
Michael, Lindy, and Adventists— Exonerated at Last

I. Reactions in the Media

Lindy and Michael Chamberlain have become the best-known Adventists in the world, with the possible exception of Leonard Bailey and the Loma Linda University infant heart transplant team (See Lowell Tarling, “Who Killed Azaria? Adventists on Trial,” *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 14-22; and No. 3, pp. 42-59.) The response of the Australian public to Lindy and Michael was significantly bound up with their feelings about Seventh-day Adventists. What has been the reaction of the Australian public, as expressed in their press, to the exoneration of the Chamberlains? Has their exoneration affected the public’s perception of the Seventh-day Adventist community? We here reprint, in largely chronological order, articles appearing in Australian newspapers and magazines following the court’s quashing of the Chamberlains’ conviction. The editorial from the *Sydney Morning Herald* is representative of comments appearing in other “quality” newspapers, such as Melbourne’s *The Age* and the nationally published *Australian*. Even the *Northern Territory News* applauded the exoneration and called for financial reparations to the Chamberlains.

A Cry in the Dark, starring Meryl Streep and Sam Neill, is the first big-budget, feature film about any Adventists. The fact that Michael and Lindy were a ministerial couple in the church is an integral part of the story portrayed. In the second part of our report we reprint several reviews of the film—all, except those appearing in

Newsweek and the *New Yorker*—printed in Australian publications. We also include reports on the attitudes toward the Chamberlains of Streep, Neill, and Fred Schepisi, the Australian director of the film. Finally, we reprint reactions of the Chamberlains to *Evil Angels*, the book by John Bryson upon which the film is based.

We wish to thank Norman Young, professor of New Testament at Avondale College, for his assistance in gathering the material appearing here. Young is writing a book recounting how support groups managed to reopen the Chamberlain case.

—The Editors

The Advertiser

Friday, September 16, 1988
by Bill Hitchings

Emerging From Eight Long Years of Trauma

It’s been more than eight long, often emotional, occasionally dramatic and sensational—and sometimes even painfully tedious—years.

But the Chamberlain saga is at last all but over.

Two people, devoted churchgoers, who, while members of quite a different denomination, have become born-again citizens.

Yesterday, during a brief hearing, they were told that the three judges of the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal unanimously agreed that their convictions over the death of their child Azaria were quashed.

For a few moments it was the old Lindy Chamberlain—tiny, vulnerable, and terribly ordinary as she tried in vain to stop the flood of tears, her jaw quivering with the effort.

Alongside her and just as distraught was her blond-haired husband, Michael.

He, too, sighed at the declaration.

He, too, looked his old self as he smiled through his tears and put his arm out for his wife, who was near to collapse.

And as they were crushed by well-wishers from the packed court and the crowd gathered outside, one felt that old twinge of sadness and yet a reflective triumph that two such ordinary people could have dredged the depths of unfathomable determination, fought a seemingly unbeatable system, and won.

But, as one who has watched, listened, and recorded virtually every nuance, every mood, and every shift in direction of the amazing affair, I find it impossible to resist the temptation to say: thank God it’s almost over.

And that is not just for their sakes.

Of course, there is one more act to be played out.

The couple want the Territory Government to repay them.

And one can’t help wondering if monetary compensation can make up for the hurt, the pain, and the almost indescribable deprivation these two people have been through.

If payment is not forthcoming they will then consider civil action.

But there is something else in the relief that this whole sorry affair has been done with.

Perhaps it is the fact that at last you no longer have to witness the indelible wrongs and the sadness.

Perhaps it’s the fact that you no longer have to be the onlooker of the wrenching of two lives from their mundane but enduring naiveté and the remarkable transformation it has wreaked on them.

At the outset, for instance they were

quite different people.

Lindy, her bobbed raven black hair and ankle socks gave her a girlish buoyancy.

Michael, though serious and almost dour, had a pleasing dullness about him.

They knew nothing of the harsh world of the law and what it could mean to them.

But then, at the first inquest, came their first harsh act of reality.

Someone threatened to kill them and for the first time in their lives, they were given an armed bodyguard.

Naturally, they tried to protect themselves by going into their shell.

It was an act that could easily have been mistaken for harshness.

Their faces became expressionless masks—that is, in public. In the privacy of their hotel room Mrs. Chamberlain often became nearly hysterical with worry and fear.

But their proclivity for what others might call odd behavior—a trait which to some extent got them into trouble—showed itself again at the end of the inquest.

They were completely exonerated, and as the court dispersed they walked to the front steps and then unrolled a large color photograph of Azaria to show the cameras, and through them the world, how much they loved and missed their child.

That inquest alone was trauma enough, and after it had finished the couple quickly went to ground.

But there was another, even bigger, shock to come.

The first coroner, Mr. Denis Barritt, SM, had exonerated the couple and their family from any involvement in the child's death. But significantly he found that a human, probably a white person, had almost certainly been involved in the disposal of the child's body.

Adelaide odontologist, Dr. Kenneth Brown—incidentally a Seventh-day Adventist—also had been criticised by Mr. Barritt. Within weeks he had taken the child's bloodstained jumpsuit and other material to London to his old friend, one of the world's leading pathologists, Professor James Cameron.

Professor Cameron and his team, using sophisticated ultraviolet photography and other equipment, revealed what they believe was a new twist. They said that in their opinion the child's throat had been cut.

The Chamberlains reappeared, this time to face a new inquest after the findings of the original one had been quashed.

They looked much more wary and much older.

The two-week inquest resulted in them being sent to trial—Mrs. Chamberlain on a charge of having murdered her child and Mr. Chamberlain on a charge of having

been an accessory after the fact.

But the most startling change in her appearance was still to come.

In between the inquest and the trial she became pregnant—and it showed. She was nothing like the old Lindy. She had grown dumpy, her hair was cropped short and her face had become bloated.

It had also taken on an extra hardness.

Throughout the trial the couple remained impassive except for one brief moment when the bloodstained jumpsuit was brought into evidence and Mrs. Chamberlain broke down briefly.

But it was at the end of the trial that she became completely shattered when the foreman of the jury announced those three unforgettable words: "Guilty as charged."

Her whole being seemed to collapse. She sat for a while trying desperately to comprehend what it all meant, and a prison warden came and led her by the arm out of the courtroom.

As she left through a back door garage, sitting in the back seat of a car that took her to jail, I saw her briefly, but it was enough.

Her whole body was shaking with grief and incomprehension.

A groundswell of support gathered around Australia but despite protests the Northern Territory Government refused to budge. No, it said, she would not be released.

Even those who felt she had been guilty voiced the opinion that a life sentence was too harsh. Still the Territorians said no.

Then, three years later and five years after Azaria disappeared, a baby's jacket was found at the base of Ayers Rock near the mutilated body of a camper who had fallen off the rock. It was a miraculous discovery.

Mrs. Chamberlain immediately identified it as the one Azaria was wearing the night she disappeared.

The Federal Government within days persuaded the Territorians to hold a jointly-financed Royal Commission.

Federal Court judge Mr. Justice Morling sat for nine months during which time Mrs. Chamberlain attended nearly every day of the hearing.

But, instead of the girlish woman with the toothy grin of the first inquest days, she was aloof.

Mr. Justice Morling found that had the jury at her trial known the evidence he had been given it would have been directed to acquit the couple. The finding was cause for some celebration but again the Chamberlains remained publicly impassive.

The Territory Government immediately granted them a pardon, and it was time for the lawyers to take over once again.

Armed with a newly introduced piece of legislation enacted by the Territory Government, Mr. John Winneke, QC, who had

represented the couple throughout the Royal Commission, set about presenting his written submissions to the Court of Criminal Appeal.

The couple—other than one TV special and an interview for a magazine, for which they were reputed to have been paid \$200,000—remained in the background, clinging to what was left of their family life.

Other than teaching and helping at the Seventh-day Adventist college near their home at Cooranbong, they did little apart from spend time with their family and work with the lawyers.

They amassed a mountain of documents.

And then this week came yet another public appearance when they arrived in Darwin for the hearing.

It was an emotional—if brief—hearing yesterday. As the judges announced their unanimous agreement that they were acquitted, they tried desperately to remain composed.

They had put up the veneer of remoteness but now it was all gone.

But it is, with all the drama and with all the tragedy, a relief for it all to be over.

I, myself, had the indulgence of a brief tinge of excitement on hearing the judge's verdict.

And if you'll excuse the mild boast it is something I have believed should be the case for a long, long time.

But I'm glad it's over—you can, after all, overdose on drama.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Friday, September 16, 1988
by Malcolm Brown

Relief and Tears for Many Involved

"I feel like a small boy at Christmas time—I have seen all the presents and I don't know what to do next," said Michael Chamberlain's father, Mr. Ivan Chamberlain, yesterday.

The 71-year-old retired farm manager, of Christchurch, New Zealand, could hardly contain himself as he said: "It is marvelous news. It is what we have waited for."

Tears flowed aplenty yesterday as the news reports came that the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal had quashed the verdicts of Michael and Lindy Chamberlain.

Michael's mother, Mrs. Greta Chamberlain said: "I just feel the whole burden has been lifted. We felt we would have to go on for years living with it.

"Michael is a very sensitive and a very dedicated boy. I know him so well. Leaving the ministry has broken his heart. I was very sad when he felt he should go. I felt he had been called by God.

"My son, Peter, felt the strain very much. Lois, his wife, cried often. We have all come through it, trusting God, thinking that it all must come right."

Michael and Lindy Chamberlain yesterday stuck by their commitment to avoid any contact with the general media.

They flew to Sydney in the afternoon and last night were interviewed by Alan Jones, of Radio 2UE, after a special arrangement had been made between 2UE and their manager, Harry M. Miller.

They were concerned about the amount of money they owed, which they stated at one time to be between \$1 million and \$2 million, a debt carried by the Seventh-day Adventist church as a long-term loan.

They would then return to their three children in their bungalow at Avondale College, in the Lake Macquarie hinterland.

Ivan Chamberlain said the ordeal had affected Michael and Lindy's relationship.

"There has been a little bit of conflict of character," he said. "Michael did say originally she was cantankerous."

"She has been remarkable to have held herself as well as she has. But there is something wrong deep down. When you are under strain, nothing is right."

"It is just a personality clash."

The news was welcomed by the SDA church, which had always tried to stay in the background in the controversy. But there were immediate questions about the Chamberlains' future.

Pastor Walter Scragg, president of the South Pacific Division of the SDA church, said: "We have not studied yet what is to happen to Michael Chamberlain.

"For Michael to come back into the church as a minister would be almost impossible for the church and for Michael. We would hope he finds some other professional occupation."

In other parts of Australia, there was a mixture of relief and exhaustion. People had suffered in many ways.

Mrs. Liz Noonan, prominent in the Darwin campaign on behalf of the Chamberlains, recently widowed, said: "My husband, Tony [Dr. Tony Noonan], stood out against the hostile environment.

"I can only wish Tony were here now to see the final result. For the first time I have a wee bit of faith restored in the judicial system."

Dr. Wes Allen, a Brisbane general prac-

itioner who campaigned for the Chamberlains for years and joined the self-styled Chamberlain Innocence Committee, said: "A lot of my friends thought I was crazy. Some of my friends even thought I was part of a Jesuit plot to overthrow the legal system."

Justice Frank Gallagher, a former deputy president of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, who campaigned in retirement for the Chamberlains, felt well satisfied.

"Lindy and Michael are absolutely cleared now and it is a matter for great public celebration," he said.

THE AUSTRALIAN

Friday, September 16, 1988
Editorial

The Chamberlain Decision

The decision by the three judges of the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal to quash the conviction of Mrs. Alice Lynne Chamberlain for murder and her husband, Mr. Michael Chamberlain, for being an accessory after the fact to murder should mark an end to the public speculation over their involvement in the disappearance of their infant daughter at Ayers Rock eight years ago.

In the 30-page judgment handed down by Justices Asche, Nader and Kearney, they make it clear that they have given great weight to the findings of the commission of inquiry into the Chamberlains' conviction that was conducted by Justice Morling of the Federal Court.

Indeed, Justice Nader, who wrote the greater part of the decision, quoted more than 14 pages of Justice Morling's findings in the body of his decision.

Justice Nader then concluded: "In my opinion, upon a consideration of the adopted findings, there is a real possibility that Mrs. Chamberlain did not murder Azaria and, therefore, the convictions of the Chamberlains ought to be quashed and verdicts and judgments of acquittal entered. Not to do so would be unsafe and would allow an unacceptable risk of perpetuating a miscarriage of justice."

Justice Nader then spelt out just where the Chamberlains now stand as regard to the law.

"It may be thought that the mere acknowledgement that a doubt about the guilt of Alice Lynne Chamberlain is a half-hearted way for the matter to end. . . It is rarely that a criminal trial positively estab-

lishes the innocence of an accused person. . . That is because under the criminal law a person is presumed innocent until the contrary is proved. . . The convictions having been wiped away, the law of the land holds the Chamberlains to be innocent."

The mystery surrounding the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain remains as baffling today as it did eight years ago. Probably the full story about what happened at Ayers Rock will never be revealed.

But no fair-thinking person can deny that Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain have every right to ask the Northern Territory Government for substantial compensation for the emotional suffering they have been put through during the past eight years.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Friday, September 16, 1988
by Alan Gill

Adventists Still Fight Image Problem

On August 17, 1980, baby Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from her parents' tent at Ayers Rock camping ground, creating a dramatic and, for the Chamberlains, most unhappy sequence of events.

On paper (financial compensation has yet to be resolved) the Chamberlain affair is all over bar the shouting. The issues raised, some of them of a religious nature, will linger.

For the first five years of the affair, I was the *Herald's* Letters Editor. It dominated our mailbags. At one period, when Mrs. Lindy Chamberlain was on trial we were receiving on average 100 "Azaria" letters a day.

It would be wrong to assume that church people generally supported the Chamberlains. Churchgoers (other than Seventh-day Adventists) were divided. I heard two bishops discussing the affair in the Anglican synod. Their opinion was that Lindy "did it" because she felt that to sacrifice her child would be pleasing to God.

The demeanor of the Chamberlains when their baby went missing and the meaning of the name "Azaria" were "religious" factors which featured in the debate. Heads of denominations pondered the precedent set by the SDA church in agreeing to underwrite the costs of the Chamberlains' defence.

Others asked whether Pastor Michael Chamberlain, who subsequently resigned his ministry, could "in conscience" (to protect his wife) lie under oath.

Many in the mainstream denominations shared the prevalent view of SDAs as belonging to a small, cultic group, and worthy of suspicion. Others, notably Lesley Hicks, a columnist in *Australian Church Record*, thought that society had made witches of two innocent people belonging to a small and inoffensive religious group, and where would it end?

"Adventist" is ecclesiastical shorthand for the flood of exotic movements, formed in the 18th and 19th centuries, which had as a common denominator a concern about the date of the second coming of Christ. They are divided into premillennial and postmillennial, according to whether they believe this will happen at the beginning or end of a period of peace and prosperity (generally assumed to be 1,000 years) which will follow the defeat of Satan's forces at the battle of Armageddon.

An Adventist movement of sorts flourished in England around Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), who identified herself as "the woman clothed with the sun" (Revelation 12:1) and the "bride of Christ" (Rev. 19:7). She believed herself to have been chosen for a new virgin birth, and for a while showed signs of pregnancy.

The movement fractured when the baby failed to arrive. A splinter group was led by a certain John Wroe, founder of the Christian Israelites, who taught that the Anglo-Saxons are the descendants of the "lost" 10 tribes of Israel. Wroe, who was probably mad, died in Melbourne (where the movement still has adherents) in 1863.

A Wroe convert called Michael Mills had a trance from which he concluded he was Michael the archangel who was to gather the 144,000 for the final conflict. He had an interesting theory—for which he was imprisoned—that as Eve had seduced Adam into sin, he would seduce women into virtue.

The roots of modern Seventh-day Adventism lie in two larger-than-life 19th century figures. The first was an American Baptist preacher, William Miller, who believed that in Scriptural prophecy a day stood for a year. He calculated that Christ would return on March 21, 1844, and being proved wrong, adjusted the date to October 22, 1844.

The day came, but Christ did not. Adventists call this "The Great Disappointment." Disillusioned Millerites then came under the influence of Ellen Harmon (later White), whose prophetic claims led to the formal establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1860.

In recent years an Australian, Pastor Des Ford, has been excommunicated for chal-

lenging White's theories and suggesting that she plagiarized other authors. Formerly this country's leading Adventist theologian (he taught Michael Chamberlain) Ford now heads a U.S.-based "independent" Adventist movement, which is making inroads in Australia and elsewhere.

Apart from the Miller/White connection and their preference for a Saturday Sabbath, the beliefs of modern Seventh-day Adventists are broadly on a par with Evangelical Protestantism. Adherents resent the "sect" status given to them in such books as Professor Walter R. Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults*.

In the 1970s the church began a quest, which still continues, to be considered part of the mainstream. A minister almost hugged me when I included his sermon in the *Herald's* now-defunct *From the Pulpit* column. There was joy verging on delirium when an Adventist service was broadcast by the ABC.

Then came the Chamberlain affair, which renewed—with a vengeance—the church's image problem. Adventism has a stronghold on Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands where the church has aided descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers. Seventh-day Adventists, like the Pitcairners, have had a rough passage. They are praying that the next decade will bring calmer seas.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Monday, September 19, 1988

Editorial

Lindy: It Can Happen Again

The quashing of the convictions against Lindy and Michael Chamberlain by the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal has been described as proof that our legal system works. The opposite is true. The Chamberlains finally received justice despite the system. The saga of the Chamberlains' quest for justice showed (as with the Splatt case) that once the legal system gets something wrong it can be incredibly difficult to turn things around. The people in control of the legal system begin to believe the system has to be defended rather than the rights of the individual it is supposed to serve.

The terrifying aspect of the case is that Mrs. Chamberlain's innocence should have been clear from the beginning. The first coroner, for instance, had no difficulty in coming to correct judgement. The

Crown, at subsequent trials, could not provide a motive, a body, or a murder weapon. It did not provide even a remotely plausible account of how a deeply religious person like Mrs. Chamberlain, in a matter of about five minutes, could have murdered her baby and disposed of the corpse and the weapon so effectively that they have never been found.

Why did the legal system break down in this case? Many people, admittedly, found the dingo story improbably unlikely. Because of this attitude, they were prepared to believe something that was impossible. The "evidence" for the impossible relied on such factors as the Chamberlains' stoicism in the face of their tragedy (as if tears are a sign of innocence), and rumour-mongering that was vicious and inaccurate. Northern Territorians, also, seemed determined to get Mrs. Chamberlain. Finally, the scientific evidence mounted against Mrs. Chamberlain was presented in such a way that it was difficult to test.

In theory, the Crown is supposed to share its scientific evidence with the defence. It is also supposed to turn over information that is favorable to the defence. In fact, the Chamberlains found it difficult to get access to evidence and the most damaging evidence against them, which enabled graphic accounts of their car being "awash" with blood to be described, was destroyed before it could be properly tested.

Mr. Stuart Tipple, the solicitor acting for the Chamberlains, in a prize-winning 1986 essay, *Forensic Science—The New Trial by Ordeal*, pointed out that the cardinal rules of documenting case notes and independent checking of major laboratory observations were not part of New South Wales procedure when the evidence against Mrs. Chamberlain was being assembled. The essay argued that "what was uncovered was not a one-off sinister plot involving the Chamberlain case, but rather the standard laboratory practice which has been operating in New South Wales at least since 1974." He was critical of the "arrogance" and the "lack of interest" of the legal profession in believing that "suspect evidence is always exposed." His recommendations that would force the Crown scientists to regard themselves as specialists helping the court—and not Crown specialists—have been ignored. So has Justice Morling's important recommendations that a national forensic science institute be established. In other words, the legal system, despite the shocks to its credibility and integrity from the Chamberlain case, remains flawed. What happened to Lindy Chamberlain can—and unfortunately, will—happen again.

II. Reviews of the Film

THE AUSTRALIAN *Magazine*

October 29, 30, 1988

by Heather Brown

Michael, Lindy, and Sam

It is early evening when the train pulls into the small country station. Sam Neill climbs down from the carriage and stands on the platform. The rest of the passengers straggle away into the night and he is left alone. He stands and waits while the minutes tick by and suddenly—out of the corner of his eye—he sees a man walk out of the station. He waves and asks if he just arrived. “Oh no,” Michael Chamberlain says slowly. “I’ve been here for quite a while.” He was watching him.

One of the challenges of the Chamberlain part was the fact that he was playing a real person. “It was different playing someone who was actual, instead of being fictional or long dead. So it seemed to me that it was important to get it accurate, and apart from my research—Seventh-day Adventists, the case, the people themselves—it seemed pretty obvious to me that I had to get around to meeting Michael and Lindy and getting to know them. So I went up and stayed with them.”

After he arrived—and realised that the man he had come to watch stood at the railway station and watched him instead—Neill discovered that getting to know the Chamberlains would not be easy: “He was extremely cautious about me—not to say suspicious, as well he might be. I mean, here is your story about to be put up on the big screen and some actor he has never heard of turns up to play him. I’d be suspicious as well, so I think we circled around each other for a while.”

The next day, the pastor took the actor for a walk around Avondale College in rural New South Wales and asked him if he was religious. “This sort of threw me a bit, because I didn’t have any good answers and I was starting to back-pedal furiously, so I said I could probably call myself a spiritual person. I certainly couldn’t call myself a Christian or a religious person.

“I tried to explain that it seemed to me that to produce a performance of someone with convictions—and Michael Chamberlain is someone with strong convictions and beliefs—it is not entirely necessary to have the same beliefs. I don’t think I sounded very convincing, but we started to

get to know each other more on a personal level after two or three days together and we parted on good terms. I studied him obsessively, collected anything that had been on television about the Chamberlains—rewind, rewind, rewind—because I didn’t want a music-hall impersonation. I wanted to be truthful to some sort of essence. I think that sort of objectivity was crucial to what we were doing.”

Neill soon made his own impressions of the character he was to play. “I don’t think Michael is a weak person. I think he is a lot stronger than he is given credit for. He doesn’t have the presentation that Lindy has, of course. I like Lindy. I would like to think that we get on really well. She is amusing and gutsy.

“Michael had his faith severely shaken. I am surprised he still has any faith at all, and I don’t know how he got through, and I don’t know how she got through. . . .” He pauses. “I wanted to be very clear about the character I was playing. I wanted to tell the truth and I wanted to do Michael justice—not by making him any better than he is, but simply how he is. That’s how I wanted it to be.”

Neill’s time with the Chamberlains was invaluable in getting to know the private side of them: the one the public and the media were unable to penetrate. “One thing always stuck in my mind from the time we spent together. One day there was some fire in the bush country and we had to walk through someone else’s property in order to get to see what the fire was doing. We walked through what appeared to be an abandoned orchard—it hadn’t been pruned for years—and there were hundreds of thousands of windfall oranges on the ground.

“It was a hot day and I was thirsty and I was like a pig in heaven on all these oranges—you know, kids in orchards—and I realised that I was the only one who was doing this. Lindy wouldn’t even pick an orange and she wouldn’t even have a windfall. I said, ‘Go on, these are fantastic,’ but she wouldn’t, because they were somebody else’s oranges.

“But they were so good I decided to take a bag home, which I thought was no big deal because there were hundreds of thousands of them going to waste. So I found a

bag and filled it and shoved it in their car. Lindy was clearly uncomfortable about this and hid them under a blanket in case we saw anybody and I was quite touched by this. More than anything else, it struck me that here is someone who is seriously honest. It struck me as an invaluable little detail.”

“The film was an emotional experience for me. Most films that I’ve done, you can feel quite detached and you can stand back and say that was good, that was bad, but I don’t know how to judge this film. I don’t even know what sort of film it is. Just watching it was an emotional experience for me, and that inevitably gets in the way of your critical facilities. Mine were completely suspended.”

The question still lingers: why did it all happen? “You could speculate forever, I suppose,” Neill says carefully. “Sometimes I think it’s like we feel the place is empty and we have to fill it. Maybe we turned our back or maybe we forgot our own mythology, so we had to invent a whole new set of myths.

“There are so many examples of something like this happening in modern history that suddenly show us how primitive we are, like Salem, where a whole set of rumours got the better of a whole community and their better judgment, so whether we are English, New Zealanders, Australian, or whatever, we are not as sophisticated as we like to think.

“It is the power of the media that is the frightening thing. There are people who deal with the media all the time and they get good at it. I’m not one of them, but I believe it’s a game you can get bloody good at and play to your own advantage. But there are also people like the Chamberlains out there—ordinary people from an ordinary town who suddenly get all this tremendous attention and have absolutely no idea how to deal with it.”

Yet *Evil Angels* brought blessings in the end—blessings of the kind that mattered to Sam Neill.

“Michael sent me a couple of messages once—personal messages, so I can’t say what they were—but I found them very touching. They were messages of solidarity between us. After the initial suspicion that night I arrived at the railway station, I realised that he finally came to trust me, and that meant a great deal. I hope that trust hasn’t been compromised. I earnestly strived to do this in good faith.”

He sighs and stares out the window. “It was a strange trip to be on,” he says wearily, almost to himself. “I don’t think I could do it twice.”

THE AUSTRALIAN FINANCIAL REVIEW

Friday, November 4, 1988

by Padraic P. McGuinness

The Lindy Film and the Truth

At last the film of the Lindy Chamberlain case is out. The advance publicity has been almost as bad as the flurry of rumour-mongering which surrounded the case itself when it first broke in 1980.

The first thing which needs to be said about the film is that it is not, nor does it really pretend to be, an objective account of the events springing from the disappearance of Baby Azaria, nor of the evidence adduced in court during the various hearings associated with it. It is based quite closely on the emotional account of John Bryson's book *Evil Angels*. Nor does it attempt to explain or analyse the hysteria which surrounded the case, or the behaviour of various of the participants involved apart from the principals.

But it is a very moving and quite powerful film which cannot help but elicit sympathy for the Chamberlains. This, of course, they deserve—as well as quite a few apologies from those to whom they owe their maltreatment.

By this stage it ought to be impossible for anyone to believe that any guilt attaches to Lindy and Michael Chamberlain with respect to the family tragedy which fell upon them. They have been as thoroughly and as conclusively cleared as is possible in any case in which there remain unanswered questions. But issues and questions do remain.

One important issue is that even if Lindy had been guilty of infanticide, which she certainly was not, she still would not deserve to have been treated in the way she was. Infanticide is not an uncommon event, and the problem of post-partum depression and psychosis is well-documented. The very worst that should have been suspected is one of those tragic cases which every now and then achieve publicity. They are usually treated with sadness and tolerance. Why was not Lindy Chamberlain treated gently even by those who thought that the dingo story did not hold water?

Where did the vicious rumours, the treatment of her as a member of a bizarre sect, come from? After all, the Seventh-day Adventists are pretty well-known and there are few people who have not eaten

Sanitarium products or passed by one of the shops where well-scrubbed girls totally free of make-up sold vegetarian food until recently. It is difficult to believe the simplistic view of the film that there was any special antagonism to this religion.

When the rumours around the case first began to gather force, many of them fantastic and vicious, it became a matter of increasingly passionate public discussion. Quite a lot of people rapidly abandoned the view that Lindy was not guilty until proven otherwise. Chief of these seem to have been the Northern Territory police and Government. Oddest of all was the line which became increasingly prevalent among the greensies and those of that ilk that the dingoes were being unjustly accused, and had to be defended lest there be a campaign to wipe them out. One would have thought that babies would be given the benefit of the doubt any day.

The matter should have been dropped, of course, after the first coroner's verdict. This quite properly exonerated Lindy Chamberlain and her family, and accepted that the weight of evidence was that a dingo had been involved, but that there must have been human intervention afterwards—as was indicated by the burying of the baby's clothing. That really is as far as anyone can go, as millions of dollars, and untold pain for the Chamberlains, have shown.

Why couldn't the Northern Territory Government leave it at that? Why were they determined to pin it on Lindy? It is true that new evidence appeared. But it was not necessary to reopen the case.

Having personally discussed the matter with a couple of very senior ministers of the Northern Territory Government prior to this, I was at a loss to understand why they were so emotionally involved in the case. They could not leave it alone. What was wrong with them, and the police? It has been suggested that they were worried about an adverse impact on tourism in the Ayers Rock (Uluru) area. But surely such a relatively trivial matter could not account for their passion.

It was indeed a case of mass hysteria, of a kind not unknown in other countries and other places. The United States, as the home of the lynch mob, should be the last country to point the finger at us. But we should point it at ourselves.

And the film should serve a useful pur-

pose in this respect, even though that will be obscured by the necessary reservations which should be expressed about it. At the Cannes film festival in 1986 I discussed the project with Verity Lambert, the film's producer (she has a cameo role as a video film editor early on in the film), and suggested that perhaps more was involved than just a simple tale of wickedness and persecution. But, as always, the "good story", following Bryson's book, took charge.

It seems to have taken emotional charge of Fred Schepisi, the director, too. It does not affect the quality of his direction, which is nearly perfect, but the notion that film critics should not be allowed to preview the film seems to have derived from the unjustified hatred which is built up against journalists generally; while many did behave badly, so did the public which demanded their reporting.

But many behaved very well, none more so than Malcolm Brown of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, who, while becoming an emotional defender of the Chamberlains, regularly delivered his usual impeccable reporting. He is shabbily dealt with.

But it is a great film, which must become part of the myth itself. Meryl Streep as Lindy does manage to become convincing, despite an accent which occasionally sounds more South African than Australian. That hardly matters. It is a deeply sympathetic and convincing performance. Even more so is that of Sam Neill as Michael Chamberlain, who manages to convey just how deeply wounded and confused that poor man must have been.

Nevertheless, the major sufferer was Lindy Chamberlain, and Streep does an enormous amount to bring home just how difficult the whole thing must have been for a woman who was not an actor. One of the cruellest criticisms made of Lindy is that she did not act the part demanded of her by a non-existent schmaltzy script, but exercised a considerable degree of self-control. Imagine being sent to jail for not behaving like a third-rate bimbo in a Hollywood mini-series!

What is really needed now is a careful analysis of the origins and propagation of the story, in which the journalists have to be seen more as victims themselves than as "evil angels" and in which the difficult sociological and psychological issues of the propagation of rumour and mass hysteria are tackled, with a careful telling of who reported and said what and when.

Probably we will have to wait until the records of the Northern Territory police and especially the Government are available to the public. But we can be sure that much has been destroyed and will be destroyed before that day. There is a lot the authorities of the Territory have to hide.

The Sunday Telegraph

Sunday, November 6, 1988
by James Oram

Blame the Evil Angels for Eight Years' Hell

He was a Northern Territory policeman, tough, intelligent, not too keen on blacks but that's a common failing up Darwin way.

The conversation got around to the Chamberlain case, as it inevitably does when sharing a drink or two with a Northern Territory cop.

"You know," he said, "there's no doubt it was a sacrifice. It's one of the rituals of their mob. They sacrifice babies to cleanse the sins of all of them."

I laughed. He had to be joking.

"It's true," he said, his face serious and a little pained that I should be amused by his remarks. "That's what happened to Azaria. You can't tell me different."

I suspect he holds the same view today. I further suspect his opinion would not change after sitting through two harrowing hours of the film *Evil Angels*, which tells the Chamberlain story through the eyes of Lindy and Michael.

He will go to his grave convinced of their guilt. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, so will half of Australia.

If nothing else, *Evil Angels* is an examination of that prejudice that eats like corrosive acid at Australian society.

Director Fred Schepisi includes the reactions of average people discussing the case, and in most cases they confuse gossip with truth.

I was involved with the case for eight years. Because of this I would often be asked at dinner parties, in pubs, in fact anywhere, for my opinion.

I don't recall having much of an opinion until the Northern Territory Supreme Court trial in Darwin. It was a story. When you are involved with a story, opinions can sometimes be dangerous.

At the end of the trial I thought the jury had probably done its best in an extremely difficult case.

They had listened for close to six weeks to complicated scientific evidence that had legal minds confused, let alone 12 average men and women.

Disturbed

But something disturbed me. I returned

again and again to the case and what I saw, what I had missed, was the impossible time bracket that enclosed Azaria's disappearance.

Reliable witnesses showed that Lindy would have had no more than 10 minutes in which to kill her baby, presumably cutting off her head with a pair of scissors, disposing of the body and returning to the campsite carrying a tin of baked beans and looking as normal as everyone else.

It could not have happened. I would give that opinion when asked and then everyone would argue, presenting their versions picked up from God knows where.

Stories were told like they were holy writ that Azaria was deformed, that one of the Chamberlains' other children had accidentally killed her and repeatedly, that Seventh-day Adventists were a peculiar, macabre sect that demanded human sacrifice.

You can't change prejudice with an argument. You can only change the subject.

The problem was—and the film brings this out well—the Chamberlains were members of a small sect with strict beliefs not always in line with mainstream churches.

For instance, they go to church on Saturdays, a day most Australians set aside to worship at beaches or racetracks.

Australians don't mind people having religious beliefs, although they would prefer them not to shout about it from the roof tops.

Seventh-day Adventists are so committed to their faith it dictates their every move.

Worship

Biblical quotes drop from their lips the way comments on the weather might from other less religious people.

They live religion. They see life as a stepping-stone on the path to eternal happiness, which is why the Chamberlains were able to treat Azaria's disappearance so calmly. They would see her again in heaven.

Australians don't see much beyond tomorrow and could not understand this belief, this passion. Nor could they cope with it.

And so, as *Evil Angels* shows, they turned on the Chamberlains the hatred reserved for people who worship in different temples and they became obsessed. So did the politicians.

It was not stressed in the movie, but the determination to prosecute the Chamberlains was political.

The Northern Territory Government was not pleased with the findings of the first inquest, particularly the coroner's disparaging remarks about the police.

The order was given to re-open the case,

to find new evidence, to vindicate the police and to satisfy the prejudices that flowed with the beer in every Darwin pub and at every Darwin party.

The film goes out of its way to condemn the media. If you accept Fred Schepisi's interpretation, the media were vultures picking over the carcass of a sensation.

In truth, the media were merely recording the events that transpired.

There were exceptions of course, but generally reporters reported, photographers photographed and cameramen filmed what was happening.

At times what was happening was bizarre: Lindy's daily fashion parade, the couple's ill-advised stone-faced appearance, their reluctance to even say hello after their early availability.

Robert Caswell, the scriptwriter, seems surprised that reporters were not on the Chamberlains' side in Darwin.

A good reporter is not on anyone's side. A good reporter covers a case such as this and then tries to put it out of his or her head until the next day.

In an interview Caswell suggested the media in Darwin for the trial was involved in one long party, with vast amounts of booze consumed around the Darwin Hotel swimming pool.

Goodly amounts of booze were consumed, but at the end of a long, hot monsoon day.

Most reporters worked 10 or 11 hours a day, with extra hours on Saturdays and Sundays.

They were all living in close contact with each other and unless they were Recchabites they were bound to party on.

If there were 50 or so bankers or brain surgeons living in close proximity on licensed premises for six or seven weeks there would also be parties.

No, the media were not to blame. If the blame lies anywhere it is with the legal profession, too smart by half on the side of the prosecution, not so on the part of the defence.

Blame

Police were also to blame. And the politicians.

But most of all the blame lies with the Australian public who would believe only what they wished to believe and with certain forensic scientists who got things so impossibly wrong.

One can but hope that after eight years the film will be the last word on the Chamberlain case. But I doubt it. Some matters never rest easy.

Because of Meryl Streep and Sam Neill's fine sensitive performances, *Evil Angels* will be a success overseas, if not in Australia.

But it is not going to do much for the country, it's not going to leave Americans feeling good about us as they did after watching Paul Hogan as Crocodile Dundee.

Perhaps we deserve it. And it should never be forgotten that in all the bitterness and ugliness lies a small life ended on that cold night at Ayers Rock eight years ago.

That is the trouble with sensational cases like the Chamberlain affair. No one remembers the victim.

The Courier Mail

Saturday, November 12, 1988
by Bob Crlmeen

Schepisi and the Chamberlain Obsession

There are so many questions to be asked of Schepisi about his film of John Bryson's book of the Azaria Chamberlain mystery—a mystery that for more than seven years made Lindy Chamberlain the subject of suspicion and innuendo unprecedented in Australia's history.

Schepisi, who spent much of his time during these years shuttling back and forth between Australia, America and Britain making the films *Barbarosa*, *Iceman*, *Plenty* and *Roxanne*, was one of millions of Aussies who got caught up in endless hours of passionate, vehement discussion about the bizarre disappearance of Azaria from the foot of Ayers Rock, and whether her mother did or didn't kill the nine-week-old baby.

Unlike the majority, Schepisi claims to have believed from the beginning that Lindy Chamberlain didn't murder the child, that Azaria was taken from inside the Chamberlain's tent by a dingo.

Yet, Schepisi says that after he read Bryson's book he was outraged and ashamed that he had formed opinions, even though out of the country most of the time, about the Chamberlains from private discussions with friends and public perception as they were portrayed in Australia's print and electronic media.

To this end, Schepisi blames the media—bitterly.

"The problem is we get the media we deserve because we want our news quick, and we want it juicy," he says, breaking off

a piece of unbuttered croissant delivered moments earlier by the hotel's room service.

"Unfortunately, people think it's information they're getting—they don't understand that it's entertainment.

"Nor do they understand that the people producing this stuff on the television, radio and press do it because they want to make money, not because they want to disseminate information.

"Ratings and circulation sell advertising, so therefore they have to produce exciting entertainment.

"How can the public get the right information to make any kind of assessment or judgment when it's reduced to a 20 or 30-second exciting grab on television, a 10 to 15-second spot on radio, the sensational pictures in the paper?

"The critical question in this case is: How much information didn't we get?

"I'd come in and out of Australia on a fairly regular basis and I was astounded that dinner parties would be entirely devoted to discussing the Chamberlains.

"People who were usually rational, intelligent and logical would argue for hours, but always the final comment was: 'She's guilty, anyway.'

"It was an obsession, trial by suspicion. You know: 'She's shifty; she's hard-faced.'

"The pity is that you get caught up in it, and I confess that I did."

That Schepisi became caught up in the project that has finally culminated with the release of the film—called *Evil Angels* in Australia and *A Cry in the Dark* in the United States—is due almost totally to the indomitable persistence of British independent producer Verity Lambert.

"I didn't want to do it for a very long time," he reflected. "But Verity wouldn't take no as a final answer.

"She drove me mad. Every week she'd tell me she wanted me to do it, and I'd say no."

Bluntly, Schepisi believed it was too difficult, almost impossible.

"I lived in fear all the way through that this might be a disaster as a film," he confessed.

"John's book is fabulous, but I didn't think I could do it (adapt the book) in a normal movie context and make it viable without distorting, taking it out of context or biasing."

Lambert's response was to challenge Schepisi's professional pride by telling him: "You just don't know how to do it." To which he responded: "That's right, I don't!"

Undaunted, she engaged native Queenslander Robert Caswell to write a first draft screenplay, then brought him and Schepisi

together to discuss it.

"I worked out then how I could do it, but it was only when Meryl (Streep, with whom Schepisi had worked so successfully in *Plenty*) got involved that I finally got the confidence to go for it," Schepisi recalled.

"I knew I had a great brain to fire off and collaborate with."

Schepisi, who shares the screen-play credit with Caswell, said that from the outset they made two crucial decisions about the *Evil Angels* project.

One was to explore fully the private reality of the Chamberlains versus the public perspective.

"On one hand there was the pass-the-gossip thing," Schepisi said.

"I don't think anybody realises how seemingly harmless conversation, reaction and (news) coverage turned into a really disastrous, extraordinary, pressure snowball that destroys people's lives.

"What we wanted was the truth; to show people everything that happened."

The second was that the film would not take a biased view of the Chamberlain saga.

"Among us all—Robert, the producers, the researchers, the actors and myself—I think we talked to just about everybody involved on all sides of the case.

"Then we tried to present everything from their point of view, so that we let the film speak for itself, to offer new insights."

Schepisi said the production team also had tried to overlay *Evil Angels* with the grim message: This could be you.

"It could have been me, it could have been any one of us caught up in that web," he said, moving forward in his chair and emphasizing words with hand movements.

"How would we react? How would we have withstood what the Chamberlains have been through?

"How many people do you know who would still be married to each other after such an event?

"How many people do you know who would even have survived this event?

"I mean, first of all losing a child, then being found guilty, sent to jail, having your baby taken from you?

"In Michael's case, losing your whole career, your ministry?

"I honestly think these are two—and I don't want this to sound deprecating in any way—quite ordinary, quite innocent, slightly naive in media terms, people from the country.

"They are very religious, well-meaning, sometimes perhaps a little misdirected, yet they've weathered the most extraordinary storm, in spite of the human frailties involved, because, clearly, of very deep, strong faith.

"Even though they made surface mistakes, they must have had extraordinary character to come out the other end after eight years of relentless battering and be very normal."

Schepisi spent time with the Chamberlains before he made *Evil Angels*, and they and other people close to them revealed to him, Caswell, Streep and Sam Neill, who plays Michael Chamberlain, some previously undocumented warts that are shown in the film.

"There comes a day when you have to probe a bit deeper," he said, laughing out loud.

"They could see we weren't on a bias trip, that we were going to examine it facts and all.

"I think they also felt that the best thing for the whole issue was to tell us some of those things.

"But I tell you they didn't do it easily, and it certainly was a great embarrassment to them because nobody likes to be shown with their frailties.

"I would like to think they took us into their trust, which couldn't have been easy for them because there had been quite a few people in the past who tried to get them on side personally, and used it against them."

The Chamberlains, including the children, have seen *Evil Angels*—and they've seen Schepisi, too.

"They were pretty traumatised," Schepisi, who sat through the first screening with them, revealed. "They were reliving the event again, and that wasn't easy.

"It was a highly emotional experience for all of us.

"They felt it was fair to all sides, but I think they'd rather have been shown a little more glamorously.

"I don't want to put words in their mouths, but I know it was very difficult for them to see eight years of their lives together up there on the screen.

"I know they've seen the film subsequently, and feel pretty good about it.

"I think they've even forgiven me. . ."

The Sydney Morning Herald

Thursday, November 10, 1988
by Paul Byrnes

Lindy's Hell Unearthed

As a re-creation of an ordeal, of the gap between private emotions and public ones

for a couple wrongly accused, *Evil Angels* is a terrific piece of work.

It's intimate and moving and deeply disturbing. Fred Schepisi and Robert Caswell, who wrote the script from John Bryson's book, take us where we could never go before, into the private and painful spaces between Lindy and Michael Chamberlain, or the movie's version of them.

We are confronted with their ordinariness, something most of us never had a chance to see, because they were robbed of it by the events of August 1980, at Ayers Rock.

On a television news bulletin there is no context, only subjective immediacy of a sort that's not kind to the unconventional. A movie is the opposite of that, having the power to explain mysteries.

Fred Schepisi uses that difference to the fullest. He gives us a context and by draining the introductory scenes of forced drama, he accentuates the horror of what happens when an ordinary couple are faced with extraordinary events.

There is no foreboding of those events as Michael (Sam Neill) and Lindy (Meryl Streep) present their new daughter, Azaria, to the Adventist congregation in Mount Isa. When they reach Ayers Rock on holiday, they are just like the other couples at the camp site, except for the lack of meat, tobacco, and alcohol in their diet.

These scenes are like a home movie. Quite remarkably, you forget that this woman is Meryl Streep, the most famous of actresses. Chameleon-like, she has become an ordinary Australian woman, in look as well as sound (the accent is nearly perfect). Her Lindy is squat and slightly solid and she moves with an ungainly, unself-conscious gait, in baggy sundress and jogging shoes. She's a contrast to the more athletic, fastidiously natty Michael, who is more self-aware.

There is another contrast at work too. From the start, Schepisi introduces an edge of harshness, a prejudicial meanness, in many of the people around this couple. As Michael sets up a family photograph outside the church in Mount Isa, a huge truck passes by, the driver hurling a casual oath at them and their religion.

Throughout the film, the abuse continues, like a Greek chorus, because Schepisi isn't just telling the story of an ordeal, he's indicting the national character.

Evil Angels isn't so much a story of the human condition as of the Australian condition, and for Schepisi, that's largely a function of rampant, malignant masculinity.

Most of the gossip-mongers, the arm-chair judges, the media persecutors and police pursuers are men, and often their

pronouncements of Lindy's guilt are delivered in a beery haze—the alcohol serving as an accusation against them.

Maybe it is true that more men than women thought her guilty. Who knows? Everyone has their own recollections of the tenor of the debate which raged across the nation at the time.

My reservations about it are not so much to do with the thesis, as with its presentation. It's glib and accusatory rather than inquiring. The accent is less on trying to understand how this case so stirred people as on finding the guilty parties, and that's ironic in a film about a witch-hunt.

Schepisi's treatment of the process by which the Chamberlains were judged—in the courts, the living rooms, television stations and dinner parties—is not just angry, it's contemptuous. We are never in doubt about who the bad guys are because they are so clearly labelled and ridiculed by Schepisi's camera (as in the shot of a vain TV reporter doing a 'noddy,' or reverse shot).

By concentrating so much on the demolition of the dark forces, the film loses some of its potential to shed light. It can't get very deeply into the sense of national division that characterised the case because it's too busy hunting the villains.

One would hardly know that there were many people who believed in her innocence all along—and that some campaigned tirelessly from early on. When they appear abruptly towards the end of the film, it's surprising, because we haven't seen the development of this side of the story.

At the centre of this storm, we have the lonely figures of Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain, and it is with their story that the film achieves its full potential, a real complexity.

Meryl Streep has a sort of bloodless, defiant courage about her that is extraordinary, and which is familiar from some of the news footage of the real Mrs. Chamberlain. Her strength grows throughout the movie till it becomes fortress-like, but we're always inside the walls with her, watching her desperately laying the bricks to protect herself and her family.

The full irony of their strength isn't lost: the thing that enabled her to survive was also the thing that many took down in their minds to use as evidence against her.

Sam Neill's performance is equally fine—his boyishness and naiveté, his embattled faith in God's plan, his heart-rending distress under the pressure of court and media glare. This may be the best work he's yet done.

Fred Schepisi's handling of their story is perfectly balanced. His clarity of vision isn't clouded by sentiment and his compas-

sion is always to the fore.

I don't think he's as successful when he tries to capture the mood of a nation, but the importance of the movie doesn't really depend on that either. *Evil Angels* is foremost an act of rehabilitation, part of the process of righting a terrible wrong, and on that level it's a fine achievement.

Newsweek

November 14, 1988

by Dave Ansen

The Most Hated Woman in Australia

For one cynical moment, when Meryl Streep first appears in *A Cry in the Dark*, you may be inclined to giggle. Oh God, what nationality is she this time? An Aussie? But the moment passes. Fast. Before long you may entirely forget you've ever seen this actress before. Wearing a brutal helmet of black hair, carrying herself with the bovine un-self-consciousness of a woman who has never given fashion a moment's thought, speaking with a perfect Australian accent, Streep vanishes magically before our eyes, replaced by the prickly, intransigently unglamorous Lindy Chamberlain—a mother who, when accused of murdering her infant child, became the focus of a lurid media thunderstorm.

Lindy didn't do it. The movie lets us see this from the start. She's on a camping trip to Ayers Rock—a looming, mysterious formation deep in the Outback—with her husband (Sam Neill) and children when a dingo (an Australian wild dog) enters their tent and runs off with their nine-week-old daughter between its jaws. The baby was never found. But the Chamberlains' nightmare was just beginning. Even though she was exonerated at the initial inquest, the rumors began, inflamed by the sensation-happy media, spurred by the local police, and twisted by an entire nation of onlookers who seemed to find in Lindy Chamberlain an ideal scapegoat for all their worst fears about human nature. As Seventh-day Adventists, the Chamberlains were ripe candidates for a mean streak of religious bigotry. Ironically, it was their acceptance of God's will that helped create the image that they were insufficiently mournful about their loss. And their willingness to be exploited by television, in a kind of media Catch-22, fed the accusation that they were coldblooded publicity seekers. By the time the case was reopened and

Lindy brought to trial, confronted with an arsenal of dubious scientific "evidence" of her guilt, she had become the most hated woman in Australia, a modern-day witch.

Burning bright: It's a hair-raising, excruciating story, made more uncomfortable by the uncompromising artistry of Streep and director Fred Schepisi. How easy it would have been to turn Lindy into some saintly, put-upon victim of injustice, the sacrificial lamb of numerous TV movies. But though Schepisi's outrage burns bright, he's after tougher game. As in his much misunderstood movie of *Plenty*, also with Streep, Schepisi is drawn to difficult, even unlikable heroines, and he makes no attempt to disguise the abrasive, bitter edges of Lindy's personality. Coldness is no sin, but in a world increasingly swayed by television images, Lindy's untelegenic comportment may be the most damning evidence against her.

A Cry in the Dark is no mere courtroom drama. Schepisi turns this tabloid story into a kind of splintered epic, a scathing portrait of Australian provincialism and prejudice at its most virulent. He counterpoints the story of the Chamberlains' disintegrating private lives with quick, incisive portraits of the country reacting to the story, and rewriting it to suit their own fantasies. It's a movie about how rumor spreads, how the media and the government can collude in passing judgment, how reality is fractured into convenient and deadly images. Schepisi's own images are extraordinary. As he showed in his great Australian epic *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* and his delightful American comedy *Roxanne*, he is one of the most naturally gifted filmmakers around: he has an eye as fluid as Spielberg's, but a brain drawn to much tougher, more complex subjects. Forget the fond Aussie pipe dreams of *Crocodile Dundee*: this absorbing, disturbing drama will give the Aussie Office of Tourism fits.

THE BULLETIN

November 15, 1988

by Sandra Hall

Rock Solid

Evil Angels is a painstaking piece of cinema rather than a great one. Perhaps inhibited by their theme—the dangers of sensationalism—the director, Fred Schepisi, and the writer, Robert Caswell, have gone carefully, and the result is a coherent and absorbing account of the Chamberlain case that covers all the angles

without ever hitting the heights.

Obviously, the decision to take this comprehensive, semi-documentary approach was not taken lightly. Schepisi declared vehemently in a recent *Cinema Papers* interview that *Evil Angels* was not made from Lindy Chamberlain's point of view—that it "was a combination of many points of view." And Caswell's script does, in fact, reproduce the all-seeing authorial tone of John Bryson's book, on which the film was based. Yet the crucial early scenes, at Ayers Rock, claim sympathy so quickly and effectively for the Chamberlains that their innocence is never in doubt. Police, media, scientists, and public may all have their day in court and the film's point of view may shift accordingly, but the script remains firmly on the Chamberlains' side.

Gossip is the villain here—along with political expediency (delicately hinted at)—and the film's most conspicuous fault is the intrusiveness with which it labors this point. Schepisi has contrived a series of awkwardly staged scenes allowing the audience to eavesdrop, from time to time, on destructive conversations in bars, living rooms, shops, and factories across the nation, and the style is somewhere between a Greek chorus and The Comedy Company (whose members are to be seen in force).

To add to this effect, Meryl Streep sounds, on first appearance, so much like The Comedy Company's Kylie Mole that her performance seems as if it's going to be dangerously dominated by the accent but, after a while, as Lindy ceases to be simply a symbol of bereaved motherhood and starts to develop shades of stubbornness and a nervy, irreverent individualism, Streep's characterisation starts to work. It's still a little too passive for plausibility but, when things are toughest, the script has her display a bleak sense of the absurd which sustains her and engages the audience while it alienates Michael. When she finally announces, to her lawyer, that she can't cry to order and "won't be squashed into some dumb act for the public—and for you," it's a particularly powerful moment, for her anger is directed at the ludicrousness as well as the injustice of her situation.

As Michael, Sam Neill gives a highly intuitive and ultimately very moving performance. It's a portrait of a man confident in his faith and in his own pastoral abilities, yet strangely awkward with the language of intimacy. Used to comforting strangers, he resorts to formal and familiar phrases when expressing his own grief, then finds that he can't quite get them out and breaks down. The film is at its most subtle when charting the shift in strength as Lindy is provoked and stimulated by her indignation and Michael is brought to the point of

questioning his faith and his future.

It's unwieldy material for film-making. John Bryson took over 550 pages to cover the five years between the disappearance of Azaria and Lindy Chamberlain's release from Berimah Prison in 1986 and to sift the obscure and confusing evidence presented at the inquest, the trial and two appeals, yet Caswell's script is true to the spirit of this remarkable book, compressing and shaping its research into a persuasive and swiftly moving narrative.

The technique is necessarily impressionistic for the supporting case of lawyers, judges, jurymen, scientists, journalists, and interested bystanders is so huge that none of them come fully into focus. Nonetheless, the mood is right—especially the knockabout cynicism prevailing in the media room in the Darwin courthouse as the reporters puzzle over ways of fitting some of the more abstruse pieces of forensic evidence into the lead paragraphs of their news stories. At this point, you appreciate, with particular clarity, how the case has turned into a bizarre carnival with a rhythm and momentum all its own.

Despite the presence of Streep the film does not have the look and feel of a Holly-

wood blockbuster. Beneath the hysteria is a flat, hard, laconic Australianness, which tells a story of prejudice born from a scepticism so ingrained that it's almost reflexive; and of a naturally occurring antipathy towards minorities—especially religious minorities.

Paradoxically, it misses out on being great cinema because of its embarrassment of riches. There are several films here: an exposé of the fallibility of the legal system, a study of the media machine in action, a highly emotional account of a family's ordeal and most intricate of all, a story about a woman forced by the cruellest of circumstances to discover a new and less comfortable self—one whose abrasive stubbornness is complemented by a tough-talking humor and resilience.

Schepisi and Caswell provide pieces of all these stories, welding them together as accurately and cohesively as possible. Given that they are dealing with a very lurid episode of recent history involving the living, it is the most responsible approach and it has paid off. *Evil Angels* sets the record straight with a forcefulness and lucidity that can't be ignored.

conscious to intrude as little as possible on her life.

Looking much younger than her 35 years, her blonde, silky hair falling to her shoulders, the luminescent Streep sits in a Manhattan hotel and explains: "I didn't want to spend too much time with her.

"I can't think of anything worse than being scrutinised by an actress, knowing you're being studied to note your facial expressions, posture, hair-style, even the type of words you use.

"I felt very sorry for her, but on the other hand I had to meet her and find out those things. They were an important part of her character since she was tried in an electronic courtroom by the media, who noticed and reported everything.

"I was frankly scared about meeting her but when we finally met she put me at ease. She's a sharp and exact woman who says what she feels... an extraordinary ordinary person.

"I copied her hair. I wore the clothes that came out of her closet or approximations of them."

Lindy Chamberlain had seemed to much of the Australian public cold and unfeeling because her religion gave her a certain stoicism in the face of adversity.

Says Streep: "I didn't find her the least bit cold although she does carry everything inside. She carries her religion around like she carries her purse.

"She came to see me with her Bible and said, 'I want you to have this for the duration of the shoot.' I mean, it was like handing me her heart, really: she was so generous and inspiring—that's the only word I have for it. She really gave me the fuel to do the piece.

"I'm fascinated by how females have to be liked and by the fact that you have to break down and cry to be vulnerable and by the fact that what she was telling was the truth but how she told it was annoying, unattractive, and unsympathetic.

"There is a reason, she believes, that this happened and she firmly believes that God does things for a reason. She and her husband believe that someday they will be reunited with the baby."

When it was announced in Australia that Streep would play the Lindy Chamberlain role, there was much speculation that this mistress of voices—a Dane in *Out of Africa*, a Pole in *Sophie's Choice*, and an Englishwoman in *Plenty* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—may have finally met her match with the Aussie twang.

Schepisi, who had worked with Streep in *Plenty*, was well aware of the problem. "All we Australians sort of sit there and say, 'Ha, you can't get this one,'" he said laughing gleefully. "We do it with everyone because nobody's ever really done it

The Sunday Telegraph

November 20, 1988

by Sally Ogle Davis

When Lindy Handed Meryl Streep Her Heart

Meryl Streep, home after giving birth to her daughter, flung the book across the room, "Get this out of my sight—I don't want to hear about this."

It was the Oscar-winning actress's first encounter with a story which has horrified and intrigued Australians for eight years.

Film producer Verity Lambert had sent her a copy of *Evil Angels*, John Bryson's book about the disappearance of a child in the Australian outback and the subsequent tangle of court cases.

"Three weeks before I had given birth to my daughter Grace (now two) and after I read the first 40 pages I threw it across the room," Streep recalls.

"It was deeply upsetting. Here I was nursing my newborn daughter, and I didn't want to read about a baby being dragged off by dogs..."

A year later Lambert sent her a film

script. "I realised it was the same story, and my heart started to go and I thought, 'My God, anything that has residual power like this, that plays to our deepest fears as parents... there's something compelling in the story.'"

The rest is becoming Hollywood history as crowds flock to the box office and critics pen their praise for a movie which combines Streep's brilliance with the tragic story of little Azaria Chamberlain.

Director Fred Schepisi's cinematic account of the Chamberlain story, *A Cry in the Dark*, or *Evil Angels* as it is called in Australia, does not fence-sit on what happened that 1980 evening at Ayers Rock.

Lindy Chamberlain, jailed then freed for the death of her baby, had her version of events turned upside down by gossip, press stories, and a climate of innuendo mixed with fiction.

Everyone who worked on the *Evil Angels* set appears to believe firmly in the Chamberlains' innocence, although Schepisi says he has simply presented all the facts on all sides and let them speak for themselves.

Streep was particularly sensitive in her dealings with Lindy Chamberlain, being

well."

Streep's costar, the New Zealand-born actor Sam Neill, who in an equally brilliant performance plays Michael Chamberlain, agreed.

"It's almost impossible for an American to do this accent properly. They all like to give it a go. They've seen *Crocodile Dundee* and they try it, but inevitably it's embarrassing. But Meryl's accent is extraordinary."

It didn't come easily, however, and everyone who watched her prepare for the role agreed that she worked extraordinarily hard.

"She had these tapes of Lindy's voice," recalled Neill, "and she played them incessantly. The accent is not a very attractive one in my view, and Lindy's voice with the greatest respect at times sounded like a fingernail on a blackboard. Meryl got all that."

Streep is the first to agree that this time the task was enormous. "I've gotten into trouble with accents because I take them seriously. I rarely pay a lot of attention to the dialogue before I shoot scenes. I read the script beforehand and plan the character but the actual words are secondary to the emotion I have to feel. Once I have that emotional reaction down pat I practise the accent, but this one was the most difficult I've ever had to do. It was part country, part Cockney, part English, and it could easily slip into any one of those types. I had to be careful to be consistent. I also met Lindy and frankly I tried to imitate her accent."

In fact, both Streep and Neill have served the Chamberlains in exemplary fashion. Streep manages the very difficult task for an actress of showing that underneath an unconventional and to an outsider decidedly cool facade, there was real passion, real feelings of grief and loss.

Neill shows us a Michael who begins as a nervous, passive—one might almost say wimpy—man whose faith keeps him insulated from the real world who then gradually gains in strength and self-knowledge through tragedy.

Neill spent several days with the Chamberlains in the sequestered Seventh-day Adventist religious community north of Sydney where they now live, honing his portrayal of the man down to his nervous scratching of his lank blonde hair to the point where his scalp bleeds.

Both Streep and Neill, who has often been seen on film as little more than a handsome romantic fantasy figure, here have willingly deglamorised themselves to portray the Australian pair as they really were.

"We by no means Hollywoodised them or cleaned them up," insists Neill. "We wear the same sort of clothes that people

wore in small town Australia at that time, which were pretty bloody dreadful."

They certainly were. Streep is seen in a variety of impossible outfits from baggy limp cotton dresses worn with knee-high sports socks and grubby tennis shoes, to cheap polyester nightgowns and pregnancy clothes covering a bowling-ball stomach, all worn with an impossible black wig.

Streep, Neill, and Schepisi found the making of the movie against a background of intense media interest extremely taxing on their private lives.

Ironically, this personal exposure to the great interest in the case, says Neill, gave Streep and himself a new insight into the plight of the Chamberlains.

"It was very useful in playing the parts to be subject to the same kind of pressure that they were," he recalls.

Despite all her experience and her reputation Neill says that sort of thing is as damaging to Streep as to lesser mortals.

"Meryl has this image as this sort of super machine that's impervious to any kind of doubts or flaws, because she seems to sail through one astonishingly difficult role after another and because she doesn't do a lot of press or reveal much about herself, but she's a prey to the same kind of fears as we all have as actors."

Of his star Fred Schepisi says only, "Without Meryl I would not, I could not, have made this picture. I needed someone with that sort of intelligence around to give me another viewpoint—not just on her character but on the whole picture. I would work with her again anytime. I hope she would with me."

The ordeal of playing an infamous character apparently did nothing to deter Streep's taste for more of the same. She has announced that she will next portray Evita Peron in the film version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita* for *Wall Street* and *Platoon* director Oliver Stone.

The New Yorker

November 28, 1988
by Pauline Kael

Trials

If *A Cry in the Dark* had been called *A Dingo Ate My Baby!* that would tell moviegoers what it's about—it would be a *Cry from the Heart*, and they might line up around the block. But *A Cry in the Dark*,

directed by Fred Schepisi and starring Meryl Streep, isn't the kind of movie they would expect to see. Schepisi uses the case of Lindy Chamberlain, who was tried for murder and convicted, to ask why the press and the public jeered at her account of seeing a dingo (the Australian wild dog) slink off from the tent the baby was in. The film asks why Australians were so eager to believe that Lindy, the wife of a Seventh-day Adventist minister and the devoted mother of two little boys, had killed her nine-week-old baby girl, while the family was camping near Ayers Rock, in the Outback, in 1980.

To begin with, there's a lurid, *National Enquirer* ring to her story. And it met with the derision of a rough, cynical people and jangled their national pride. Dingoes are an Australian mascot, and they're not very large (they resemble coyotes), and Ayers Rock, the great monolith in the desert which has been a sacred site for the aborigines for over ten thousand years, is a chief tourist attraction. Australians like to say it's the biggest rock in the world. And, as Seventh-day Adventists (and so vegetarians), Lindy (Streep) and her husband (Sam Neill) were "different," and before long were rumored to be members of a cult with blood rituals. Perhaps the most damning thing, the thing that made the penniless and once again pregnant Lindy the most hated woman in Australia, was that her stoic, matter-of-fact manner was not what the public expected. TV had accustomed people to grieving mothers who showed their frailty and their naked pathos, and here was Lindy on TV—distanced, impersonal, and bluntly impatient at the endless dumb questions.

It's this that makes the role work so well for Meryl Streep. She's a perfectionist who works at her roles from the outside in, mastering the details of movement, voice, and facial expression, and this thinking-it-all-out approach gives her an aloofness. Of course, she's got the accent; at least, to American ears she's got it—the flatness, the low pitch, and the combative swing of the phrasing. It seems more fully absorbed than her meticulous accents generally do. And she's devised a plain, inelegant walk for this woman who has no time for self-consciousness, and no thought of it, either. The walk may be overdone: the actual Lindy Chamberlain, when she appeared on *60 Minutes*, didn't move this heavily, as if she'd just put down a washboard. And Streep definitely overdoes the coiffure—witchy black hair with the bowl cut you sometimes see on little boys. But Streep's Lindy has a consistency—she's practical and unrefined, with no phony aspirations. And what gives the performance its power is that Streep can use her own aloofness and

make it work in the character. (Even her lack of spontaneity works for her here, though sometimes she does seem overcontrolled.) Streep has psyched out Lindy Chamberlain and seen that her hardness (unconsciously, perhaps) serves a purpose: it saves a part of her from the quizzing and prying of journalists and lawyers. Lindy, who's scrappy and reacts to fools with comic disbelief, needs her impersonal manner to keep herself intact. (Maybe the professionally gracious and intelligent Streep has learned this from her own sessions with reporters and TV interviewers.) From time to time, Streep suggests the strong emotions that Lindy hides in public, and we feel a bond with her—we feel joined to her privacy.

Schepisi, who worked on the script with Robert Caswell (it's based on John Bryson's study of the case, *Evil Angels*), may have got too many things going. He's a superb movie-maker, but in his attempt to do an epic dissection of how superstitions can spread, and how false the public perception (based on the media) can be, he put together more elements than he could develop. There are wonderful scenes: early on, at the campsite, a dingo snaps up a mouse so fast it's like the whirring of the wind; at dusk, right after Lindy screams that her baby has been taken, the people in the camp, in panic and confusion, hunt for the infant in the darkness; and then there's a gigantic, organized search, with men and women carrying torches seen from a distance, lined up across the wide screen. (The image has an awesome horror.) Schepisi introduces the Aussies' casual cruelty to the aborigines. (Their dogs are ordered shot, though they're nothing like dingoes.) And when public opinion has shifted, and the self-contained Lindy is thought to be an icy, tough customer, he gives us vignettes in homes and bars and glimpses of the workings of the yellow press. (These are perhaps the weakest scenes: too many uncouth, boisterous shouts, too much hubbub, and we're not told enough.) He provides a quick rundown on the forensic scientist far away in London who has never seen a dingo but concludes that one wasn't involved. And he keeps briefing us on the Chamberlains. When the trial starts, Lindy is seven months pregnant, and she keeps letting out her dress; by then, her husband is rattled and almost incoherent. He's losing his faith and doesn't want to be a pastor anymore. Sitting in the courtroom, he digs his fingernails into his scalp and bloodies them. The two try to hide from the hostile public, and press helicopters fly overhead, spying on them, the wind blast buffeting them. You can see why she tells off the lawyer who advises her to be demure on the

stand.

A Cry is never less than gripping, and toward the end, when new evidence is found, the picture is powerfully affecting. That's a surprise, because the steadiness of tone and the couple's religious fatalism don't lead you to expect this wave of pure emotion. But *A Cry* is scaled to be a masterpiece, and it isn't that. It's more like an expanded, beautifully made TV Movie of the Week. And partly this is because Streep, remarkable as she is (she does some of her finest screen acting), seems to be playing a person in a documentary. This is also true of the very accomplished Sam Neill. Everything that Schepisi does shows integrity, but he doesn't seem to go down deep enough. The picture doesn't have the ambiguities or the revelations of drama; basically, you don't learn much more than you did from the *60 Minutes* segment. And *A Cry* doesn't show the kind of affection for the Australian people that would give it a documentary meaning. You come out moved—even shaken—yet not quite certain what you've been watching.

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SPECTRUM

by Bonnie Dwyer

The Importance of Innocence to the Innocent

Lindy Chamberlain holds a special place in the hearts of Adventists. We shared her pain of being misunderstood and ached for her as she was imprisoned. So when the movie which told her story, *A Cry In The Dark*, was released in the United States in November, many Adventists, this reviewer included, wondered if she would be portrayed sympathetically. Would her religion be accurately depicted?

Not all early reports were reassuring. *Ladies Home Journal*, one of the first magazines to carry a feature story about the film, put Meryl Streep on its October cover, complete with dingo earrings. The article called Lindy a homely preacher's wife and questioned why Streep would pick such a role. It looked like Lindy was in for more bashing from the media.

However, the week the movie opened, Gene Shalit, of NBC's *Today* show, did a two-part interview with Streep that was much more encouraging; it proved to be one of the most intriguing media pieces on the film. He set the story up accurately and

quickly, so that Streep's comments were easy to understand. The reason Streep accepted this role became clear—she likes challenges. The part attracted her, she said, because of the extraordinary strength of this seemingly ordinary woman. She talked about the difficulty of playing someone who is very well known. For instance, she had to learn Lindy's precise accent which is Australian with a hint of New Zealand in it. She did not portray Lindy as a poor victim of circumstance, which would have been easy to do. She knew she had to convey the Lindy that had irritated many Australians as they watched the story unfold on the evening news. Streep also talked about meeting the Chamberlains. What an incredible marriage, she observed. Shalit then asked Streep what her husband thought of the film. He called it her best performance, Streep said; high praise indeed for the actress who has received seven Oscar nominations and two Academy Awards.

But there is much more about *A Cry In The Dark* that is worth noting. Perhaps Fred Schepisi's background as a producer of documentaries helped him to stick to the facts. For whatever reason, he did not distort the story to make it work as a film, and key scenes were done verbatim. For instance, the comments made by the first judge who exonerated Lindy were straight off the court transcript. Lindy's speech at Avondale Church upon her release from prison matched the tape of the event featured in the *60 Minutes* (the Australian version) special on the Chamberlains made upon her release from jail.

Schepisi avoided getting diverted on many of the tangents in this complicated story. In the concluding scene Schepisi accurately highlights the most important theme of the Chamberlain saga. Michael, when asked why they were pursuing their fight for justice even after Lindy's release, says: "People forget how important innocence is to innocent people."

People also forget the harm that can be done when a story is incorrectly told, when gossip is considered to be fact. And that is why *A Cry In The Dark* is such an important film. It finally tells the Chamberlain story, not only well, but accurately.

Adventists can be glad that Fred Schepisi, Meryl Streep, and Sam Neill were principals in the telling of this important story. The elements of religion that were misunderstood by many in Australia were set into proper context so that they made sense. One film observer even went so far as to say that given the gossipy, vindictive nature of the typical Australian as portrayed in the movie, the Adventists appeared to be the sanest people in the country.