

M. Scott Peck oversimplifies his ideas in novel

A Bed by the Window: A Novel of Mystery and Redemption, by M. Scott Peck; Bantam Books (New York, N.Y., 1990); 306 pages; \$10.

By David and Julianne Palma
Guest contributors

M. Scott Peck doesn't write a bad detective story. The best parts of a *Bed by the Window* are the investigations by Lt. Tom Petri of the New Warsaw police department into a murder at Willow Glen Nursing Home.

The story centers on Stephen Solaris, a cerebral palsy victim who has been trapped in a severely deformed body since birth. Even though he can't speak, Stephen touches those around him with his brilliant insights into human nature and his innate goodness by tapping out his thoughts one letter at a time on an alphabet board.

As the plot unfolds, the home's most compassionate nurse, Heather Barsten, falls slowly in love with Stephen. She sees a bright light that radiates from him. Their romance, which involves Stephen's sexual awakening, ends abruptly when he is murdered.

Evil then enters Willow Glen's seemingly placid environment. During the young detective's in-

vestigation, illusions are slowly stripped away as the characters deal with the realities of their lives. Many of the characters' lives are transformed as the search for the murderer progresses.

While the dialogue sounds natural when it serves to enhance the plot, it is very stilted, even pedantic, elsewhere. This stiffness results because the dialogue is mostly made to serve Peck's message — perhaps "deliver" is a more apt word.

Peck is not a novelist. Many of his characters deliver monologues that sound like sermons, and he populates the nursing home with characters who could be lifted from a psychiatric casebook.

To his credit, he does choose common, relevant personal problems for his characters to grapple with: the woman who can't break the cycle of dependence on weak men; the shy man who can only approach women by being sexually aggressive; the resentful teenager who can only act out of her anger; the lonely professional woman who doesn't think she is worthy of a relationship with God.

But these people are set against other larger-than-life figures: Stephen,

who has learned that power lies in weakness; Rachel, the virtually catatonic woman, who is consumed by demonic hate; and Mrs. Grochowski, to whom everyone turns for comfort, guidance and absolution, who is so saintly that she, too, radiates an aura.

The difficulty lies in the fact that Peck treats the first group's everyday struggles with the same depth as the second group's revelations. Perhaps part of his point is that the ordinary soul is as significant as the extraordinary one, but the lack of delineation between them only makes for a confusing, monotonous tone. Everything merges into Willow Glen's grayish institutional walls.

Another limitation comes in these people's characterizations solely in terms of their problems. No "little spot of joy" can be found in their lives to relieve the unrelenting soul-searching each undertakes.

Notable exceptions to this approach come in the figures of Georgia Bates and Lt. Petri. These characters have multiple awareness levels, struggle with several conflicts — both internal and external — and are not defined largely in terms of their sexuality. They seem like real people.

This mention of sexuality introduces an important point: in describing the book's two sexual encounters, Peck briefly uses unnecessarily graphic language. Because of the presence of these two short passages, some readers might find the book offensive.

Peck's themes of unflinching self-examination, evil's very real presence in the world, and the importance of community are powerful ones. They are so important to him that he has written a non-fiction treatment of each — *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (1978), *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (1983), and *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (1987).

In trying to weave these themes together in his novel, however, Peck ends up oversimplifying his ideas. If you have the time, you should read his non-fiction treatments of these significant themes. If you would like an overview to introduce you to Peck's ideas, read his novel.

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Jennifer 8 lacks thrills; rambling Waterland drowns in awkwardness

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The latest in a rash of thrillers with paltry thrills is *Jennifer 8* (Paramount), a movie about a cop on the trail of a serial killer whose next victim may be the cop's love interest.

Andy Garcia is the detective obsessed with catching the mass murderer while, inexplicably, his colleagues all want him to drop the search.

The stakes rise when he falls for a blind woman (Uma Thurman), who was in the killer's presence just before her blind roommate vanished.

Writer-director Bruce Robinson's



Jack Rowand-Paramount Pictures
Andy Garcia stars in *Jennifer Eight*, which the USCC says lack thrills.

script is so sloppily plotted there are holes throughout the story.

Because of brief violence, some menace, a flash of nudity and much rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Waterland

Drowning in a sea of guiltily repressed memories is Jeremy Irons in *Waterland* (Fine Line).

As the movie opens, British high school teacher Tom Crick (Irons) realizes his middle-aged wife, Mary (Sinead Cusack), has gone over the

edge when she imagines she's pregnant. Moreover, his students are complaining history is irrelevant. His response is to reveal to them how history — that is, his own adolescent personal history — is so relevant it is now wrecking his marriage.

Director Stephen Gyllenhaal's rambling movie jumps back and forth, even awkwardly depositing the students into the teacher's past to witness his troubled formative years.

Due to much discussion of sexual matters, a discreet sexual encounter and some nudity, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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