

Plugged-In Parenting

How to Raise Media-Savvy Kids
with Love, Not War



BOB WALISZEWSKI
DIRECTOR OF
pluggedⁿ

Today's parents are between a rock and a hard place. They want to protect their kids from the worst of the Internet, TV, movies, video games, and music—but they don't want to wreck their relationship with their children by always saying “no.” Good thing Bob Waliszewski can show you the why and *how* of teaching your kids to make wise entertainment choices. Create your Family Entertainment Constitution and start practicing *Plugged-In Parenting*.

GARY SMALLEY

Author, *Change Your Heart, Change Your Life*

Bob Waliszewski is one of the foremost experts in the world on creating a media-safe home. This is a must read for any parent who wants to help their kids navigate the ever-changing culture and thrive. *Plugged-In Parenting* is filled with practical insight and years of wisdom. This book could be the most important investment you can make in the lives of your kids.

JIM BURNS

President, HomeWord; author of *Confident Parenting*
and *Teenology: The Art of Raising Great Teenagers*

Bob Waliszewski knows what he is talking about! He is a brilliant man with a brilliant message. Families with children need this book to protect them from the degrading media influences that plague this nation. The timing of this book could not be better!

DR. JOE WHITE

President, Kanakuk Kamps

I was six years old when my brother took me to see *The Blob*. Although tame in comparison to what passes for science fiction horror today, I had nightmares for months. In fact, I was convinced an amoeba-type alien would find his way into my tiny bedroom in Southern California! Over four decades later I still remember how those graphic scenes clouded my innocent mind. In this excellent and timely book, Bob Waliszewski provides wise counsel along with useful tools that will help parents put into

practice the old song many children still sing: Be careful little eyes what you see and little ears what you hear. Thanks to Bob and his latest contribution, when it comes to media and music consumption, that very difficult job has been made easier.

JIM DALY

President, Focus on the Family

Don't let technology build a wedge between you and your kids. In order to rise above the challenges that our ever-changing world presents, you need to have a united front at home. *Plugged-In Parenting* is a street-smart, grace-filled approach to preparing your kids to succeed in a media-driven culture.

DR. TIM KIMMEL

Author, *Grace-Based Parenting*

DARCY KIMMEL

Co-author, *Extreme Grandparenting*

There has never been a more urgent need for children (and their parents!) to exercise discernment when it comes to making choices about media and entertainment. With cutting-edge content and practical steps for implementation, *Plugged-In Parenting* equips the parents so that they may equip their children. This is a resource that I strongly encourage parents to read.

ALEX MCFARLAND

Author, *Stand Strong in College*

Plugged-In Parenting



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with Love, Not War



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Plugged-In Parenting

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part one

Deciding
Where
You
Stand as
a Parent

Is This Stress Necessary?

My cell phone began its vibrating “ring,” but this was an important meeting. I let the call go to voice mail. When I listened to the message shortly afterward, the caller was insistent: “Bob, call me back as soon as possible.” It was a man I’ll call John (not his real name).

I dialed his mobile number. “What’s up, John?”

He explained that as he’d walked through his living room the previous evening, he’d noticed his 15-year-old daughter watching a Disney Channel program he didn’t know much about. But it made him uncomfortable. He angrily ordered her to turn off the television, saying, “I just don’t like the boy-girl thing” on that show.

His daughter promptly burst into tears and grudgingly turned off the TV.

But that was just the beginning. Soon the incident escalated into the family version of World War III.

John’s wife, disagreeing with his decision, heatedly and in no uncertain terms expressed how she felt. A fight ensued, with both spouses insisting they were handling the situation appropriately. But before heading off to bed irritated, the couple agreed on one thing: John would call me in the morning and ask my opinion about the whole matter. Both would abide by my decision.

I would be the tiebreaker. No pressure!

I’ll tell you where I came down later in this book. At this point, I just want to assure you that family entertainment-related battles are

common—although most parents don't call me to arbitrate them.

You know the kind of clash I mean. Perhaps it's arguing over how much time your preteen or teen spends on social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter. Maybe it's your daughter's decision to watch that horror film at last weekend's slumber party even though she'd promised to call if that temptation ever arose. Or it could be borrowing your 16-year-old son's car, turning on the ignition, and getting blasted with profanities from the CD he left in the stereo, a disc you had no idea he even owned.

So here's the question: Since disagreements over what to watch, play, text, listen to, click on, download, and read cause so much conflict, is all the stress worth it? Why not just adopt a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy when it comes to your family's media diet?

To Tell the Truth

At this point you may be thinking, *I know where this is going. This guy has an ax to grind. He wants to make the media look as bad as possible. That's how he makes a living. How can I trust him?*

I understand. I've faced that challenge before.

Trust was an issue recently when my wife Leesa and I were looking for a used car with decent gas mileage. Turning to Craigslist, we found one. As I read the online listing, I was determined that if the vehicle was as advertised, I wanted it. When I called, a young man answered and explained that he was helping his mother sell her car. What I didn't know was that the mother and son had emigrated from China just four years before. The teenage son had picked up English rather quickly, but his mother had not.

"Well, would you take a personal check?" I asked.

"No," was the response.

"Well, we're coming up anyway and we'll figure it out later," I said. At Leesa's suggestion I ran to our bank and withdrew the cash.

Arriving several hours later to inspect the vehicle, we saw it had been represented accurately. "Yes, we want it," I declared, "and I have the cash to seal the deal."

The young man said I'd need to talk to his mother at work. Going

to her place of employment, I told her I wanted to buy the car. Despite the language barrier, she clearly understood. But when I pulled the wad of cash from my pocket and explained how we would be paying for it that very day, the deal suddenly was in jeopardy.

“Could be . . . counterfeit,” she blurted.

Standing there with more cash in my pocket than I’d ever carried before, all in \$100 bills, I had a major dilemma: How could I convince this lady that I wasn’t trying to cheat her, that the money was genuine? I tried assuring her the bills were real, that I’d just gone to the bank. I smiled politely and tried to look like an honest man (a challenge in itself). Nothing seemed to work.

In broken English she explained that in China it was very common for people to cheat others using counterfeit currency. As a relatively new person in the United States, she was determined not to get swindled.

I can’t blame her. Fortunately, Leesa soon joined me after doing some shopping. Instantly the Chinese lady trusted her—not me—and said she would accept our cash and sign the paperwork!

I tell that story because in this book I’m doing my best to offer what’s real, genuine, and true. But I’m afraid some readers won’t buy it, believing what I’m offering is counterfeit.

Maybe you, like the Chinese lady, have had experiences that make it hard to trust anyone who comes bearing a pocketful of \$100 bills—or arguments and warnings and advice about how the media might affect your kids. Perhaps you’ve made some assumptions about whether your family’s media diet really matters, and whether it’s worth the stress of making that diet a healthier one. Maybe you’ve even been believing a myth or two or three.

Since I can’t bring my wife along to convince you, may I ask that you read this book with an open mind? I’ll try to earn your trust. My message may not always be pleasant—but it’s the real thing.

The Waliszewski Experience

Speaking of honesty, I have to say the following in the interest of full disclosure: As our children grew up, my wife and I seldom battled with

them over entertainment decisions. I'm thankful for that, but realize I run the risk of alienating and discouraging you if your experience is different. You might feel our family somehow lived above the fray—something you believe is totally unrealistic for you. I hope you won't see it that way; instead, I hope you'll take heart that although entertainment can be a battleground, it doesn't have to be a bloody one.

I believe the major reason my wife and I didn't regularly bicker with our children over media decisions was our effort to follow the principles I'll share in this book. But we weren't exempt, either.

For instance, when our daughter Kelsey was in middle school, a certain R rated film came out that was *the* talk of her classmates—and the rest of the nation. As R rated films go, it was on the lighter side, but still contained enough objectionable content that we just weren't comfortable letting her see it. According to our daughter, "all" of her friends had viewed this particular movie (which of course wasn't true, but many had). She was convinced she should see it, too.

If you've dealt with a similar situation, you can imagine how Kelsey felt—that her status as a maturing young adult was on the line. She certainly didn't want a reputation for being the girl who was only allowed to watch *Cinderella*, TV Land reruns, and movies filmed in the 1940s and '50s.

I'd love to say this challenge had a happy ending at the time. But it didn't. Even though many, many Christian parents were allowing their kids to see this one, we believed we were making the right decision by putting our foot down. There was no compromise that would make her happy and allow us to stay true to our values. The answer was no. End of story.

Well, not quite. Kelsey is in her early twenties now; recently my wife and I talked with her about her growing-up years. I asked her to describe the most difficult "media moment" in her upbringing. She recalled the situation I've just described. Then I asked, "Knowing what you know now, what would you change if you had to live this time all over again?"

"Not a thing," she replied. Chuckling, she recalled how badly she'd wanted us to let her see that film. But she's glad now that we drew

a line in the sand and didn't waver. Whew! It took almost a decade to discover that even from our daughter's perspective we made the right decision.

Setting healthy entertainment boundaries in your home may mean you won't see much buy-in from your kids—at least in the present. But stay the course. Don't waver. A better time probably is coming.

Why is this important? Because navigating today's entertainment successfully is a big deal even though we live in a culture that says it's not. For millions, media decisions are made as casually as buying a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread. I can't tell you the number of deeply troubling R and PG-13 movie screenings I've attended that included parents with young children—even toddlers and those around four or five! Sadly, these parents don't have the gumption to walk out and take their children with them when things decline from risqué to soft porn or from violent to gruesome. I can't even imagine the battles these children will face with issues like sexuality as they grow older.

Chances are you already know, deep down, that helping your kids make wise entertainment choices is important. But it's easy for many of us to avoid taking action. That's because we've latched on to some convenient untruths that seem to excuse us from tackling our responsibilities as parents.

Media Myths that Matter

As ridiculous as it now seems, there was a time I believed I could beat Billie Jean King in a game of tennis if given the opportunity. This wacky thought occurred to me during the much publicized 1973 match between King and Bobby Riggs.

That wasn't the first time I'd made a questionable assumption. After being exposed to Greek mythology in kindergarten, I became convinced that human beings could fly if given the right amount of feathers (never mind that I'd never seen anyone do that). I also believed that if I read a book by candlelight, I would eventually lose my vision.

All of us can point to things we once believed that we now know are totally false. I'm glad that many years ago I accepted the fact that

I'll never be able to fly. Nor do I stand even the slightest chance of returning the serve of Billie Jean King—even in her later years—much less coming out victorious in a match. And I've read many things by low light; my eyesight isn't what it used to be, but I can't blame the lack of lumens.

Living successfully involves the ongoing process of sorting out fact from fiction. There are several myths about the impact of entertainment, the nature of biblical discernment, and the parent's role. Some sound quite appealing. A few may appear to work. Others may look spiritual on the surface. But believing them can have unintended consequences. I'd like to highlight seven of them.

Myth #1: "It's No Big Deal"

Focus on the Family received a letter from Larry, a Michigan father, who accompanied his correspondence with 13 CDs. All but one were stickered with Parental Advisory warnings. Among other things, Larry wrote this: "My son is hooked on degrading, offensive music. After 14 years of Christian schooling, church, and Sunday school, he is rejecting Jesus and Christianity—please get the word out [before] more children fall for this God-insulting music."

Ask Larry if it's true that a child's media diet is no big deal. I guarantee he'll eloquently make his case to the contrary. For him, and many parents like him, this myth was shattered by personal experience and heartache.

Can the choices Larry's son made regarding music be blamed for his abandoning the faith? Yes and no. Music is a powerful influence. But there may have been other factors, too—like peer pressure, his relationship with his parents, a traumatic loss, a lack of real friends, bullying, poor self-image, experimentation with drugs or the occult, a sexual relationship, or false theology. But I agree with Larry that, at the minimum, his son's media choices played not only *a* role, but a *significant* role.

Maybe your child is not battling the same issues as Larry's son. But the chances are great that your young person's faith has been marred somewhat by what he or she listens to, watches, or plays—if those media choices lean toward the unsavory side.

If you do have a child like Larry's in your home, you know that any attempt to "meddle" can get messy. You've heard the advice that we should pick our battles carefully—and we should. Is this one to skip?

I don't think so. Not only should we stand our ground; we need to come fully armored and prepared for the long haul. Entertainment really is a big deal—especially when it has immediate consequences and eternal ramifications.

Myth #2: "Just Get 'Em Saved"

Many parents—though they wouldn't state it quite this way—believe that if they can just bring their young person to Christ, good media choices will naturally follow.

It's true that some spiritual conversions include new convictions about objectionable entertainment. But frequently this isn't the case. When most kids accept Jesus as Savior, it's their first step in a lifetime of maturing spiritually. It's not a magic, protective dynamic. Nor does the salvation experience impart a new understanding of media, any more than it imparts the ability to windsurf, fly-fish, or snow ski.

In fact, it may come as a surprise that evangelical teens seem to consume media much as their non-Christian peers do—at least according to a limited number of studies. One such study appeared in *The Barna Report 1992-1993*, making the disturbing discovery that "Christian young adults are more likely than others to have watched MTV in the past week" (42% compared to 33% respectively).¹ More recently, a February 2011 online survey of 240 ethnically diverse 10- to 15-year-olds—admittedly a small sampling—found that evangelical tweens were more likely to have viewed an R rated movie in the past three months than their non-evangelical peers were (35% compared to 26% respectively). This survey also found that one of every four evangelical tweens watched MTV's *Jersey Shore*, 38 percent said they watch the sexually obsessed *Two and a Half Men*, and 35 percent viewed *Glee*—roughly the same percentage as non-Christian tweens.²

At best, beginning a relationship with God helps the new believer

want to please Him more deeply. That can bring a new openness to honoring Him with choices that never seemed important before. But it's far from automatic.

Myth #3: "They'll Learn by Osmosis"

Many moms and dads seem to assume there isn't a whole lot to teach about making wise entertainment decisions. They seldom bring the subject up and have never had a pointed conversation about media and its influence.

If asked, they'd admit that they've done little in the way of verbal training. For them, it's all about modeling. They believe that if they practice media discernment themselves, their children will soak in all the right ingredients to make wise entertainment choices.

I can't underscore too many times how important setting a positive example is. But it's simply not enough. Our children also need to *hear* regularly from our own lips how important it is to guard our hearts. They need to understand from us *verbally* what's expected, and why the Lord's heart aches when we disobey and dishonor His commands.

Myth #4: "The Youth Group Can Do It"

A lot of parents feel that if they get their youngster to regularly attend the youth group at their church, that son or daughter will become media savvy. It's true that some youth leaders are quite knowledgeable about media discernment and teach along those lines at youth group meetings. But a number of them don't.

Frankly, some youth leaders simply don't get it when it comes to honoring Christ with their personal entertainment choices. As a result, they don't teach on the subject. I know this firsthand; as a former youth pastor myself, I was halfway through my youth ministry "career" before the Lord got hold of this area of my life.

A rock-solid youth group can make a huge, positive difference in your young person's life. But you can't assume this particular job is getting done. I'd suggest sharing a cup of coffee with your church's youth pastor to find out his convictions on a number of issues—media included.

Myth #5: "I Survived, So My Kids Will, Too"

Plenty of parents can recall making all kinds of poor decisions regarding entertainment during their middle and high school years. Yet somehow they survived the onslaught. These parents put a lot of confidence in their kids' resiliency.

While all that sounds wonderful, there are no guarantees about "bouncing back" in the Bible or in the world around us. Some young people—like Larry's son—turn their backs on God because of the influence of media in their lives. A number of these eventually return, but others tragically don't.

Keep in mind, too, that times have changed since your childhood and adolescence. Much of today's entertainment is darker, more sexually explicit, profane, and gory than what was popular when you were growing up.

Myth #6: "I Have to Wait for an Invitation"

One day a few years ago my family and I had lunch at a local restaurant. Seated nearby was a mother and her teenage sons. I couldn't help but notice that one of the guys had a T-shirt emblazoned with the name of a perverse and violent rock band. When the teens took off, leaving Mom to cover the bill, I went over to her and asked, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

She didn't.

"I was wondering how you handle the fact that one of your sons sports the shirt of a band whose lead singer fantasizes on one of his CDs about brutally torturing his mother."

Her jaw dropped. "I had no idea," she replied.

Like this woman, many parents have no idea what's really happening in their teenager's entertainment world. After all, many of our young people have their own television set in their room, don their private earbuds when they're in our vehicles, and head to the movie theater with a simple "See you later."

But for parents committed to passing the "faith baton" to their children—and safeguarding that heritage—having "no idea" when it comes to the world of media is not an option these days.

I'm convinced that some parents *choose* to be uninformed because they fear knowing what's going on would result in a home full of strife. For them, ignorance is bliss. The truth, however, is that it's always better to be informed when it comes to our children—no matter how tempting ignorance can seem.

I suspect the mother I spoke with at the restaurant was more aware than she let on. But I'm certain she asked very few entertainment-related questions of her son that would have helped her get better acquainted with his media world. I'm sure she believed that to open this can of worms would invite at least squabbles and verbal sparring.

In many homes today, the media world is an unfamiliar haunt with a big Keep Out! sign figuratively above the entrance. Parents in these situations are waiting for that sign to come down.

But trust me: Young people rarely remove it of their own accord. It's unrealistic to expect your child to one day approach you with, "So, Mom [or Dad], I really want you to coach me on how I can better serve the Lord in the area of media choices."

So, what's a parent to do if he or she feels unwelcome inside a child's media domain? Start with a heart-to-heart conversation. Your goal initially is just to discover what your young person likes and why.

What you find may dumbfound you—not just your child's preferences, but the reasons behind them. Be careful not to overreact. At this point you're on a fact-finding mission. Ask lots of questions, maybe even taking notes. Listen, listen, listen. There will come a time—perhaps later that day, perhaps a week or two down the road—to respond.

Myth #7: "It Would Be Intolerant to Draw the Line"

Many people are under the impression that Jesus' message was, "You live your life the way you want to and I'll live Mine the way I want to." Anything else, they'd argue, is judgmental and intolerant, or at least condescending.

This isn't even close to the truth, of course. Though clearly guided by love, Jesus booted the moneychangers from the temple, regularly "flamed" religious leaders for hypocrisy, and told a forgiven adulterer

to “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). Later, the apostle Paul commanded the church of Corinth to expel an immoral brother from fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:1-5), adding, “Are you not to judge those inside [the church]?” (1 Corinthians 5:12).

Despite popular opinion, there’s a good and healthy form of intolerance. We shouldn’t ignore sinful behavior in our own lives nor in those of our children. Any media pressure that nudges us to act or think in a corrupt way should be rejected. This isn’t narrow thinking, legalism, or having a judgmental attitude. It reflects the thoughts and desires of a holy God.

Even the most vile-hearted recognize that there are forms of “entertainment” that are out of bounds. For some, it might have to be something as extreme as a rape scene in a movie, a real murder being shown on the Internet, or child pornography. The real question for most people is not, “Are some things wrong?” but rather *where* one should draw the line.

There is a type of judgment that does displease our Creator—that of condemning another human being. But to evaluate and examine human behavior and spiritual fruit is actually encouraged, even commanded.

Raise Your Kids, Not Your Blood Pressure

Abandoning myths can be upsetting. Trying to get your child to think through his or her assumptions about entertainment and technology can be frustrating—kind of like getting a cat to play the piano. Setting family media standards can ruffle more than a few feathers.

More than ever, though, families need to “learn to discern.” Not because there’s a shortage of rules, but because some types of entertainment can do real spiritual harm. Abandoning myths, thinking through assumptions, and setting standards are all part of responsible, loving parenting. Does that mean all the stress—the arguments, the slammed doors, the pouting, the “I can hardly wait to move out of here” statements—is necessary?

No.

I can't make the process of teaching your child media discernment a total breeze. But there are ways to make it a lot less painful. You can even find it bringing your family together, helping you to grow spiritually, manage your time, and discover new ways to have fun and communicate your love for each other.

It begins with addressing one more myth—one your child may believe. That's what the next chapter is about. The more you know about answering this objection, the less stressful your parenting will be.

Quotes to Note

“The same violence and gun activity I’m [now] attempting to stop, I once was a part of and played a huge part in promoting. I carried guns and slung dope as a 13-year-old. That’s why I feel I owe you an apology.”³

—Rapper T.I., whose real name is Clifford Harris, speaking at a New York City rally condemning gun violence. The prominent rapper began serving his one-year sentence for federal weapons violations shortly after that speaking engagement.

“He was dangerous to the government. If he had said, ‘Bomb the White House tomorrow,’ there would have been 10,000 people who would have done it.”⁴

—Sean Lennon, son of slain Beatle John Lennon, talking about the influence his rock-star father had on fans

“If my sons told me they wanted to be in the entertainment business, I’d lock them in their rooms until they turned 30.”⁵

—Britney Spears

“We’re at a time when a chance to become famous in this country can seem like one more inalienable right, as basic as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But beware, in a culture that seems to celebrate celebrity for its own sake, it can be easy to confuse fame with genuine achievement, or worse, to think of everything short of fame as failure, especially in such an intense media climate. We need to remind ourselves and teach the children that the value of leading a good and decent life away from the spotlight is a real achievement.”⁶

—CBS news anchor Dan Rather

“We need to set limits and expectations. We need to replace that video game with a book and make sure that homework gets done. We need to say to our daughters, ‘Don’t ever let images on TV tell you what you are worth, because I expect you to dream without limit and reach for your goals.’ We need to tell our sons, ‘Those songs on the radio may glorify violence, but in our house, we find glory in achievement, self-respect, and hard work.’ We need to realize that we are our children’s first and best teachers.”⁷

—President Barack Obama

“I knew my mother loved me, but she never expressed it, so I learned about love from the movies.”⁸

—*Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner

“. . . Life is much too precious to waste so much of it on TV. When it comes to defending childhood innocence, we have inexplicably invited the principal enemy and potential destroyer into our own living rooms. By the age of six, the average American child has spent more hours watching the tube than he will spend speaking to his father in his lifetime. This is madness and, in a very real sense, child abuse. And the old excuse, ‘My kids only watch the quality programs,’ does not carry any weight at all. The underlying problem with television and kids isn’t quality. It is quantity.”⁹

—Film critic and radio talk show host Michael Medved

“Anyone who thinks the media has nothing to do with [the Columbine school shooting] is an idiot.”¹⁰

—CBS president Leslie Moonves

“We better be careful what we are singing and we better be careful how it is presented because we can ruin a nation or change one with the kind of music we allow to be presented.”¹¹

—Singer Gladys Knight

“Only a third of Americans can name the three branches of government. That’s scary. But 75 percent of kids can tell you *American Idol* judges.”¹²

—Former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O’Connor,
promoting her civics-oriented Web site
on *Good Morning America*

“The Internet is very much the Wild West. You wouldn’t have sent Laura Ingalls Wilder out in the middle of the night to fetch water from the river. Something terrible could have happened to her. It’s the same with your kid. Don’t just let them go out there and think everything will take care of itself and [that] your kid is smarter than a scammer. Odds are . . . they are not. And the outcome could be absolutely devastating.”¹³

—Kelly Land, a mother from Asheville,
North Carolina

“In today’s world, we look at our presidents, our prime ministers, our princes and our potentates and we describe them as our leaders, but they’re not. They’re merely our rulers. The leaders are the people who change the minds and stimulate the imaginations of the public, whether children or adults. That means the movie makers, the people who make TV shows, the entertainment people in the business.”¹⁴

—C. S. Lewis stepson Douglas Gresham

“Movies are the highest popular art of our times, and art has the ability to change lives.”¹⁵

—Author Stephen King

“Quite honestly, I was very surprised when I read the Audio-slave review, and I went on to read maybe a dozen more. I was expecting it to be these kind of fire-and-brimstone condemnations of all things rock and rap. Instead I found the

reviews much more thoughtful than the typical rock magazine review.”¹⁶

—former Rage Against the Machine/Audioslave
guitarist Tom Morello, describing his
introduction to Plugged In’s CD reviews

“You must now relate your new life to your recreations. Or, rather, you must relate your recreations to the new life. For recreation must not be the center and the new life fitted into it. If you try that, the new life will die. You must now go over your recreations and see whether they contribute to or dim the new life. They should stay only as they minister to your total fitness. Some recreations do not re-create—they exhaust one. They leave one morally and spiritually flabby and unfit. . . . I find after seeing some films that I have been inspired and lifted. But often a film leaves one with the sense of having been inwardly ravished. . . . You come out drooping. One should never expose himself to such a film—not if he values the higher values. It is like turning pigs into your parlor.”¹⁷

—Missionary to India E. Stanley Jones
(surprisingly, written back in 1936)