

Uncivil disobedience

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

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There has never been a great movie about John Brown. Seriously, hard as it is to believe, no one has ever created a real blockbuster about America's most famous abolitionist. Amazing.

Quentin Tarantino says he'd like to. "John Brown is my favorite American who ever lived," he told Jay Leno a couple of years ago. "He basically . . . single-handedly started the road to end slavery, and the fact that he killed people to do it, you know, he decided, 'OK, we start spilling white blood, then they're going to start getting the idea.'"

All of that is true—all of it.

Biographies we've got—by the score, in fact. Just for starters, there's *To Purge This Land with Blood*, by Stephen Oates, and David S. Reynolds' *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*; not to mention fictional renditions like sprawling *Cloudsplitter*, by Russell Banks; and, most recently, James McBride's *Good Lord Bird*, a take on John Brown's life that sometimes feels like a good old American tall tale.

Books galore we've got, biographies and novels; but no movies. No wonder there's speculation about what Tarantino is up to these days.

Why [John Brown](#) isn't on the silver screen is a no-brainer: we honestly don't know what to make of him and haven't for 150 years.

Throughout my years in the classroom, I taught important writers like Emerson and Thoreau, American Romantics, intellectuals and artists who believed in all sorts of things and causes and spirits. Martin Luther King studied Thoreau's little essay "Civil Disobedience," as will millions of high school kids in the next few months. The abolitionist John Brown, deeply admired by Thoreau and Emerson and the whole crowd of Concord intellectuals, really believed Thoreau was sad and hopeless. Unlike Thoreau, John Brown was committed to violence, the only way to cleanse the nation

of its bloody, awful sin—slavery.

Calvinist that he was, that deep faith came from his very soul. John Brown was in Kansas when what became the Civil War actually started in the mid 1850s. "Bleeding Kansas," people still call it, a five-year span or so when pro-slavery forces and free-staters literally went to war over slavery.

When Brown went back East on a fund-raiser, he tried to recruit men for his armies, "good men, industrious and honest, who respect themselves, and act only from principle, from the dictates of conscience; men who fear God too much to fear anything human." Sounds like campaign rhetoric.

Imagine someone seriously playing a character who was as much a fundamental Christian as the mystical and mythical John Brown. I don't think there's a place on the screen for someone that passionate a believer.

But then, there's good reason to consider him mad, insane. Many would say he was.

After all, he commanded the bloody murder of pro-slavery Border Ruffians. Out on the frontier of Kansas, he and his personal army—his own sons—grabbed Southerners out of their beds, took them out to some wooded gulch far from their bawling families, and butchered them with machetes because they believed in the institution of slavery.

How do you put that on a multiplex screen?

There simply is no simple way of understanding John Brown, and that's why he's not been a Hollywood favorite, never had a series like Davy Crockett. Sometimes evangelicals like me are proud to say that we were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement of the mid-19th century in America. We were. No question.

John Brown, a man who was totally convinced that God, his God, the God who spoke to Brown in his word, the Bible, was on the side of those who wanted to end to slavery, was far ahead of his time. Many, many ardent abolitionists didn't really believe slaves to be fully human. They were utterly against slavery as a system, but they believed African Americans made excellent railroad porters, but little else.

Not Brown. John Brown was totally convinced (he was never half-convinced about anything) that African-Americans were no different than his own white race.

When Julia Ward Howe sat down one night and tried to rewrite the lyrics of "John Brown's Body," a familiar campfire song for Union troops, she wrote out words that have become as deeply imprinted on the American consciousness as any, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

John Brown is in that hymn.

As he was when that great battle hymn was sung by Union troops at Gettysburg and then again, for the next 150 years, when just about every choir worth its salt offered its own rendition. John Brown is an American hero and a fanatic, a madman. He's both, and I'm not sure American popular culture can handle that kind of complexity.

Most of us don't even try. Here's the ballad. The narration belongs to Lincoln, of course; but John Brown, devoted Christian believer and bloody murderer, is here too:

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