

Tom, Thanks for A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood
November 27, 2019

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD (2019)
Directed by Marielle Heller
Written by Micah Fitzerman-Blue & Noah Harpster
Starring Matthew Rhys, & Tom Hanks as Mr. Fred Rogers

It's difficult not to believe that some people are born with an X-factor, a magnetism to which the ordinary are drawn, either through some heavenly virtue or general charisma. This rare sort of person seems to glow from the harmony of ideally-aligned chromosomes that have united in the forming of someone truly special. It can't be quantified and thus it can't be proven, but it drives the wonder that perhaps this specialness, this X-factor, is not universal, but in the eye of the beholder. It's nice to imagine we're all this exceptional to someone, and I guess we are. But there does exist an occasional person so special they dare not admit to their specialness, for how it could belittle the rest of us. If I've learned anything from Mr. Rogers, it's that I shouldn't hold him, or anyone, so high; that we're all only human. But he *did* shine bright enough, at least, to show us how to find the same glow within ourselves, and that's pretty special.

Fred Rogers hosted his public broadcast children's show, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, for longer than Carson hosted the Tonight Show. Featuring unrefined hand-puppets, a head-on approach to heavy subject-matter, and fearless pauses of silence, it flew in the face of every corporate mandate of television; he didn't peddle products or methods or doctrine, his only agenda was that the world's millions of curious, uncynical children felt seen. Lately, it's been overly-stated, and I think it's heavy-handed to imply, that Tom Hanks is a grown-ups' Mr. Rogers. At a distance, they're both widely influential men with a reputation for generosity and emotional evocation. But to cross-generationally compare the relevance of two people for such superficial reasons feels unproductive, and when I first heard that TH would be playing Fred Rogers in the bio-pic, I admit, I found the casting a bit on-the-nose.

But I was delighted to see this film deviate from a traditional cradle-to-grave format. For that sense of biographical narrative, one can watch the impeccable documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, but this scripted film takes a more theatrical approach. Hanks' transformation is practical and nonprosthetic, and instead captures his character's tone. Rather than rhyming off the subject's greatest hits (in Rogers' case: his [senate appeal for PBS funding](#), or when he [shared the swimming pool with Officer Clemmons](#), or when he [taught the children of the world about assassination](#)), *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* brings us into the life of Lloyd Vogel, an Esquire reporter who's been assigned to write a short piece on Mr. Rogers for an issue about American heroes. Lloyd's developed a reputation for antagonism, and when Fred's turned out to be the only American hero open to meeting with him, Lloyd is suspicious.

Because of Mr. Rogers' rare breed of goodness, even the most optimistic movie goer will identify more with Lloyd than Fred, but to go see this movie at all shows at least a shred of willingness to begin closing the gap. Certainly, I can get stuck in a spiral of self-doubt and cynicism, as can many of us simple humans, but to hear Mr. Rogers tell Lloyd, "I don't think you are broken," is to hear him say it to us. This is reinforced when, in the same scene, he deploys one of his signature quiet glares into the hearts of every lonely human among us. I should say, at this point, we're openly crying, and not for the first time.

The story is creatively arranged as if to be a meta episode of Mr. Roger' Neighborhood. Lloyd is presented as a *friend* of Mr. Rogers (again, Lloyd is all of us and all of us are indeed friends of Mr. Rogers), and the transitions between scenes are done via adorable city-scape models in the style of the Land of Make-Believe. By the end, in spite of our best effort to secure our guard, we are forced to drop shoulders and accept a good person's loving embrace, accept the friendship Fred never once doubted. It's a hard-learned lesson for Lloyd, but he finally understands that love is a two-way street when the tables are turned and Mr. Rogers comes to visit him in *his* neighborhood.

Here, we have a study in the challenge to humanize our heroes rather than glorify them. To presume a person is innately superior in their decency, is to undermine their commitment to being the best person they know they can be. What's more is it lets you off the hook in your own responsibility to make the same commitment. This film is

careful not to let us think anyone is less capable of self-love and kindness. Fred's wife, Joanne Rogers, reminds us (though Lloyd) that Fred is as imperfect as anyone, and we see that for ourselves when a mistake at the piano causes him to pound angrily on a cluster of low keys. What matters is the breath that follows, and his willingness to return to the melody; because none of us are broken.

It would be disingenuous for me not to include that Mr. Rogers was never one of my top guys. I remember seeing him [on Arthur](#), and PBS in general, and I probably even caught a few of his essential lessons. But, in Canada, we had a similar character named Mr. Dressup, and I felt seen through Judy Blume as much as anyone else. But this movie is hardly a niche article meant only for tenured members of Mr. Roger's neighborhood. It invites you to think back on all the many heroes who loved you into being. It's being described as "the movie we need right now," and while that might be so, there's really no wrong time for a reminder of your worth, that anything mentionable is manageable, and that you are most certainly not broken. Then again, there's no time like the present to accept the love of a friend and neighbor, and to know that you are seen.

Thx!