

Teen angel

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

Curiously, most of the memorable love stories are the ones in which the couple does not live happily ever after. Whether it is Rhett in *Gone With the Wind* telling Scarlett that he doesn't give a damn, or Rick in *Casablanca* informing Ilsa that she belongs with Victor, helping him fight the Nazis, the couple's realization that things will not work out is part of what makes the love story great. Memories will have to suffice. ("We'll always have Paris.")

A subcategory of the love-story genre is the teen love story, from Romeo and Juliet to any number of contemporary teen heat fests. But the same rule applies: the story is more poignant, and perhaps even profound, when things can't work out.

Normally, the insurmountable problems in teen love stories are differences in money, class or race. Religion rarely enters the picture as a reason for a couple to stay apart or to try and get together. What is intriguing about *A Walk to Remember*, which is loosely based on the 1999 novel by Nicholas Sparks, is that one member of the couple is initially considered undesirable and unattractive because of her devout Christian beliefs. The question is: Is her faith an insurmountable obstacle to romance?

The film, directed by Adam Shankman (*The Wedding Planner*), is rougher and more realistic than the book--which is all to the good. Whereas the novel takes place in the 1950s, screenwriter Karen Janszen (*Digging to China*) sets the romance amid the permissive and sexually overt teen culture of today. A Christian teen who explicitly talks about her faith seems even more culturally exotic in this setting than she would have in the '50s. And for an insecure boy who is terrified of not appearing cool to his friends, it is definitely a risk to spend time with such a character, let alone fall in love with her.

The male lead, Landon Carter (Shane West), is a kid who gets into trouble on a regular basis. In fact, it is punishment for an act of brazen stupidity that brings him closer to Jamie Sullivan, the Bible-toting daughter of the small town's stern Baptist preacher. (He is a single parent, since his wife died giving birth to Jamie.)

Jamie is played by teen pop star Mandy Moore. I have never seen her perform, but am told she is part of the "bare-midriff" school of music. Despite her off-screen persona, the soft-spoken Moore is quite wonderful as Jamie, suggesting a confidence that comes with faith in herself and her father, as well as in a supreme being.

Landon falls in love with the unpretentious and frumpy-looking Jamie, drawn in large part to her innate goodness and strength of belief, which is in direct contrast to his own confusion and lack of good sense. Initially, he tries to hide their burgeoning friendship from his buddies, since Jamie is outside the circle of popularity. The film shows Landon's growing maturity as he comes not to care what other people think-- a development largely due to Jamie's influence.

Those familiar with the other books by Nicholas Sparks (including *Message in a Bottle*) may guess what the couple's real insurmountable problem turns out to be. But as pat and predictable as the ending may be, it doesn't negate the cinematic virtues of this moving story. Jamie Sullivan is not only a good person but an exceptionally strong character, and the fact that she occasionally falls to her knees to pray for guidance instead of indulging in teen-movie sex makes *A Walk to Remember* a welcome exception to the Hollywood rule.