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No Dumb Questions (review)

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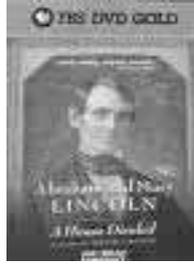
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Abraham Lincoln, noting that “the man Mary Lincoln knew and loved and mourned has faded into myth.” The film’s second goal is to then argue that while the Lincolns “reached the White House as partners,” personal tragedy and the onset of the Civil War divided the couple (hence the subtitle of the film). The first goal works much better than the second.



While playing off of Lincoln’s 1858 “A House Divided” speech, made in reference to a nation being torn apart by slavery, the divisions claimed about the Lincolns’ relationship are overblown. The key moment for this interpretation comes in February 1862 when the Lincolns’ beloved little boy Willie died of typhoid. Mary Lincoln remained inconsolable for weeks, haunted by the little boy’s toys and even his favorite flowers. The ubiquitous David McCullough then narrates, “As the war went on, Mary would retreat more and more into herself, while Lincoln would somehow find the strength to merge his own grief with the grief of his countrymen.” But there is also plenty of evidence in the film to support a counterargument: that throughout all the heartbreak of the war years, the Lincolns clung to one another as best they could. If the Lincolns were divided after Willie’s death, it is hard to account for Mary’s rallying from her grief to support her husband and the war effort by spending long hours at soldiers’ hospitals tending to the wounded. She also donated time and money to charity efforts for fugitive slaves at a time when emancipation was still a very thorny political issue for Abraham Lincoln. When an old friend from Springfield paid a visit after Willie’s death, the discussion turned to Mary’s Confederate brothers, half-brothers, and cousins. The minister was shocked to hear Mary say she hoped they would all be killed. But Mary then very sensibly explained of her Confederate kin, “they would kill my husband if they could.” And she was right. Another component of the divided marriage theme rests on the fact that Mary Lincoln spent several weeks and months between 1861 and 1865 away from her husband and away from Washington, D. C. It was, however, not at all unusual for women of means in the 19th century to spend long periods of time away from their husbands and the documentary notes that Abraham and Mary wrote one another frequently. Moreover, Washington, D. C. in the early 1860s was an unhealthy, unpleasant place. Most men could not wait to leave the nation’s capital either. Finally, the poignant last few days of Abraham Lincoln’s life, right up to the couple holding hands and whispering affectionately early in that awful night in Ford’s Theater, also testify that the Lincolns’ relationship had in fact persevered through four hideously long years.

The documentary adds little new to the life of Abraham Lincoln, but it performs a much needed service by telling Mary Lincoln’s story more completely. Too often Mary Lincoln gets caricatured in the Abraham Lincoln literature as being crazy, an-

noying, or some combination of the two. There is no question that Mary Lincoln, like her husband, suffered from depression. Her depression was exacerbated by Willie’s death in 1862 and of course by Abraham Lincoln’s murder in 1865. After 1865, grief and delusion took over until she finally died a sad and lonely death in 1882. But by taking the viewer carefully through Mary Todd’s early years as the daughter of a wealthy Kentucky slave-owner, and then as the young wife of Abraham Lincoln, she emerges as a much more sympathetic and engaging figure. Mary Todd possessed a sharp, quick intellect and was well-versed in contemporary American politics. She could be extraordinarily charming, even during the war years when she suffered so much personal tragedy.

*Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided* was produced by David Grubin who also co-wrote the script with Geoffrey Ward. The structure of the documentary features alternating sections on the lives of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. Much of the Ken Burns formula for historical documentaries is employed: talking head historians offer insight and further the narrative; serial close-ups of primary sources such as letters, newspapers, cartoons, old photographs, and drawings add touches of material culture; modern day footage of important locations such as rural Kentucky, the Lincoln house in Springfield, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. connect the present and past; and the steady sound of Americana music helps complete the mood of hopefulness and then tragedy. The historians selected are appropriate: they include David Herbert Donald, Jean Harvey Baker, Douglas L. Wilson, John Hope Franklin, James McPherson, Mark Neely, Margaret Washington, Charles B. Strozier, Linda Levitt Turner, Donald Miller and David Long. Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin also makes an appearance among the Lincoln historians. Among the actors who read as the historical figures, Holly Hunter is perfect as the voice of Mary Todd Lincoln.

**Charles J. Holden**

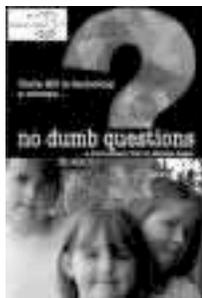
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## ***No Dumb Questions***

*No Dumb Questions* centers on a topic that necessarily interrogates “traditional family values.” The film follows a white middle-class family of five closely as mother, father and in turn, their three children, digest the challenging news: their loved one has decided to live as Aunt Barbara, instead of as Uncle Bill. While the film does not explicitly address “family values” rhetoric, Melissa Regan’s documentary shows its viewers one family’s values and the process by which they are cultivated.

As a family, they cultivate the values of love and acceptance throughout the film by employing the principles of openness, love, and humor in dealing with the new knowledge about Aunt Barbara/Uncle Bill. As the title of the film suggests, both

the parents and Aunt Barbara encourage questioning and respect the children's perspectives. When Chelsea, age 11, wants to ask a question using the word penis she first says, "Can I say it? It won't be inappropriate?" By involving questions in the process of cultivating their children's values, the parents avoid stifling the learning process with prescriptions that would close down or limit discussion. They thereby demonstrate meaningful value-making through their interactions. Olivia, the 9 year-old niece, initially expresses fear when she meets Aunt Barbara, but later says that she "calmed down" after talking with her. Chelsea, the oldest daughter, feels proud that she stood up in class and provided the terms her classmate requested rather than simply allowing the class to snicker about a "man who wants to become a woman" without a direct response from the teacher.



The family's approach to interaction with their children is consistent: they present a topic, sometimes by asking questions, then they allow their children to think about the topic, reflect, interact with one another and answer each other's questions. Then, the parents respond to their children's inquiries and spark further discussion. Each of the sisters have very different reactions from one another as well as very different ways of coping, reflecting, and processing information, so each of them learns to employ the values that their parents encourage in their own way. When the children learn that their Uncle Steve decided not to meet Barbara because he is not handling the news very well, the mother says that her daughter was mad saying, "I do not understand! This is his brother, his sister! If that was my sister and she had something going on, I would always love her!" The children demonstrate that they have learned the values their family encourages.

The means used to cultivate family values in the film stands in stark contrast to the "traditional family values" rhetoric that demonizes groups of people. Aunt Barbara's family refuses simply to ostracize her; instead they consider the difficulties she experiences. As viewers, we learn about some of the struggles she will face as a transgender individual through the eyes of those who love her including her six year-old niece, Abby. Humanizing Barbara through their approach to her decision, Barbara's family recognizes that the learning process matters as much as the outcome. Indeed, the very root of the word traditional reveals that traditions, like its synonyms, custom and culture, are learned. So, if one's values in practice are not consistent with the values one claims to want to preserve, then a mixed message can result.

The familial context of this film reveals that the phrase "traditional family values," can be employed as an empty rhetorical tool that fails at the very process required to accomplish its alleged purpose of preserving tradition. Choosing not to focus energy on hunting down allegedly immoral people, the family does not concern themselves with how to protect their innocent chil-

dren, but rather they devote time to preparing their children to reflect and make decisions about how to live a life of love. The film thus gives the viewer hope that communities and families can still foster love, acceptance and humor despite the context of "the culture wars." By not treating their questions regarding their aunt as a threat from somewhere outside their family, the family in the film avoids a stifling debate over transgendered identity. Portrayed as *at war*, any focus on the values of consensus, love and acceptance can disappear from the discussion, but Regan's decision to present her subject through the eyes of children within intimate family settings enables her film to break through the impasses of these debates.

Without employing the phrase "family values," Chelsea, Olivia, Abby and the parents *exhibit* their family's values: they illustrate practical tools for cultivation and value-making steeped in love, where the parents' means for introducing values to their children are consistent with their desired ends. The process by which the family in *No Dumb Questions* teaches and learns the values of love and acceptance is refreshing and exhilarating to witness so intimately. This family's admirable approach to processing difficult family news would make any hard-to-deal-with family issue easier to consider. Faced very directly with a controversial topic, we witness parents guiding and supporting their children as they encourage them to think through complicated ideas and questions. The process of cultivation that they as parents employ enables them to return from meeting Aunt Barbara with an assessment of success, "If this has done anything, it has put a positive light in being accepting of others. [Our children] are going to be better off because of it." Appealing to their core values as a family, they take a courageous and very humane stance. Love leads them to accept Aunt Barbara completely, even when they cannot completely understand or relate to her decision.

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## ***Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001)**

On the surface, the Bollywood film *Lagaan* offers a story of resistance. Set in the traditional musical mode of films coming out of the prolific Mumbai (Bombay) studios, *Lagaan* tells/sings/dances the story of the resistance of Indian villagers against their British colonial oppressors. Smaller resistances within the village shore up this larger unfolding of tension, as the hero Bhuvan (played by Aamir Khan) defends the village untouchable, welcomes the token Muslim, Ismail (Raj Zutshi) and token Sikh, Ram Singh (Javed Khan), and stops the villagers from violently killing the turncoat spy for the British, Lakha (Yashpal Sharma). We watch as the villagers conquer the clear evil of British Captain Andrew