



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Ladykillers

A dark comedy about character, justice, and the good life.

The Ladykillers is a dark comedy set in sleepy Saucier, Mississippi, deep in the Bible Belt, where the forces of good and evil meet. The villainous professor Goldthwait Dorr masterminds a riverboat casino heist, and the pious widow Marva Munson unwittingly plays host and foil to the con artist and his dimwitted henchmen. It's a contest between evil and virtue, with neither the winner nor the loser ever glimpsing the greater drama.

This study guide will help you discuss the deeper themes of the movie. What does this film say about how God intervenes in our lives? How does it portray the church and Christian worship? What impact do our habits of thought and lifestyle have on our character? How do we find true joy? And how is justice delivered in this world?

Based on:

The Ladykillers (Buena Vista Pictures, 2004), directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, based on the 1955 Ealing Studios production of *The Ladykillers*, screenplay by William Rose, Joel Coen, and Ethan Coen, rated R for language including sexual references.



© 2004

Visit www.ChristianBibleStudies.com



Movie Summary

The eloquently verbose con artist, “professor” Goldthwait Higginson Dorr III (Tom Hanks), has a plan. *The Bandit Queen*, a riverboat casino moored just off Marva Munson’s (Irma P. Hall) home, has several million dollars he intends to steal. By running a local want ad, he assembles a motley troop of criminals: Gawain MacSam (Marlon Wayans) is an aggressive street hood with a dirty mouth and lustful impulse-control problems; Garth Pancake (J. K. Simmons) is a demolitions man with bowel-control issues; Lump Hudson (Ryan Hurst) is a muscle-bound heavy with a mental impairment; and the General (Tzi Ma) is a former tunnel-digging Vietnamese general of few words and a lethal smoking habit.

Dorr’s plan is set after he rents a room from Munson, and he and his bumbling bandits invade Munson’s root cellar. With battered musical instruments as props, Dorr tells Munson they are practicing rococo classical music—actually supplied by a boom box. With a few setbacks, such as an inopportune explosion, a severed finger, and a last-minute bribe for a corrupt casino boss, they finally dig the tunnel and loot the casino. But that’s when the master plan collapses and the God-fearing Marva Munson becomes the problem no plan could’ve predicted. Now they have to kill the old lady. Amazingly, Munson escapes each attempt at her life. She ends up with the money, which she promptly gives away.

The movie demonstrates—with more than mere piles of cash—that crime does not pay and virtue is its own reward.

—For more coverage of *The Ladykillers*, visit <http://christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/ladykillers.html>

Rated R:

This film is inappropriate for younger viewers due to frequent profanity, crass comments about male and female anatomy, toilet humor, and a few violent outbursts that can be both cartoonish and bloody.

Discussing the Scenes

Select one or more of these themes to discuss:

1. Church and Worship
2. Divine Intervention
3. Christianity in the Movies
4. The Makings of Our Character
5. Joy and the Good Life
6. Justice

1. Church and Worship

(Ephesians 2:22; Philippians 4:4–7; Hebrews 10:25)

Throughout the movie we see Marva Munson at dynamic church services. The congregants are so visibly worshipping that the scenes are emotionally stirring and uplifting.

Read Ephesians 2:22, Philippians 4:4–7, and Hebrews 10:25.



- [Q] Why should we rejoice during church worship?
- [Q] What is it like to be in a moving worship service? If you've experienced one, how did you feel touched or stirred? Talk about the effect it had on you.
- [Q] How did you feel during these scenes in the film? Were you moved in any way while watching them?
- [Q] How did you react to the honesty of the worship scenes? How well did the scenes fit in the context of an absurd plot?

At the end of the movie, Lump says, "I've been doing some thinking, maybe we *should* be going to church..."

- [Q] What might have happened if any of the criminals had gone to church with Marva?

2. Divine Intervention (Exodus 14:23–30; Acts 5:1–10; Acts 28:1–6)

As Dorr's plans crumble and the gang decides to murder Marva Munson, each attempt fails at the last second. Each thug is killed, either at the hands of another criminal or by an outlandish accident. MacSam dies while fighting over his own gun. Pancake flees with the money, but he's caught and killed by the General when his irritable bowel slows him down. The General is startled by a Jesus cuckoo clock, swallows his cigarette, and tumbles down the stairs to his death. Lump tries to intervene but is killed by his own stupidity and professor Dorr's handgun. And a crumbling gargoyle fells Dorr, who plunges to his death on a barge destined for Garbage Island—an obvious metaphor for hell, and the destination of each of the dimwitted fools, even down to the severed digit.

- [Q] What does the film imply by protecting Marva's life and killing the criminals?
- [Q] Who or what is the implied ultimate agent behind these things? Is God at work, or are these criminals merely the victims of coincidence?

Read Exodus 14:23–30, Acts 5:1–10, and Acts 28:1–6.

- [Q] Have you ever had a close brush with evil only to realize later that God protected you? Why do you believe it was God rather than a coincidence?
- [Q] If God can protect us from harm, why does he allow bad things to happen at all? Are we being punished if something bad happens to us?

3. Christianity in the Movies (Isaiah 54:17; John 17:15; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Titus 2:7–8)

Marva Munson is a devout southern woman deeply concerned about the immoral state of culture. She complains about "thumpity" stereotypes and the lyrics of "hippity-hop" music. She mourns the state of culture "2,000 years after Jesus, 30 years after Martin, in the age of



Montel.” She warns the sheriff to help someone, arguing, “You don’t want to be tried and found wantin’.” Then, foreshadowing Dorr’s entrance, she warns: “There’s a stranger in our midst, come to deceive us.”

After this introduction, we might expect to see Munson portrayed as a busybody crackpot. But she faithfully keeps the memory of her devout husband alive, 20 years after his death. She regularly contributes a “widow’s mite” to a Bible school (Bob Jones University), and she is faithful in her attendance at church. She cherishes the wisdom of God found in Scripture. She resists greed, and she is generous in her hospitality, even while laying down the law about ungodly behavior in her home.

- [Q] Many contemporary films treat Christians and their beliefs contemptuously—at best with condescension, and at worst with outright ridicule. Why do you think this film gives a positive portrayal of a woman’s devout faith?
- [Q] Why is Munson’s integrity and piety important for the frustration of evil plans later in the movie?
- [Q] Why do you think the filmmakers spent so much screen time with Munson at church? Wouldn’t it have been enough to show her quoting a few verses now and then?
- [Q] How have other movies portrayed Christianity? What impact do you think those portrayals have had on our culture?

4. The Makings of Our Character (Romans 1:18–32; Romans 6:19; 1 Corinthians 10:23–24; Galatians 6:7–8; 1 Peter 1:13)

Professor Dorr presents himself as a man of purely intellectual pursuits. He has mastered Latin and Greek, reads classical tomes, and uses impenetrably dense language. He is obsessed with an author of dark and macabre works: “I just love, love, love Edgar Allen Poe.”

- [Q] Why do you think the filmmakers had Dorr be obsessed with Poe’s writing?
- [Q] What kinds of books, movies, television shows, or music contribute to sin in our lives?
- [Q] Is there any such thing as a harmless obsession? Why or why not?
- [Q] What impact does our thought life have on our behavior? What do you think Dorr spent time thinking about? What did Munson spend time thinking about?
- [Q] What about the other characters in the film—Gawain MacSam, Garth Pancake, the General, and Lump? How do their actions reveal their hearts? What do you think is motivating each of them?



In an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Tom Hanks said, “[Dorr] says he's on sabbatical from that college in Mississippi, but I think he's been on sabbatical for 17 years. You just know he got fired for something, probably something a bit scandalous.”

[Q] How is Dorr’s true character first revealed to us? How is Munson’s character revealed?

[Q] What happens when people try to hide sin in their heart? Is it inevitable that the truth will come out?

Near the end of the film, Dorr tries to bribe Munson’s silence with a substantial portion of the loot. She sways but finally resists. Later, when she has full control of the money, she tries to return it but is told she can have it all—which she then decides to give away.

[Q] How was Munson able to resist the temptation of all that money?

[Q] What would you do if you suddenly found yourself with millions of dollars?

[Q] How would you define integrity?

Read two or three of these passages: Romans 1:18–32, Romans 6:19, 1 Corinthians 10:23–24, Galatians 6:7–8, 1 Peter 1:13.

[Q] What do these passages say about the relation between our thoughts and our actions?

[Q] How can we control our thoughts and improve our character?

5. Joy and the Good Life (Job 20:4–5; Philippians 4:4–9, 11–12)

During the film’s church scenes, we see faces everywhere suffused with delight. Feet are tapping, hands are clapping, arms are raised in worship, and radiant joy lights the screen. In contrast, whether in the underground root cellar of iniquity or at the local Waffle Hut, Dorr and his dimwitted cronies are the picture of anger, greed, and enmity.

[Q] What is the difference between pleasure and joy? What about happiness and joy?

[Q] How do you identify joyful Christians? What sets them apart from people without joy?

[Q] Why are the Christians the only joyful people in this film? Besides the foot-tapping music, what makes the difference?

[Q] When, in your life, have you been the most joyful? How can you carry that joy into other areas of your life?

[Q] When has joy been absent from your life? What caused your lack of joy? How did you find your way back?



- [Q] What is it like to be around people who don't have a source of joy in their lives?
- [Q] How can we live a life of joy even while suffering? How can we find joy even in a culture that is, bit by bit, sailing for "Garbage Island"?

6. Justice (Proverbs 29:26; Ecclesiastes 3:16–17; Isaiah 1:17; Romans 12:18–20; 2 Peter 2:9)

The preacher at Munson's church refers to the time when Moses caught the Israelites "red-handed, worshiping the golden calf, worshiping the false god, because Israel was in decline." So, the preacher says, God "smote those sinners in his wrath."

Read Proverbs 29:26, Ecclesiastes 3:16–17, Isaiah 1:17, Romans 12:18–20, and 2 Peter 2:9.

- [Q] What is justice?
- [Q] How do we know when justice has been delivered?
- [Q] God says he is the one to deliver vengeance. What about justice? How do we know if we should seek justice or wait for God's justice?
- [Q] What do you think about how justice was measured out in this movie? Was it complete? Was it truly just? If you had the chance to rewrite this film, what would your version of justice look like?

When justifying his thievery to Munson, Dorr convinces her that the casino is a den of iniquity, that the money is dirty, and the casino doesn't deserve the money. He tells her the casino is insured so the money will never be missed. In an [interview](#) with Hollywood.com, Marlon Wayans, who played Gawain MacSam, was asked, "If you could rob any establishment, what would it be?" He answered, "Something corrupt, like a government. Or I'd probably rob somebody who robbed somebody. Like a drug dealer."

- [Q] What is the morality at work behind these statements?
- [Q] How would you respond if somebody told you a sin was justifiable as long as the cost was small or the victim was wicked?

As the Credits Roll

- [Q] What role did music play in this film? When the film opened, Marva Munson was complaining about "hippity-hop" music, and when professor Dorr persuaded her to let his gang practice music in her cellar, he said the music was "gospel-inspired." What role do you think music plays in culture? Is it possible for any music to be sinful in and of itself?
- [Q] Lump's character is mentally impaired, maybe due to a number of concussions. His naïveté and obliviousness lead to his exploitation. In the end, Lump is unwilling to



kill Munson, thinks maybe they *should* be going to church with her, and attempts to turn the tables on Dorr—but is killed by his own hand and blunt stupidity.

- [q] Why did the filmmakers make his character so dimwitted?
- [q] Lump responded to an ad designed to attract greedy lowlifes, but he's not mean-spirited like the rest of the team. What is the message behind this character's involvement in the plot?
- [q] Can ignorance ever protect you from the consequences of your decisions?
- [Q] What other themes did you see in *The Ladykillers*?
- [Q] What messages did this movie convey that troubled you or that conflicted with your faith?
- [Q] What messages did this movie convey that encouraged your faith or helped you see truth in a new way?

—Study by Rich Tatum, Internet operations manager
for Christianity Today International.