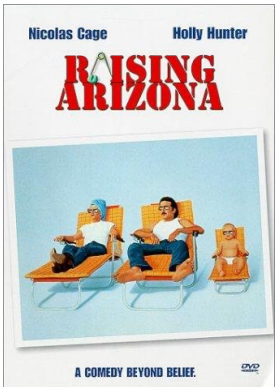
Morality: *Raising Arizona*

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Eric Michael Mazur[1]

In 1987, Joel and Ethan Coen released their second feature film, *Raising Arizona*, to mixed reviews. Hailed by some as a technical triumph, the movie was generally overlooked for its interpretive merit, and few movie analysts at the time—neither those who enjoyed the film nor those who did not—considered its structure too deeply, dismissing it as "just" a comedy. This was particularly true of scholars of religion and film who, despite some of the film's marketing,[2] did not considered it worthy of religious analysis. Consistent with a lack of attention paid to the genre of comedy in the scholarly study of religion and film, even now, nearly thirty years after its release, *Raising Arizona* has received scant serious religious consideration.[3]



A comedy beyond belief?

But this film is more than just another screwball comedy.[4] From the large gold "chai" [חי] dangling around the neck of prison counselor "Doc Schwartz," to the constant biblical references throughout the narration, the story seems worthy of attention for its religious significance. Narrated like a personal confession,[5] this film presents a classic story of a man caught between the desire to do good and the temptation to do evil, following the model of a morality play that is centuries old. "The morality play," observes David Bevington, "tells the story of a representative individual Christian." It chooses a universal central figure who is surrounded "by abstract representations of his state of mind or body: Despair, Courage, Strength, Five Wits, and so on. He is counseled by his Good Angel and tempted by his Evil Angel, or by similar figures. Accordingly," Bevington concludes, "allegory is central to the method of the morality play…."[6] While *Raising Arizona* may not employ characters as explicitly identified as Temptation or Evil, they are clearly part of the narrative structure, and there is a moral to the story. But given the role of religion in contemporary America, it is no surprise that—with a viewing audience less and less familiar with the religious texts upon which this story is modeled—the religious nuances of *Raising Arizona*, and films like it, have, in the words of Herbert Gans, gone "in one eye and out the other."[7] What critics seem to have missed is that *Raising Arizona* is not a morality tale without a moral, but a morality tale about morality; a non-moral morality tale.

A FILM *ABOUT* NOTHING, OR A FILM ABOUT *NOTHING*?

Many reviewers were highly critical of *Raising Arizona*. Sheila Benson wondered how the film could "move so fast, be so loud and remain so relentlessly boring at the same time"; John Simon, arguing that "no beast is as dumb as these characters," considered *Raising Arizona* to be "an endlessly coarse, unendingly

mindless film"; and Roger Ebert gave the movie one and one-half stars, exclaiming that it was "all over the map."[8] Janet Maslin suggested that the film "tells its story in a spirit of technical accomplishment rather than in the interests of narrative momentum," concluding that "[t]o the extent that films are about ideas, *Raising Arizona* isn't about anything."[9]

Of course, in the annals of film this description would not have made *Raising Arizona* unique; in hindsight, this might have made it representative of its time. *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), one of the most popular television programs of the late 1980s and early 1990s, ultimately made a name for itself as "the show about nothing."[10] Reflecting specifically on *Raising Arizona* and *Blood Simple* (Joel and Ethan Coen's first major release), Bruce Bawer suggests that, while "…the films of the Coen brothers, for all their absurdity, nevertheless reflect an acute and pained awareness of the evil of which human beings are capable," it might be futile "to suggest that the film is more serious than it is."[11] It is, after all, a comedy, and relies more on humor than on morality to deliver its message.

However, as we noted earlier, we should not be so quick to dismiss a film simply because it is a comedy; it is clearly a film about *something*. Richard Gilmore quotes Aristotle to define a comedy as "a narrative that begins in a bad place but, in its narrative unfolding, ends in a good place," and cites as the classic example Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*.[12] *Raising Arizona* seems to fit this description; in the beginning, Hi is a petty criminal with no hopes or dreams, but by the end of the film he is a married man with hopes (and certainly dreams) to be a patriarchal figure in a seemingly close multi-generational family. This may explain why, given this structure, a number of critics argue that the film *is* about something. Joseph Meigs argues that the theme of the film is centered around

> the interrelated ideas that childhood determines our adulthood, that proper parenting or the correct 'raising' process is crucial in the formation of a responsible individual, and that a bad childhood creates a dark side to a child that eventually comes back to haunt him as an adult.[13]

Rita Kemply puts it more directly, arguing that the film is about "having babies and taking hostages."[14] Somewhere in between is Ryan Doom, who notes that the film "examines the failed American family and the lost American dream, for which all a man desires is a wife, a job, and a family to raise." He cites the "erosion of economics and family values, the rise of greed, and the chaos of violence created by it," identifying Nathan, Sr., as "capitalism gone wrong," Smalls as the "end of America," and Hi and Ed as the "dying American dream, attempting to build the ideal family."[15] There is little doubt that the film does critically examine the frantic desire to grab on to the American dream and its manifestations in parenthood, homeownership, and, as Hi notes wryly, all things "Ozzie and Harriet."

The reference here to an America as represented by the long-running television program *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966) reflects the influence various forms of media had on the Coens as they constructed the world of *Raising Arizona*. To some critics, the most obvious influences were Saturday morning cartoons. Josh Levine notes that the Coens imagined the film "full of comic speeches and wild chase scenes in which they would take their inspiration from Chuck Jones's Roadrunner cartoons." He concludes that the choice of location "even owes something to the desert landscapes through which Wile E. Coyote eternally chased that beep-beeping bird," while Carolyn Russell observes that "[t]he showdown between Small [sic] and H.I. (a conflict between H.I.'s outlaw impulse and his nobler, more civilized, domesticated self) is a showcase of cartoon punishment."[16] This comparison has led several critics to mistake the tattoo shared by Hi and Smalls either for the popular television cartoon character the Road Runner, or Woody Woodpecker.[17] Levine suggests that "it might well be that television watching was the biggest influence of all" on the Coens.[18]

But the world of *Raising Arizona* does not depend solely on the Coen brothers' knowledge of television; it echoes a number of earlier films great and small. From the graffiti painted on the men's room door in the gas station where Gale and Evelle Snopes steal a car—possibly inspired by *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)—to Leonard Smalls's "Mad Max" appearance, the use from *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) of the line "It's a hard world for the little things" and music reminiscent of the shark's theme in *Jaws* (1975), *Raising Arizona* is a highly integrated interweaving of other filmic texts, leading one critic to label the Coens as "typical film-school products" who know "little about anything other than movies" and in whose films there is "no evidence…of exposure to any kind of culture or observation of humanity in any but the two-dimensional, celluloid form."[19]

Nonsense. As with television and film, *Raising Arizona* is replete with references to great literature and observations of humanity. The narration and dialogue are brimming with biblical references, while the very first line of the film—"My name is H.I. McDunnough. Call me Hi"—parallels the familiar opening line from Herman Melville's 1851 classic *Moby-Dick*.[20] "Like *Moby-Dick*," argues Erica Rowell, "*Raising Arizona* ponders age-old religious questions about creation, goodness, and evil, and both turn many a religious phrase," leading her to ponder if Hi's middle initial might actually stand for "Ishmael" (unlike Hi's first name—"Herbert"—his middle name is never revealed in the film).[21] Rodney Hill and Erica Rowell connect Leonard Smalls with John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), while Vincent Camby suggests that Gale and Evelle's last name—Snopes—is "a jokey reminder of [William] Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County" (a point missed by two writers who mistake the name for "Snoats").[22] In justifying the baby-knapping, Hi recalls Rudyard Kipling when he rationalizes that "there's what's right, and there's what's right, and nary the twain shall meet," and Jeff Evans traces the image of the "wart hog from Hell" to Flannery O'Connor in her short story "Revelation" (1965).[23] There is even a healthy blend of classic and American "roots" music included in the soundtrack.[24]

Several critics note other aspects of *Raising Arizona* that emphasize a Southern disposition. Paul Coughlin points out that McDunnough speaks with "the literacy and lucidity of a gifted Southern raconteur … With *Raising Arizona* Joel and Ethan Coen take to extreme the image of the loquacious and conversationally dexterous Southerner."[25] Carolyn Russell observes that H.I. "speaks in a sweetly droning, pseudo-biblical, quasi-mournful ecstasy of verbiage; Howard Cosell meets Billy Graham"—a combination that isn't that odd, given that Cosell was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, eighty miles from Graham's birthplace in Charlotte.[26] Ryan Doom, commenting on Edwina (played by Georgia-born Holly Hunter), notes that she's "the stereotypical Southern woman: stern, forceful, supportive, and demanding when it comes to what she wants."[27]

These last examples wouldn't be worth comment, except for the fact that Arizona is not the South. But this is clearly unimportant to the Coen brothers. In response to the objections of local newspapers that the film portrayed Arizona negatively—as "exaggerated stereotypes of the poor whites commonly associated with the American countryside"—Ethan Coen responded that the portrayal wasn't intended to be real. "It's all made up," he responded, "It's an Arizona of the mind."[28] And brother Joel, in a different interview, admitted that their notions of the South were based on their admiration for writers like Faulkner and O'Connor (whose influence we have already noted), and not on personal experience of the place.[29]

It is also likely that, for many non-Southerners—particularly for the Minneapolis suburban Jews Joel and Ethan Coen and an American Jewry that is overwhelming and historically non-Southern[30]—the "South" is representative of a wide variety of stereotypes, not least of which is moralistic Protestantism. "The white South," writes Larry Griffin, "was in word and deed 'exceptional,'" not least in its "cultural backwardness and religiosity."[31] This image (stereotype, really) of an imagined South would have been accessible to the Coen brothers, whose television watching habits have already been noted, largely because of how it has been portrayed on television since the 1960s.[32] Not surprisingly, the South has served as "the motive and the 'stage' for redemptive collective action in what southern writer J. Bill Berry cites as 'the nation's major moral drama.'"[33] In other words, it is the ideal setting for a morality play.

There is no doubt that numerous critics and scholars have read religion into the Coens's works, though often these have reached rather unexpected conclusions.[34] In an interview with Peter Körte, Ethan Coen admits that he and his brother were brought up "relatively traditionally"—he qualifies it as "moderately strict"—largely because of their mother's influence.[35] Yet according to Dave Itzkoff, the Coen brothers are uncertain "if their [Orthodox] Jewish background had an impact on the movies they make"; citing an interview in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Itzkoff describes Joel's reflection that, while they "don't think about it," he has no doubt that the brothers' shared Jewish heritage "affects how we see things."[36] Georg Seesslen, describing what he calls "Coen Country"—the vast moral and narrative terrain covered by the Coen *oeuvre*—pushes this interpretation a bit farther (quite possibly into "anti-Semitic Country"), calling it a "conglomeration of fragments of a highly complex narrative culture as well as of very lived experiences which may be considered 'Jewish' in so far as damnation is perceived to be implicit in life itself and in any thoughts which might offend against the law."[37] This might be part of the reason why Tasha Robinson notes that the Coen brothers' films are "never explicitly religious in the sense of Christian-targeted movies."[38] Film critic

Jeffrey Overstreet generously admits that he's "not willing to brand the Coens as 'covert Christians,'" in large part because the term "Christian" has lost all meaning (presumably especially when applied to Jews).[39] And Cathleen Falsani, expressing either irony or ignorance of the Coens's religious background, notes that their films "seldom reflect a classical Christ-centered worldview."[40]

IS THE MORAL … MORALITY?

But clearly *something* is going on here. "*Raising Arizona* is an allegory," notes Erica Rowell, while Armond White, in identifying "the Coens' interest in following a moral precept and demonstrating its truth and efficacy in inventive accounts of worldly experience," also notes that "their films present scriptural voices that all creeds can recognize."[41] Falsani examines Ethan Coen's senior thesis at Princeton University ("Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy") in which he argues that it is "the height of stupidity" to believe in God, and quotes a critic who calls the Coens "'secular theologians' whose body of work is 'one of the most sneakily moralistic in recent American cinema.'"[42] Jeff Evans, however, may provide greater insight when he argues that "Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Raising Arizona* is about the American dream and its more specific components—such as the American family and the notions of community in America—filtered through the culture-clashed psyche of the 1980's [sic]."[43]

This reference to the historical context of the film, and the "culture-clashed psyche of the 1980s"—identified even more dramatically as "culture wars" by James Hunter—recalls the rhetorical combat over basic (but profound) moral issues of that era: abortion, gay rights, school prayer, and the like.[44] On the forefront of these battles were conservative Christian leaders, and the most prominent among them was the very Southern Jerry Falwell, ubiquitous television presence and founder of the Moral Majority, which was "credited with playing a role in the election of Ronald Reagan" in 1980.[45] By 1982, the organization claimed an annual budget of $10 million, with one hundred thousand clergy and millions of volunteers. "As much as anyone," notes *New York Times* reporter Peter Applebome in Falwell's obituary, Falwell "helped create the religious right as a political force, defined the issues that would energize it for decades and cemented its ties to the Republican Party."[46]



Turn to the Right?

One of the more familiar tropes of the organizations that made up the Christian Right was the restoration of "traditional family values," often expressed in the kinds of terms found in television programs from the 1950s, the epitome of which was *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which aired on ABC from 1952 to 1966, and to which Hi negatively compares his own family situation during his descent back into petty crime.[47] Another trope, it seems, was a rather difficult relationship with Jews and Judaism.[48] In the late summer of 1980, Dr. Bailey Smith, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, told a national gathering of conservative Christians that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew"; the Rev. Falwell agreed.[49] Republican party presidential nominee Ronald Reagan—who had been in attendance at both events

where these statements had been made, was drawn into the debate, as was incumbent President Jimmy Carter.[50] Falwell eventually reversed his position.[51] Smith, however, was not finished. In November, after Reagan was elected president, it was reported that during a sermon in his Del City, Oklahoma, church, Smith admitted that he didn't know why the Jews were God's chosen people. "I think they got funny-looking noses, myself," he was recorded as saying.[52]

There are quite a few references to Republican Party politics in *Raising Arizona*, all of them negative. Hi admits during the eleven-minute prologue that, while he had heard "that sum-bitch Reagan" was a nice man, he figured that "maybe his advisors were confused," which we can now understand to have included Falwell and the Moral Majority. Gale and Evelle get their bank-robbing plan from a fellow inmate and former under-secretary of Agriculture in the Nixon Administration—the type of criminal, they note, with whom even they wouldn't normally associate. And overlooking all of Hi's parole hearings is the father of the modern conservative movement himself, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.[53] The only image of a Democrat is the one of President John Kennedy, in the jail cell near "Moses"—the only non-White in the film to have a speaking part—as he's reminiscing about his youth.[54]

Throughout the eleven-minute narrative "set-up," we constantly hear Ed yell at Hi: "Turn to the right!" A traditional moral reading would suggest that she is telling him to follow the correct—that is, moral—path. But given Hi's comment that "there's what's right and there's what's right, and never the twain shall meet," this admonition seems to suggest that there is no connection between what is right (as in "correct") and what is Right (as in religio-politically conservative).[55] The incarceration of which Hi speaks before he meets Ed can be interpreted as a moral straightjacket, as envisioned by the Moral Majority and other religio-political organizations of the Christian Right, who (as Hi notes) may be "just in it for the score." Given the choice between promoting their goals as a way of ensuring the social rehabilitation of the wayward sinner or gaining political revenge against what might have been perceived as the liberal excesses of the recently passed "Disco" decade, Hi suggests what might be motivating this moralizing group: "Revenge," he concludes, "is the only argument makes any sense." And significantly, at different times, both Hi and Ed admit that the idea of stealing the baby was Ed's; that which they seek—that which leads to their fall—is blamed on the woman, making Ed the Eve to Hi's Adam. If the baby doesn't represent salvation, but rather the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, knowledge of the pursuit of an external, materialistic "American Dream" that only leads to individual ruin, then the gained "knowledge" is the knowledge of the limitations of a strict moral system, one that Hi fears (maybe for all of us) that he himself has unleashed. *Raising Arizona*, a film seeming about nothing, is actually a critique of the moral climate of morality in the 1980s.[56]

The seeds of this critique are sowed with the film's opening line—the Melvillian, "My name is H.I. McDunnough; call me Hi"—that reveals not only a close awareness of canonical American literature, but also a temporal displacement that establishes the possibility of a moral. Like Ishmael of the famous sea adventure, Hi can serve as our moral guide because he can recount to us the details of his journey, his 1980s-version of a "pilgrim's progress." It is therefore instructive if we recall the words of Hi's apparent "spirit guide" Ishmael in "The Ramadan," in the seventeenth chapter of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael (which means "God hears") criticizes Queequeg's adherence to his own, non-Christian religion, noting that

> I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him.[57]

Allen Austin explains Ishmael as "a child of the flesh"—a naturalist who believes that "man is an orphan in an impersonal universe"—and Ahab's whale quest as an allegory of "the doctrine that personifies and worships the destructive principle of the universe as a God of love."[58]

It now seems plausible to suggest that, while the catalyst of *Raising Arizona* is the conservative political shift in 1980s American culture—the constant "Turn to the Right!"—represented by Republican party politics and the marriage of economic to religious conservatism in the form of the Christian Right, the real

target of the Coens' critique is the sense of moral certitude exuded by these (and other) figures in public life.[59] Are the Coen's—like Ishmael—expressing intolerance for the intolerant?

In a film that is a critique of the charade of moral certitude, no one is as he seems: Hi, the simple Everyman,[60] is articulate and (moderately) knowledgeable of scripture. Edwina, "an office of the law sworn to defend the Constitution," is the (not-so-silent) partner in crime. Gale and Evelle Snopes evolve—if only briefly—from kidnappers to loving foster parents. Even some of the biblical references in the narrative are inverted: the more Esau-like Gale pulls Evelle from the muddy hole by his heel, and Gale twists a portion of the Sermon on the Mount to introduce his crime-spree offer to Hi, telling him he'd "rather light a candle than curse your darkness."[61] Nathan Arizona, Sr., admits that he is not actually "Arizona" at all, but "Huffhines"[62]; and while there is a Florence, Arizona—the home, as luck would have it, of one of the thirteen facilities in the Arizona State Prison Complex—there is no such town as Nathan, Arizona, an interesting state of things if—as a character in a morality play—he represents God.[63] In such a state (of things) there can be no moral certainty, only ambiguity. Within a few years of the release of *Raising Arizona*, *Unforgiven* (1992) would become the first Western to win the Academy Award for "Best Picture" since 1930, despite its challenge to the traditional "outlaw" genre: a morally ambiguous narrative without a clear "good guy" or "bad guy." The times—and not just Hi—seem to be without moral compass.

"ALL HE WANTED WAS A HOT ROLL AND BUTTER…"

But just beyond the *Moby-Dick*-like opening lines of the film, just before we meet another character who isn't what he seems—a large, deep-voiced prisoner exclaiming that he feels like a woman "trapped in a man's body" because he "gets the menstrual cramps real hard"—we hear prison counselor "Doc Schwartz" comment that "All he wanted was a hot roll and butter." We are never told who "he" is, but Erica Rowell identifies it as a comment derived from the short story "Bontzye Shweig" ["Bontzye 'the silent'"], by Yiddish author I.L. Peretz.[64] Peretz, identified by Ruth Wisse as the "first Yiddish literary modernist," was part of the Jewish European world motivated by the possibilities socialism held for Jews (and others). According to Wisse, Peretz "assumed that sooner or later all Jews would have to take advantage of political emancipation and scientific progress, and replace God with human reason as the determinant of their fate." Much like Ethan Coen's argument against a belief in God made in his senior thesis, Peretz believed that a Jewish belief in God was "no long possible," but that in its stead Jews must "continue to honor the exalted moral tradition that derived from faith." Not surprisingly, notes Wisse, "People said that he [Peretz] was 'more than a writer,' by which they meant that he had achieved the status of a moral authority."[65]

Wisse's analysis of Peretz enables us to dig a bit deeper. "Curiously," she notes, "Peretz produced some of his finest work when he thought he was being least profound. The stories that he designated 'humoresque'"—much like the Coen brothers' *Raising Arizona*—"stand up exceptionally well." Informed by his socialism, Peretz was writing for the common man, the Everyman—Jewish or not—who was vulnerable to exploitation by sources beyond his control. "In particular," notes Wisse, "the character Bontshe Shvayg was held up to Jewish workers as a symbol of their passivity."[66]

Despite his sufferings and misfortune, Bontshe is silent all through his life. During the trial to determine what portion of the "World to Come" (the Jewish conceptualization of heaven) Bontshe will inherit, it is the prosecutor who remains silent. One might assume that, in the face of all of the persuasive evidence of Job-like righteous suffering endured by Bontshe and presented in his defense, the prosecutor is simply admitting to the weakness of his own case. But when Bontshe is offered all of the riches of heaven and asks only for a hot roll and butter, the reader realizes that, in a way, the prosecutor has well played his hand (and knows it), and Bontshe has sealed his own fate, settling for eternity in the pattern of his miserable earthly existence even though he now has the opportunity to ask for—and maybe even deserves—more. As Wisse notes, Bontshe, clearly pious man, "has never learned his worth." Peretz, she argues, wants his readers to understand that, unlike Bontshe, "they had better learn to demand their due in this life."[67]



"We can be good, too."

In many ways, all Hi wants is his "hot roll and butter"; by the end of the film, he and Ed realize that happiness does not come from without, but from within. As he notes in the last few lines of the film, "Me and Ed… we can be good, too." They can be: throughout his career in crime Hi had refused to use bullets specifically because he didn't want to hurt anyone; Ed was a public servant ("twice decorated"); and despite their initial (and, to be honest, quite significant) error in kidnapping the baby, they do bring him back ("no harm done").

Maybe it is the case that many have sought the wrong thing in *Raising Arizona*, and are therefore a bit confused. The film certainly has all of the initial markings of a Christian morality play: Hi is Everyman and Ed is Everywoman; the Snopes brothers are Temptation; Smalls is Satan; Nathan Arizona, Sr., is God and his son Nathan, Jr., is Salvation; Hi and Ed struggle with temptation, but ultimately resist and emerge triumphant; and there are enough biblical references in the script to make it sound religious. But it might be a bit of cultural arrogance to presume that Hi is "a representative individual Christian," the element (as David Bevington noted, above) that is central to the construction to the morality play. This is not to suggest that Jews don't have morality plays (they don't, or didn't, at least not nearly in the same way, but that's beside the point), but rather that, as a morality play, having a moral isn't the same as teaching morality, particularly if the moral is about extreme moral rectitude.

By the end of the film, Hi is a man—not wishing to steal, not wishing to do any harm—whose successful journey he has come to on his own. While Erika Rowell suggests that Hi "must loose himself from such mental manacles and embrace a better life or end up like Bonsche, perpetually suffering,"[68] it would appear that, because he is telling the story to the audience, Ishmael-like, from the vantage point of having lived through the events and learned his lesson, he already has. But maybe ending up like Bonsche is better than ending up as the alternative, as the one who has done in this world for the reward in the next. Through his willingness to tell us the details of his journey, Hi seems to be suggesting that maybe the hot roll and butter really are all that he—or anyone—should want in order to be happy. And maybe he is better off following his own self-directed inner path, where he turns neither to the right, nor to the Right.

NOTES

[1] Portions of this chapter were published as Eric Michael Mazur, "'I'd rather light a candle than curse your darkness': Bringing Religion to Light in *Raising Arizona*," in *Art and the Religious Impulse*, ed. Eric Michael Mazur, 104-124 (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002). The author wishes to thank Pauline Fletcher for the opportunity to publish it then, and Associated University Press for the permission to republish parts of it now. I would also like to thank long-time friend and respected colleague Ellen Posman for her close reading of an earlier

draft, and for long-time friend and respected colleague Elijah Siegler for inviting me to contribute this chapter, and for having the patience to wait while I polished it up. Honestly, Elijah, its delay was not intentional!

[2] The videocassette adds a subtitle: "A Comedy Beyond Belief."

[3] Comedies have gotten little attention in scholarly writing on religion and film. Although it is impossible to prove a negative, one need only consult resources like the bibliographies of recent resources in the academic study of religion and film for strong evidence suggestive of this trend; see Eric Michael Mazur, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Press, 2011); John Lyden, ed., *Routledge Companion for Religion and Film* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010). I made a similar claim more than a dozen years ago; see Mazur, "'I'd rather light a candle," 104. To my knowledge, that piece is the only work on religious aspects of the film between its release and now.

[4] See Robert C. Sickels, "'We're in a Tight Spot!': The Coen Brothers' Screwy Romantic Comedies," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, 3 (Fall 2008): 114-122; Andrew Moss, "Schizophrenia and Postmodernism: *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, and 'The Coen Brothers,'" *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 27, 2 (Winter/Spring 2008): 28.

[5] Scholars differ over the role of H.I.'s narrative omniscience; for example, see Richard Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona* as American Comedy," in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 8. Andrew Moss suggests it is all either a dream or madness; see Moss, "Schizophrenia and Postmodernism," 28, 31.

[6] David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 792. Bevington defines the morality play as "the dramatization of a spiritual crisis in the life of a representative mankind figure in which his spiritual struggle is portrayed as a conflict between personified abstractions representing good and evil." He suggests that the most common plot involves "a soul-struggle in which the mankind hero succumbs to vice but is finally restored to grace."

[7] Quoted in Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977), 3.

[8] Sheila Benson, "Two Unlikely Love Affairs: *Raising Arizona*: Farcing Around with Parenthood" *Los Angeles Times* (20 March 1987): sec. 6, 1; John Simon, "Bringing Baby Down," *National Review* (8 May 1987): 54; Roger Ebert, "Raising Arizona," *Chicago Sun-Times* (20 March 1987).

[9] Janet Maslin, "What is a New Director?" *New York Times* (29 March 1987): sec. 2, 17.

[10] See "The Pitch," aired 16 September 1992.

[11] Bruce Bawer, *The Screenplay's the Thing: Movie Criticism, 1986-1990* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1992), 66.

[12] Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona* as American Comedy," 10.

[13] Joseph A. Meigs, "Children into Adults in *Raising Arizona*," in *Selected Essays from the International Conference on The Outsider 1988*, ed. J.M. Crafton (Carrollton, GA: West Georgia College, 1990), 163.

[14] Rita Kempley, "*Raising Arizona*," *Washington Post* (20 March 1987): 29.

[15] Ryan P. Doom, *The Brothers Coen: Unique Characters of Violence* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 16-17. See also Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2007), 38.

[16] Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers* (Toronto, Ont.: ECW Press, 2000), 44; Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 40. See also Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 38.

[17] Meigs, "Children Into Adults," 169; Cathleen Falsani, *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 36; Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 45; Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 29. It is most closely resembles "Mr. Horsepower," the mascot for Clay Smith Cams, which was the foundation for the Woody Woodpecker character; see Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona* as American Comedy," 17. See

also "About Mr. Horsepower," *Mr. Horsepower Genuine Apparel* (n.d.) [Online: <http://mrhorsepower.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 29 May 2013)].

[18] Levine, *The Coen Brothers*, 5.

[19] See Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 38, 45, 49-51, 62; Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers* (London: Virgin Books, 2003), 46; James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2000), 41, 48; Joy Susan McEntee, "Especially Hard on the Little Things: Fathers and Children on the Road in American Film," *A.U.M.L.A.: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association* 96 (2001): 166; Simon, "Bringing Baby Down," 53.

[20] Depending on one's interpretation, there are at least two-dozen biblical references, from Genesis to the Revelation of John; for an accounting of most of them, see Mazur, "'I'd rather light a candle than curse your darkness,'" 104-124.

[21] Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 51, 52-53.

[22] Rodney Hill, "Small Things Considered: *Raising Arizona* and *Of Mice and Men*," *Post Script* 8, 3 (Summer 1989): 18-27; Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 46; Vincent Camby, "*Raising Arizona*: Coen Brothers Comedy," *New York Times* (11 March 1987): C24; Doom, *The Brothers Coen*, 25; Matt Zoller Seitz, "Directors of the Decade: No. 3: The Coen Brothers," *Salon* (29 December 2009) [Online: <http://www.salon.com/2009/12/29/seitz_coens/> (accessed 18 February 2014)].

[23] Rudyard Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (London: Methuen & Company, 1897), 75; Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric in *Raising Arizona*," *Studies in American Humor* 3, 3 (1996): 39-53.

[24] The soundtrack includes Pete Seeger's 1955 *Goofing Off Suite*, a banjo arrangement blending elements from Stravinsky's "Russian Folk Themes and Yodel," "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" from Bach's Cantata 147, and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and the Chorale from his Ninth Symphony; see David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York, NY: Villard, 2008), 194; Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona* as American Comedy," 7. It also includes "Down in the Willow Garden," a traditional bluegrass ballad sung by Ed after one of Hi's dreams.

[25] Paul Coughlin, "Language Aesthetics in Three Films by Joel and Ethan Coen," *Film Journal* 1, 12 (2005) [Online: <http:// www.thefilmjournal.com/issue12/coens.html> (accessed 24 March 2013)]. Coughlin notes that "H.I.'s curious phraseology and distinctive accent operate at a formal level to define both his character and his hayseed heritage," and that the film's dialogue is "too eloquent, poetic and articulate to be mistaken for an attempt to capture and present realistic conversational practices." See also Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 41; Simon, "Bringing Baby Down," 53; Ebert, "Raising Arizona." Rowell notes that "Hi speaks in profuse, mock grandiloquent prose and is partial to biblical tropes"; Simon calls Hi "a complete illiterate, writing a farewell letter in perfectly spelled and grammatical Victorian-romance English"; Ebert simply concludes that "everyone in *Raising Arizona* talks funny."

[26] Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 30.

[27] Doom, *The Brothers Coen*, 22.

[28] Randall Barnes, "The Sound of Coen Comedy: Music, Dialogue and Sound Effects in Raising Arizona," The Soundtrack 1, 1 (2007): 17. See also David Edelstein, "Invasion of the Baby Snatchers," *American Film* 12, 6 (April 1987): 56; Levine, *The Coen Brothers*, 56.

[29] Robson, *Coen Brothers*, 46.

[30] According to the "American Jewish Identity Survey 2001," by 1990 the only region of the country that had fewer Jews in it than the South was the American Midwest; Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, "American Jewish Identity Survey 2001" (New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001), 28. Larry Griffin notes that, even in the South, "those with ready access to potentially powerful competing social identities defined by ethnicity, religion, or race —Hispanics, Asians, Catholics, and Jews, most obviously — are less likely to identify themselves as southerners, especially if they find its collective or stereotyped definitions unpleasant"; Larry J. Griffin, "The American South and the Self," *Southern Cultures* 12, 3 (Fall 2006): 9.

[31] Griffin, "The American South and the Self," 7.

[32] See Marsha G. McGee, "Prime Time Dixie: Television's View of a 'Simple' South," *Journal of American Culture* 6, 3 (Fall 1983): 100-109.

[33] Griffin, "The American South and the Self," 7.

[34] See Mary Ann Beavis, "*Fargo*: A Biblical Morality Play," *Journal of Religion & Film* 4, 2 (October 2000) [Online: <http://avalon.unomaha.edu/jrf/fargo.htm> (accessed 28 February 2013)].

[35] Peter Körte, "Interview: 'We Don't Want Everybody to Love Us," in *Joel & Ethan Coen*, ed. Peter Körte and Georg Seesslen, trans. R. Mulholland (New York, NY: Limelight, 2001), 12.

[36] Dave Itzkoff, "The Coen Brothers Receive a Prize in Israel," *New York Times* (17 May 2011): C3. In the same interview, the Coen brothers claim to be "real ignoramuses about Israel," despite the fact that their mother lived in British Mandate Palestine before the country gained its independence in 1948. See also Georg Seesslen, "Games, Rules, Violations: Looking for a Trail in Coen Country," in *Joel & Ethan Coen*, ed. Peter Körte and Georg Seesslen, trans. R. Mulholland (New York, NY: Limelight, 2001), 242.

[37] Seesslen, "Games, Rules, Violations," 293-4.

[38] Tasha Robinson, "In the Coen Brothers' Punishing World, Morals are Everything," *The Dissolve* (9 January 2014) [Online: <http://thedissolve.com/features/movie-of-the-week/349-in-the-coen-brothers-punishing-world-morals-are-ev/> (accessed 18 February 2014)].

[39] Matt Zoller Seitz, "O Coen Brothers, Where Art God? A Conversation Between Matt Zoller Seitz and Jeffrey Overstreet," *IndieWire.com* (13 March 2013) [Online: <http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/o-coen-brothers-where-art-god-a-conversation-between-matt-zoller-seitz-and-jeffrey-overstreet> (accessed 15 April 2013)]. In this context, it is unfortunate that Robinson characterizes the Coen brothers' films as often taking "a brutal, Old Testament tack on morality," recalling historic anti-Semitic conceptualizations of the God of the Old Testament as an angry God, but the God of the New Testament as a loving God.

[40] Falsani, *The Dude Abides*, 20. The fact that the conclusion appears in a work subtitled *The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* suggests that categories such as "Jewish" and "Christian" are being used rather loosely.

[41] Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 65; Armond White, "The Coens Keep the Faith," *First Things* (February 2011): 53, 54.

[42] Falsani, *The Dude Abides*, 12, 17.

[43] Evans, "Comic Rhetoric in *Raising Arizona*," 39.

[44] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991).

[45] See Peter Applebome, "Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority founder, dies at 73," *New York Times* (16 May 2007): A1+; Matthew C. Moen, "From Revolution to Evolution: The Changing Nature of the Christian Right," *Sociology of Religion* 55, 3 (1994): 345-357; Stephen D. Johnson, and Joseph B. Tamney, "The Christian Right and the 1980 Presidential Election," *Journal for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, 2 (1982): 123-131. According to Applebome, at Moral Majority rallies Falwell would hold up a Bible and tell followers: "If a man stands by this book, vote for him. If he doesn't, don't" (A17).

[46] Applebome, "Jerry Falwell," A1, A17.

[47] There are a number of other interesting references to the 1950s: Although the version of the Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* book tossed around in the film was published in the 1980s, the original version was published in 1957. (Compare Benjamin Spock, *Baby and Child Care* [New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1957] and Benjamin Spock and Michael B. Rothenberg, *Baby and Child Care*, rev. and updated [New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1985]). Also, in his conversation with Arizona, Sr., Smalls notes that his "value" as a "black market" baby was calculated in "1954 dollars," presumably the year of his birth; Erica Rowell notes that the film differs from the screenplay, which (she avers) identifies the year as "1957." [However, this is not the case with at least one published version of the screenplay; see Joel Coen, and Ethan Coen, *Raising Arizona: The Screenplay* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988).] While it may seem insignificant, the two years are the years of the two Coen brothers' birth. Rowell also links the film's explosions to the testing of nuclear weapons in the Arizona desert in the 1950s—a link strengthened by the connection of the gas station men's room graffiti and the film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964); see Rowell, *The*

Brothers Grim, 61. There is the line (already mentioned) from *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). And while "The Little Drummer Boy," to which Evelle Snopes alludes when he sees the baby smile at him, was first published in 1941, it was made popular when it was recorded by the Trapp Family Singers in 1955.

[48] See Tom W. Smith, "The Religious Right and Anti-Semitism," *Review of Religious Research* 40, 3 (March 1999): 244-258.

[49] Marjorie Hyer, "Baptist Leader's Statement on Jews Stirs Dispute," *Washington Post* (26 September 1980): F10; Denis Collins, "TV Evangelist Snags Reagan, but Not Everyone Down Home," *Washington Post* (4 October 1980): A1.

[50] Steven R. Weisman, "Carter and Reagan Comments Tangle Campaigns in a Controversy Surrounding Evangelical Group," *New York Times* (10 October 1980): D14.

[51] Marjorie Hyer, "Evangelist Reverses Position on God's Hearing Jews," *Washington Post* (11 October 1980): A2.

[52] Marjorie Hyer, "Southern Baptist Chief Slips into a New Controversy With Jews," *Washington Post* (21 November 1980): F11. While one cannot be certain, the line is reminiscent of something Hi's boss Glen might say.

[53] Wrote Southern journalist Harry Golden of Goldwater: "I always knew the first Jewish President of the United States would be an Episcopalian"; see Harry Golden, "Barry Goldwater for President," *The Carolina Israelite* 21, 3 (May/June, 1963): 1. Goldwater was descended from a Jewish family (original name: Goldwasser), who were involved in Arizona business from the mid-1800s; see Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2012), 96. Because Jewish identity is transmitted matrilineally—and Goldwater's mother was not Jewish (but was distantly related to Roger Williams)—he would not be considered Jewish according to traditional Jewish law.

[54] One scholar identifies a Walter Mondale bumper sticker on the car stolen by the Snopes brothers, which appears in the scene in which they rush to retrieve the baby they have left behind after their first (gas station) heist, pulling up just inches from the baby in his car seat. See Ulrich Kriest, "*Raising Arizona*," in *Joel & Ethan Coen*, ed. Peter Körte and Georg Seesslen, trans. R. Mulholland (New York, NY: Limelight, 2001), 71.

[55] A popular bumper sticker circulating during and after the 1980 presidential campaign declared that "The Moral Majority is Neither"; see Kathleen M. Lee, "Waiting for the Rapture: The New Christian Right and Its Impact on U.S. Public Policy," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 16, 2 (1991): 65-91.

[56] This kind of critique, revealing a filmic narrative against the backdrop of an actual event in the American political climate, can be found in other Coen brothers' films. One of the closest parallels is the 1998 cult classic *The Big Lebowski*, another "wacky" and convoluted narrative in which we see the main character take his cultural cues from the ambient political landscape. The film begins with the main character ("the Dude") paying for his meager groceries while on a nearby television we can see and hear President George H.W. Bush reacting to August 1990 Iraqi military invasion of its neighbor by insisting that "this will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." This theme—responses to aggression—colors the rest of the film in which "the Dude" suffers the theft of his favorite rug ("it really tied the room together"), physical abuse from various thugs ("we're going to cut off your Johnson, Lebowski") and the police ("I don't like your jerk-off name, I don't like your jerk-off face, I don't like your jerk-off behavior, and I don't like you ... jerk-off"), as well as sexual exploitation. The full text of the Bush statement can be found on-line; see Bush, George, "Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait August 5, 1990." Margaret Thatcher Foundation (n.d.). [Online: http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110704 (accessed 11 January 2015)].

[57] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926), 85-86.

[58] Allen Austin, "The three-stranded allegory of *Moby-Dick*," *College English* 26, 5 (February 1965): 349.

[59] No one side has a monopoly on moral certitude—two years before the film's release, Elizabeth "Tipper" Gore, wife of Senator Al Gore, founded the Parents Music Resource Center, an organization seen by many as advocating music censorship—and their proximity to governmental power may been the inspiration for one character to note as she passes out paychecks, "Government sure do take a bite!" Maybe she's talking about taxes, but maybe she isn't.

[60] Erica Rowell suggests that even McDunnough's monogram ("H.I.M.") communicates this role; see Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 65.

[61] See Doom, *The Brothers Coen*, 25-26; Gilmore, "*Raising Arizona* as American Comedy," 19; Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 33. Compare to Genesis 25:25-27; Matthew 5:15-16.

[62] One scholar incorrectly identifies the last name as "Huffhinds," contributing to his own theory regarding the presence of an over-arching theme of excrement and derrieres; see Meigs, "Children into Adults in *Raising Arizona*," 171.

[63] As I argue elsewhere, "Nathan" is a form of the Hebrew word for "gift" (נתן)—the lengthened form "Nathaniel" in Hebrew can be translated as "given from God." This suggests that Nathan, Jr., represents Jesus: just as the surname of the Christian messiah was not "Christ," so too is the last name of the kidnapped infant not "Junior," despite how often he is identified this way throughout the film—variously as "Hi, Jr.," "Ed, Jr.," "Glen, Jr.," and "Gale, Jr.," as well as "Nathan, Jr."; none of the other babies has their father's name (Larry, Barry, Harry, and Garry); and the father is a carpenter (of sorts; see Matthew 13:55). See Mazur, "'I'd rather light a candle," 104-124.

[64] Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 42; I.L. [Isaac Leybush] Peretz, *Stories and Pictures*, trans. Helena Frank (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1906). Peretz wrote in Yiddish—a primarily Germanic vernacular used by Central and Eastern European Jews and is written using Hebrew letters—for which there is no standard transliteration, particularly for words (and names) using sounds not common in English. The spelling here is from the 1906 translation by Helena Frank; elsewhere it is in the form used by the specific scholar cited.

[65] Ruth R. Wisse, ed., *The I.L. Peretz Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xiv, xxi, xxv.

[66] Wisse, ed., *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, xxvi, xix-xx.

[67] Wisse, ed., *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, xx.

[68] Rowell, *The Brothers Grim*, 42.