive measure around the monastery at Kells – 'a wall to save civilisation' – as he puts it. However, his world is shaken by an important visitor, Aidan of Iona, who wants to focus on finishing an illuminated Gospel manuscript, rather than build a wall. It is clear that the men have very separate obsessions.

Brendan is obliged to help his uncle bolster the monastery's defences. But he is drawn towards the scriptorium, where Aidan is working on the book. The boy ends up assisting him in its production. Brendan faces his fear of the forest when he ventures out to look for gall nuts to make ink. There he encounters the mysterious creature who introduced the story, a changeling called Aisling. Suspicious at first, she starts helping Brendan to get the raw materials to make the book. But she is reluctant to help when he dares to challenge the dark Celtic deity, Crom Cruach.

Sure enough, the Northmen turn up and attack the monastery. Brendan and Aidan escape with the book. A Viking leader stops them and snatches the manuscript, tearing off the jewelled, golden cover, while scattering its pages. Summoned by Aisling, a pack of wolves defeat the Northmen. Brendan and Aidan gather the torn pages and gradually restore the book. 'The book was never meant to be hidden away behind walls,' says Aidan. Commissioning Brendan to spread the Gospel, he adds, 'You must take the book to the people, so that they may have hope'. Abbot Cellach realises his mistake, of neglecting such a great spiritual treasure.

FIRST REACTIONS

- **Read Exodus 31.1–11.** *The Secret Of Kells* shows how the early Christians of Britain and Ireland valued the place of the arts in the spiritual life and ministry of the Church. This carries an echo of the book of Exodus, where the first person in history to be filled with the Spirit is an artist. Why do you think the early Christians of these islands spent so much time and energy in producing such elaborate illuminated manuscripts? The Book Of Kells is not even a complete representation of the Gospels, and there is no referencing. So what use was that? What can we learn from the monks' perspective?
- **Read Proverbs 1.1–9.** The story places a great emphasis on the need for knowledge and wisdom, and indeed the former monastery at Llantwit Major in South Wales is referred to as Britain's first university. 'If there were no books, all knowledge would be lost for eternity,' says one of the monks. People must have books, so they may have hope. That is what comes across in the film. 'To gaze upon the book is to gaze upon heaven itself,' another monk says of the Book Of Kells. How have we lost such a reverence towards knowledge and learning? Can we regain it? Should the Church play a part in that?
- **Read John 1.1–14.** The Book Of Kells was almost a multimedia presentation of the Gospels, with intricate graphics and ornate imagery adorning the lavish text. And as the film shows, such manuscripts may well have been read out in community, among groups of people. The monks may have been more like storytellers than preachers. How can we recapture something of this, so that the Word becomes flesh among our local communities? Are there any contemporary examples we can follow?

INTERACTIONS

- As well as focusing on art, spirituality and mission, *The Secret Of Kells* raises questions about Christianity and paganism. While Abbot Cellach is disparaging towards the pagan Vikings, Brendan befriends the fairy-like creature Aisling and they work together to overthrow evil – and even to complete the Book Of Kells. Aisling is the one who refers to the book that 'turns darkness into light'. Should Christians and pagans/new agers seek dialogue, rather than opposing one another's objectives – such as finding common ground in the quest for eternal truth, peace and love? If so, how could that be achieved, and what kind of outcome could one hope for?
- While Abbot Cellach concentrates on blocking the world out by building a wall, Aidan of Iona aims to build a bridge to the world by producing a book. One mindset wants to consolidate and conserve, while another mindset yearns to reach out and rally others together. This reflects different trends within monasticism. Can we find parallels in the life of today's church? If so, can such tensions be resolved?
- In the hunt for raw materials to make the book, Brendan and Aisling explore the forest and marvel at the wonders of creation. All around them, nature reflects the knotwork and spirals that are found in Celtic art. How can we engage more with creation through our worship? Are there any stories of churches and individuals who have done that in creative ways?

CLIP TO DISCUSS

Chapter 8, 00.46.22-00.50.20 (about four minutes)

Brendan's battle against the pagan deity Crom Cruach is a crucial part of the story. Interestingly, the fairy Aisling helps Brendan to face his foe and take his 'eye', which is a crystal, to help illuminate the book. It appears there is an even greater evil which demands Christian and pagan to join forces to defeat it. One old Irish source associates Crom with Moloch in the Old Testament. Consider these –

- Brendan faces an ancient fear before completing his task. What fears could prevent us from finishing our mission in life? How do we confront them?
- Crom Cruach is shown as a huge serpent-like creature. How do we stop our fears developing into monsters? Just as Brendan and Aisling helped each other, what help can we get as we fight?
- Brendan finally defeats Crom by drawing a circle around the beast with a small piece of chalk. 'Circling prayers' are an ancient form of intercession. What part does prayer play in overcoming our personal demons?

OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

Read **Ecclesiastes 2.4–11**. Towards the end of the film, the grown-up Brendan and his uncle are finally reconciled. Now in his final days, Abbot Cellach regrets all of his past decisions and thinks the book is lost – until Brendan presents it to him. Tears well up in the old man's eyes as he views the pages, which seem to come to life before him. It echoes the writer of Ecclesiastes, who warns us not to follow his example and make the mistakes he did. What steps can younger people take now, to guard against regret and remorse in later life? How do we show them? How can we mentor others to make the most of their lives?

Application: If you think it's far-fetched to imagine Christian and pagan joining forces to create 'the book that turns darkness into light', think again. In 2011, the year of the the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, both believers and atheists have praised the Bible's influence on culture and language. Even *God Delusion* author Richard Dawkins appears on YouTube, quoting some of the KJV's 'phrases that echo in people's minds', like 'beat their swords into plough shares' and 'fallen on stony ground'.

- Discuss your experiences of the King James Version of the Bible. What are the qualities you admire about it? Which Bible translation has proved most helpful in turning 'darkness into light' for you?
- Following the tradition of the Book of Kells, Bible Society is hitting the road, starting in June 2011, to give thousands of people across the country the chance to see the Scriptures as part of their story. They are creating a unique handwritten copy of the Bible (*The People's Bible*) using digital pens – and so make their mark on history.
- Bible Society is looking for nearly 3,000 volunteers to take this opportunity to their communities. Could you be part of this?
- Think of other ways your local community could mark this unique celebration. What could you do?

Clive Price is a writer, editor and lecturer who has written about film and TV. He has taught media production at Chichester College, business media at the London College of Communication and has written a course on Irish cinema for the Irish Cultural Institute. A qualified journalist, he is sub-editor of Bible Society's Word In Action magazine.

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