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The Revisionaries Movie Review

Posted by bsimon On October - 30 - 2012 [0 Comment](#)

Title: The Revisionaries

Director: Scott Thurman

A remarkably humane and well-rounded look at a perhaps unlikely yet nonetheless incredibly divisive political hot-button issue, director Scott Thurman's "The Revisionaries" delves into the Texas School Board of Education's attempts to vacuum out through legislation various language and historical examples objectionable to movement conservatives from the nation's textbooks. Pointed without being nasty or unfair, this fascinating movie is a gripping, must-see work for nonfiction film aficionados, politicians and current events intellectuals alike — an engrossing social document of our turbulent times and often at-odds relationship with not only science but, more broadly, experts-in-field.

It seems utterly ridiculous — the plot of some fanciful Hollywood concoction — but in Austin, Texas, 15 people actually sit ready to exert undue influence over what is taught to the next generation of American schoolchildren. Once every decade, the state's Board of Education (BOE) rewrites the teaching and textbook standards for its nearly five million students. And when it comes to textbooks (because of the state's purchasing power, and 110 percent upfront payment), what happens in Texas affects the nation as a whole, since textbook manufacturers are often hesitant to act against their "recommendations."

Various right-wing organizations have cannily sought to advance their agenda through this process, making for an unusual frontline in the country's ongoing, so-called culture war. After briefly serving on his local school board, Don McLeroy, a dentist and avowed young-Earth creationist, was elected to the BOE, and later appointed chairman. During his time on the board, McLeroy — who once declared, "Education is too important not to be politicized" — has overseen the adoption of new science and history curriculum standards, aided by Liberty University law professor Cynthia Dunbar and others.

"The Revisionaries" charts this bureaucratic trench warfare, wherein language regarding evolution and intelligent design is argued about back and forth, and subjected to various amendments. Kathy Miller, of the liberal-minded Texas Freedom Network, and Ron Wetherington, an anthropology professor from Southern Methodist University, are among those who weigh in on behalf of what is widely accepted as settled science during these board meeting debates, where politicking and barely concealed contentiousness are ever-present, bubbling just around the edges. Later, as the debate shifts to language about topics like slavery, suffrage, the Civil Rights Movement and important minority historical figures, McLeroy fights for his chairmanship and then his very re-election to the BOE.

Through all of this, director Thurman gives equal time to these heartily clashing viewpoints. Rather than remaining satisfied with leaning on two-dimensional archetypes, he gives all of the aforementioned subjects a chance to explain both their personal views and their opinions of the BOE's mission. The movie also follows McLeroy around at his dental practice and church, showing a private side of him that sometimes contrasts his rhetoric (in both directions) in interesting ways. The result, rather remarkably, deflates the fanned flames of partisan discord, while still highlighting the legitimate stakes involved in some of the curious erasures the more right-wing members of the BOE seek. "The Revisionaries" takes a state issue that has national implications, but doesn't hog-tie it to national frenzy and political party talking points.

It helps, of course, that Thurman's subjects are for the most part impassioned but not rhetorical bomb-throwers of the first order. Wetherington is a calm but shrewd academic who doesn't stoop to automatically demonizing his foes; after all, he can parry with facts and scientific method, so when he decries the "flammable mixture of ignorance and arrogance" involved in the GOP's rabble-rousing pushback against so-called elites, it has less unfocused rage and more the surgically precise, knuckle-rapping exasperation of your favorite Socratic teacher. McLeroy, too, for his part, comes across less as a conniving anti-intellectual and more genuinely befuddled by the contempt for his efforts — a decent family man trying to split perhaps unsplit hairs when it comes to pruning "liberal" viewpoints and claiming that he is not actually advocating for his personal beliefs.

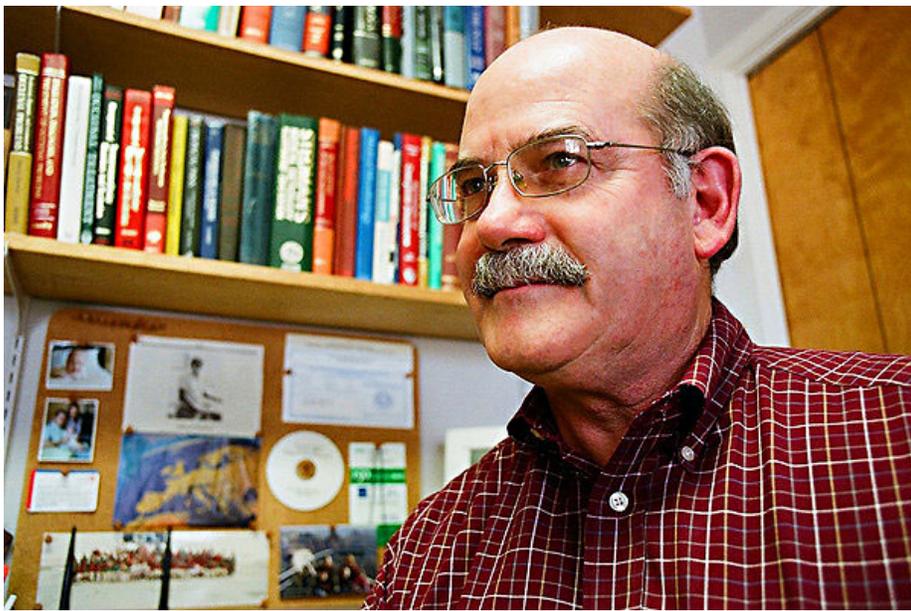
NOTE: For more information on the movie, visit www.TheRevisionariesMovie.com.

Technical: B

Story: A-

Overall: A-

Written by: Brent Simon



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