

The Tree of Life: Written and directed by Terrence Malick

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

For years, rumors abounded that the brilliant and reclusive writer-director Terrence Malick was working on a screenplay version of the book of Genesis. This would sound like a daunting undertaking for most people, but it actually seemed apt for the director of *Days of Heaven* and *The New World*, given his penchant for luxurious shots of nature, extensive use of voice-over and enough religious symbolism that audiences are tempted to genuflect.

Though *Genesis: The Movie* has not yet come to fruition, *The Tree of Life* comes close to being such a film. Think of it as the book of O'Brien, after the 1950s southern family that occupies the center of the film and comes to represent the dreams, joys and disappointments of humankind.

The movie starts with a quote from the book of Job and spends much of its remaining 130 minutes questioning God's rewards and punishments and most of all God's sense of justice. Malick—no Cecil B. DeMille—chooses to explore these mysteries through the humble, often difficult lives of the O'Briens of Waco, Texas, including the father (Brad Pitt), the mother (stage actress Jessica Chastain) and their three energetic boys (all played by first-time actors).

The father, who represents the way of nature, is a failed musician who feels his life seeping away as he toils at a local airline factory, leading him to be a stern disciplinarian. The mother, who represents the way of grace, is an iconic figure whose love for her boys is unconditional. The conflict between the father and his eldest son, Jack (Hunter McCracken as young Jack), is at the core of the story, much as God's hopes and expectations for humanity are at the core of the biblical story.

True to Malick's celebrated elliptical and impressionistic style, the story of the O'Brien family is told not within a strict narrative but rather through a series of

images. A character's memory of events is implied rather than shown as flashbacks. The fluid camerawork, anchored by the skillful Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, does a masterful job of capturing the feelings of youth—the sweaty joy of running through the neighborhood on a warm summer afternoon, the exhausted trek home at dusk after a long day of play.

This story would be more than enough to constitute a complete film, but for Malick it is just a start. In addition, the film contains images of Jack as an adult, played by a pensive-looking Sean Penn. Jack staggers through the cold, metallic buildings of the present, a prisoner of his father's prodding and bullying, as he seeks to understand why Dad worked in such mysterious ways. He knew that his father could be loving and compassionate, so why did he punish his children in ways they struggled to understand? This eternal search leads Jack to question who he is, what his life is about and—in the case of his distant family—why death can seem so random.

Malick doesn't try to answer the questions that Jack poses. He does, however, make his first serious foray into the world of special effects in order to visualize, from one man's perspective, the creation of the universe, from the gathering of the gases that led to the Big Bang through the cooling of the boiling planet, the formation of the oceans, the arrival of the dinosaurs and even the predicted death of our spinning home millions of years in the future.

These awe-inspiring sections of *The Tree of Life* conjure up scenes from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but unlike Stanley Kubrick's metaphysical musing on the meaning of the universe, Malick's film seems direct and to the point. There are no black monoliths or space babies to suggest the search for knowledge. Rather, he leaves us with smiles of recognition, hugs of remembrance and leafy trees in motion. This film comes closer to being poetry on celluloid than any you have ever seen.