

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.



Genre: Action, adventure, drama, romance
Rating: M (for mature themes, violence, sex, coarse language, nudity and brief drug use)
Length: 124 minutes
Starring Brad Pitt, Marion Cotillard
Director: Robert Zemeckis ('Forrest Gump')

Brief synopsis

It's 'Mr and Mrs Smith' meets 'Casablanca' in World War 2. A Canadian intelligence officer Max Vatan (Brad Pitt) parachutes into French Morocco in 1942 to work on an assignment behind enemy lines with former French Resistance fighter Marianne Beauséjour (Marion Cotillard), in which they must pose as husband and wife. Their mission in Casablanca is to infiltrate a party and assassinate the German ambassador. The fake romance becomes real and they marry and settle in London and have a baby girl, Anna. It is later that Max is told by military intelligence that his wife

may not be who she says she is.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- What themes are explored?
- What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

The following provides some particular aspects of the movie that could be explored. Feel free to use these ideas as a catalyst for further discussion and reflection.

ALLIED

'The first casualty, when war comes, is truth' (*Hiram Johnson*). Lies and pretence are intrinsic to war. Max and Marion need to convince others about what is false in order to achieve their mission. Will they be found out, and what other lies will be discovered after their mission? The drama plays out like a ticking time bomb. Are deception and pretence and lies part of our human relationships, and just exaggerated in war? Has modern warfare and politics escalated the manufacture of lies? What role does media have in creating and perpetuating lies? Writing in 2003 about the Iraq war, journalist Mark Steel said, 'You expect lies, but usually they're found out once a war is over. But in this war the lying is so inept that it gets rumbled the next day'. *What is the role of Wikileaks, Snowden etc, in exposing 'truth' at a cost of jeopardising national security and 'aiding the enemy'?*

Out and proud

Although a minor part of the film, Max's sister Bridget (Lizzy Caplan) is portrayed as an out-and-proud lesbian. Homosexuality had remained illegal under the hated "Labouchère" amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885 (repealed 82 years later), which outlawed "gross indecency" between men. But the law didn't apply to women, as Queen Victoria insisted that ladies did not do such things - or, in her opinion, it would be a physical impossibility between women. Although not illegal, lesbians still suffered at the hands of the public. Jo Monk writes about her own experience: "The social scene was furtive. There were people that were ready to whack you if you looked the wrong way at anybody or if they saw you holding hands. In those days, you were likely to get rotten eggs and tomatoes chucked at your back. They'd trip you up or upset drinks over you if you went into a bar".

In a world of truth and lies, why do you think Lizzy's sexuality was included in the storyline?

On screen chemistry (or lack of), or something else?

(Kelly Vance) 'The lead roles call for a spy's wariness. Max and Marianne love each other, but they're also old enough, and well trained enough, to remain slightly on guard with each other, even after they've set up house and have welcomed a baby daughter. Audience members who happen to be in long-term relationships may well recognize the way Max and Marianne look twice at each other in routine household banter, as if trying to suss out the real meaning of last-minute, late-night business appointments and surreptitious conversations. They mistrust each other not only in the manner of secret agents, but in the same way as longtime partners who are getting a bit bored with their mates'.

Discuss the suggestion that marital relationships end up in a domesticity characterised by mutual distrust. Is that what is happening in the story?

Being on the side of 'right'

The Nazi swastika emblazoned on uniforms and buildings in the opening scenes in Casablanca evokes fear and a sense of lurking evil. Might Max and Marianne then be seen as champions of justice and liberty, or as Richard Brody says, 'human-scale superheroes whose unfailing good intentions cast their false words and violent deeds in the beatific light of divine justice'? The cross that Marianne gives Max to wear as part of his Casablanca costume is more than costume jewellery. It conveys who is on the 'right side', and who is enemy, and justifies the inevitable collateral damage. Religion has long been co-opted as the premise for war: George W Bush claimed he was on a mission from God when he launched the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq 'to end the tyranny'. Tony Blair believed God wanted him to go to war to fight evil. Religion is co-opted by Muslim extremists for terrorist attacks, and by Buddhist fundamentalists in Myanmar, where violence in Rakhine in 2012 forced tens of thousands - mostly Rohingya Muslims - to flee their homes. *Discuss the nature of war in terms of religious alignment, and the use of violence and the casual acceptance of 'collateral damage' when it involves people deemed to be 'other' and 'enemy'.*

Can love between 'enemies' triumph in times of war?

Marianne says to Max when they first meet, "I keep the emotions real. That's how it works". In Alfred Hitchcock's "Notorious," Ingrid Bergman plays the daughter of a Nazi spy who is tasked with getting information from the other side; she lets love (with Cary Grant) get in the way of her mission. In Britain, there really was an 'Intimate Betrayal Rule', such that if one spy turned out to be a double agent, the other would be expected to prove his or her loyalty by killing the traitor - or be executed him or herself for high treason.

Many British women fell in love with German POWs in Britain in WWII. They were spat at, punched and shunned by their families. June, aged 79 and celebrating her diamond wedding anniversary with former German POW Heinz Fellbrich (he was 25 and she was 18 when they met), recalled the insults and fury and hostility. Heinz had to wear the PoW's brown uniform with orange felt patches at all times, so it was obvious he was the 'enemy'. June was punched and others spat in her face. "Aren't our boys good enough for you?" How could she, they asked, fraternise with the enemy when their own fathers, husbands and sons had been killed by the Germans? *How might meeting and forming relationships with people considered 'the enemy' change how we see 'others'? Does war change the protocols regarding with whom it is acceptable to form relationships?*

Fraternising with the enemy

The Bible has many examples of people who transcend religious, social, cultural and political lines. In the book of Joshua, Rahab was a prostitute who lived in Jericho in the 'promised land' and assisted the Israelites to capture the city. In the New Testament, she was lauded as an example of living by faith, while being considered righteous by her works. There's Esther, Samson and Delilah, Joseph and the Pharaoh who negotiated with the Egyptians for the Israelites to find refuge, and even Jesus and the Samaritan woman (the Samaritans being despised by the Jewish people). And many more. *What might this say about the fluidity, and perhaps the expediency, of relationships that transcend dividing lines?*