

Film Review – Sally Orwin Lee

Joy(12)

Starring Jennifer Lawrence, Robert De Niro
Released online to rent or buy, and on DVD

The history of cinema is a litany of stories about the underdog. From Shane to Jerry Maguire, Rocky to Mulan, Chaplin's Tramp to Forrest Gump it seems we like nothing better than to root for a loser. American cinema in particular has it written into its DNA, born out of a land conquered by the true grit of the pioneer spirit. Every underdog film can be read as replaying this birth of the nation in microcosm. 'Joy' is the name of the lead character, but it is also the time-honoured response to an American dream realised.

So it begins. 'Everyone starts out with a dream of what life will be', says Joy's grandmother early in the film. We watch her precocious granddaughter playing with pristine paper cutouts, her best friend Jackie watching on, quietly weeping as she is transfixed by the story Joy weaves.

'Joy was one of those people that rejoiced in making things'. She is an inventor. She is a doer. Yet by her early 30s she is trapped.

As Joy struggles to bring order to a chaotic existence, we quickly recognise those who have been deadweights on her paper dreams. The men of the house repeatedly fail her and four generations of strong women watch on passively, all under one roof, Joy also has two young children of her own, but it's clear she has to mother the whole household. She possesses a creative force stifled by the fantasists around her who each in their different ways evade reality – and responsibility.

In one revealing scene, conversation halts as the TV soap opera being watched by Joy's mother mesmerises first her grandmother, then Joy is drawn in too, and we realise in an instant how Joy's childhood dreams have died. Joy it seems is genetically predetermined to fail. Yet privately her grandmother keeps calmly insisting 'you're the one born to carry the family to success'.

We are hooked. How will Joy escape the clutches of her needy family? Where will she rediscover that motivation to create and invent? Who will free her from her body of death (Rom 7:24)? Three sources offer hope – her imagination, her drive, and the burgeoning power of the TV shopping channel.


A dream is a powerful force in life. Most of us grow out of naive childhood ambitions whether becoming a footballer, a ballerina or a rock star. But even as poor GCSEs, sudden injury, or plain lack of talent shrivel those dreams, the nagging feeling remains: that we are better than this, that we can achieve more, that we are worth

more. 'This is not who you are', Joy says of herself. I am not who I am either.

The entrepreneurial Joy goes on to realise her dreams of fame and fortune through her invention of the Miracle Mop, a self-wringing plastic mop with a head made from a continuous loop of cotton that can be wrung out without getting the user's hands wet.



As in the starkly beautiful 'Winter's Bone', Jennifer Lawrence portrays blue collar grit and determination with immense power. David O. Russell's sharp script and keen pacing keep the story engaging and urgent throughout. That he maintains the realism without sex, violence, or bad language is commendable.

As Christians, we might end the film reflecting on what motivates us, where we invest our energies, who is driving us on. For Joy it is a dogged refusal to be dragged down. But we have one who fought for us against the odds, who insists that we are not determined by our genes or our circumstances, that we are not who we think we are – and ultimately that we have an eternal destiny beyond our wildest dreams. Joy indeed. 



Sally Orwin Lee worked for many years as an organisational consultant and coach in small businesses, charities, and with church leadership teams. She is now on the Executive Committee of Biblical Counselling UK, providing biblical counselling and training within the local churches of the North West Gospel Partnership.