

Love doesn't end

by [David S. Cunningham](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

*The End of the Affair* (1999), directed by Neil Jordan

Having read Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* many times, and having taught it to hundreds of theology students, I have a rather passionate relationship with the text. So I was relieved to discover that Neil Jordan's film adaptation allows some of the book's Christian convictions to shine through. The film employs a great deal of dialogue directly from the book--so much so that my wife had to tell me to stop whispering the characters' lines before they spoke them.

*The End of the Affair* is Greene's semiautobiographical novel about a successful writer, Maurice Bendrix (played in the film by Ralph Fiennes), who falls in love with Sarah Miles (Julianne Moore), the wife of a British civil servant. Their affair had been rather conventional, remarkable only for the depth of jealousy that Bendrix felt toward every entity that spent time with Sarah (including not only her husband and her social acquaintances, but even her clothing--and the rain). Quite suddenly and without explanation, Sarah had ended their affair. Since that time, Bendrix has been unable to believe the promises that she made to him--namely, that she would always love him, and that she would love no other man. Two years after their affair ended, a chance meeting with Sarah's husband, Henry (deftly portrayed by Stephen Rea), leads Bendrix to believe that she is now having another affair--and Bendrix's smoldering jealousy is reignited. When Henry intimates that he has considered hiring a private investigator, Bendrix takes up the cause for him. The detective uncovers several clues, including a love letter and some unexplained visits to another man's house. Clearly, someone new has entered Sarah's life.

Since Bendrix is narrating the story, we tend to see everything from his perspective. But then he comes into possession of Sarah's diary; and suddenly he (and the audience) begins to understand all these events from the woman's point of view. And here the theological significance of this story comes into full prominence.

It turns out that Sarah had ended the affair because of a bargain that she had made with God. In a moment of desperation, she had made a promise to God (or, as she

puts it, "to anything that might exist") that she would never see Bendrix again, in exchange for a profound act of supernatural intervention: the saving of Bendrix's life. She got her wish--and then realized that her "happiness" must come to an end. Ever since that moment, she has continued to love Bendrix, but she has also kept her promise never to see him again. It has been very hard work, but in the process she has come to believe in God (the unexplained visits were to her priest's house); indeed, she has fallen in love with God (God was the intended recipient of the love letter). Far from the wanton prodigal that she had seemed, Sarah turns out to be a faithful keeper of promises--even when they impinge upon (what she had believed to be) her greatest happiness.

Bendrix tries to convince her that her promise was worthless--and that she should get a divorce and take up with him. His conniving schemes eventually fail, and Sarah is able to convince him that her belief in God is real. She has begun to live into an aspect of her personal history that she had thus far considered irrelevant: the fact that she was baptized as a child. "I've caught belief like a disease," she tells Bendrix--and she hints that he might catch it as well.

The beauty of this story is its depiction of a strong woman of extraordinary character. Like all of us, she is a sinner; but she comes to recognize her sin and to turn away from it. She does the right thing, even if for the wrong reasons--and it has made her a better person, perhaps even a saint. By the time the story ends, she has worked several miracles: healing the sick, strengthening a friendship, and convincing Bendrix--an avowed atheist--to acknowledge the existence of God.

The film's only major stumble is in allowing Bendrix's final wooing of Sarah to succeed, at least temporarily. In the novel, he chases her from one place to another, making impassioned pleas on behalf of his own (sexual) desire; but he is unable to break her resolve. In the film, the two former lovers return to Bendrix's apartment, have sex, and begin to glimpse a rather more conventional form of happiness as they plan a life together. This imagined happiness ultimately slips from their grasp; but the film's audience may see this as divine revenge against Sarah for breaking her promise, rather than (as the novel has it) a direct consequence of Bendrix's self-absorbed pursuit. In the film, Sarah emerges as a person of weaker character--a woman so desperate for a virile man than she is willing to cash in her passionate relationship with God. Consequently, her quasi-miraculous interventions are much less credible.

Greene's novel offers additional theological ruminations (including some profound meditations on the significance of the material body, and of its resurrection) that are omitted in the film; but such economies are necessary in any adaptation.

Fortunately, the book is still there on the shelf, waiting to be read. And if you read it before viewing the film, you too might find yourself whispering the dialogue ahead of the characters on screen:

"Love doesn't end, does it, just because we don't see each other?"

"Doesn't it?"

"People go on loving God, don't they, even though they don't see him?"

"That's not our kind of love."

"Perhaps there isn't any other kind."