

# RAY AND KINSEY: A COMPARATIVE MOVIE REVIEW

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Two exceptional and complex lives are the subjects of the recently released biographical movies *Ray* (Universal Pictures and Bristol Bay Productions) and *Kinsey* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, in association with Qwerty Films).

*Ray* is the story of Ray Charles, the eldest of two sons in a female-headed household. Ray grew up in a rural community in the South. He was born sighted but experienced progressive loss of vision at a young age. Ray's mother, an uneducated but strong-willed young woman, instilled in him strengths and coping mechanisms that became his survival weapons in the course of a professionally successful but personally turbulent life. Ray experienced both the positive and the destructive effects of interpersonal relationships, the dehumanizing racial practices of the South in the pre-Brown vs. Board of Education era, and the beginning of change following the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. He emerged as a musician who followed his creative instinct to produce beautiful and acclaimed work. Charles' musical genius made him an international idol, and his concerts around the globe drew huge crowds. The movie candidly portrays Charles' struggle to overcome a drug addiction, and to maintain stable husband and father roles. His beautiful young wife (Kerry Washington) remains faithful and more than once reminds him of the potential for personal and family destruction from his risky behaviors. She does not, however, seem to know how to nurture and help heal his emotional wounds, and Ray continues the paradoxical dance of professional success, personal agony, and interpersonal conflicts.

From a mental health practitioner's perspective, Ray Charles' life story provides an illuminating context for an analysis of the life-long effects of untreated early childhood trauma. Ray's behaviors and choices during adulthood seem to always be influenced by the internal turmoil that first entered his psyche during his childhood years in his rural birthplace. Blinded at a young age, he learned how to navigate in the world of the sighted and, following his mother's instructions, did not allow his blindness to "cripple" him. The circumstances of his younger brother's death subjected Ray to a traumatic, outside the range of normal human experience, loss. Left untreated, the impact of this childhood experience haunted him for the rest of his life as this was reflected in both his behavior and the occurrence of frequent painful flash backs. Looked at from this perspective, Ray's life script has many lessons to teach social workers and other mental health practitioners about the importance of early interventions in the lives of traumatized children. If universal prevention services are not feasible within our present mental health system, Ray's story must convince us of the importance of early interventions to help protect children from repeated tumultuous interpersonal experiences in their adulthood. Of course, one may argue that this artist's musical talent could be attributed to the effects of his childhood trauma; that it was his internal conflict and guilt that became his driving force to compose, play the piano, sing and find comfort in his acclaim and public adulation. I envision a mental health intervention that would nurture his creativity and leave his talent unscathed, would help heal his wounded psyche, role model for him healthier interpersonal

relationships and empower him to choose a healthier life style over self-destructive behaviors.

Jamie Foxx is superb as Ray. His speech and mannerisms are indeed those of Ray Charles as we have seen him perform and have listened to his jazz tunes and original compositions of spiritual and country music over so many decades; from the 1950s to the time of his death in 2004. The cinematography is very pleasing to the eye.

Unlike Ray Charles, Alfred Kinsey, the son of an academic, is a boy of privilege. Poverty, deprivation and discrimination are not the sources of his psycho-emotional traumas. His traumas are born of moral codes, religious beliefs and of dictates and expectations of an authoritarian father. It is these conditions in Kinsey's upper middle class environment that keep him a virgin till his marriage, long after he gains prominence as a zoology professor at Indiana University.

The dubious information he collects from inquiries about male sexual expression during adolescence and young adulthood, combined with difficulties in his intimate relationship with his young bride, trigger in him a passionate desire to understand human sexual expression from a scientific perspective. With research assistants whom he painstakingly trains, he conducts thousands of confidential interviews with adult male and female subjects from all walks of life in the continental United States. He develops a new course on marriage in which hundreds of students enroll every semester. His colleagues, the University's Board of Trustees, and the benefactors of his research react with skepticism to his findings. The publication of his two groundbreaking books, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), create a national uproar: with church officials denouncing them and with millions of Americans, men and women, experiencing relief upon discovering that their "perverted" sexual desires and covert sexual

behaviors were not unique. In real life, the contribution of Kinsey's reports to our understanding of human sexuality and to the women's and gay liberation movements has been acknowledged. The scientific basis of his studies and his motives for choosing his research subject remain controversial.

Liam Neeson's performance is powerful. He is convincing as an inquisitive but non-validated angry son, an inexperienced and awkward lover, an energetic classroom instructor passionate about his subject matter, a committed researcher, and an effective persuader. His teaching style as he lectures from the stage in a large lecture hall is dynamic and engaging. The passion with which he defends the contribution of the controversial findings from his research in the face of resistance from both the members of the University's Board and his funding sources, underscores his commitment to his research subject. The difference of opinion between these parties as well as Kinsey's loss of needed support to continue his work present us with a good example of the effects of restrictions to freedom of speech and scientific inquiry in the academia. Laura Linney is impressive as Kinsey's loving, understanding, ever-supportive, and daring wife.

These two films give us insight into two extraordinary men who were raised in dissimilar socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and grew into unconventional and controversial public figures for different reasons. I highly recommend them.

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