

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Witness (1985)

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir then made several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both of which also won Oscars. The recipient of numerous awards, Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *Witness* tells the story of an American police officer (Harrison Ford) who spends time in an Amish community following the discovery that a young Amish boy was the only witness to a murder. In addition to a love story between the policeman and the boy's mother (Kelly McGillis), the film focuses on the clash of cultural values between Amish and non-Amish characters. Weir brought a cinematographer from Australia, John Seale; the score was composed by Maurice Jarre, who had scored many of David Lean's epic films. Though Amish people do not allow themselves to be photographed, the Amish people living near the shooting locations rented buggies and other props to Weir and his crew.

Background In 1984, Weir suddenly became available because he lost financing for the film he was working on (*Mosquito Coast*, which he was able to make later). A producer sent Weir the script for *Witness*, and after meeting with Harrison Ford, who was already cast as the star, he agreed to make it. It was his first film made in Hollywood and set in the United States. Striking a balance between art-house style and commercial appeal, *Witness* was embraced by critics and audiences. Among other honors, the film was nominated for eight Academy Awards (including Best Picture and Best Director) and won two (for screenplay and editing).

CHARACTERS

John Book – police captain in Philadelphia

Rachel Lapp – Amish woman

Samuel Lapp – 8-year-old Amish boy, Rachel's son

Eli Lapp – Amish man, father of Rachel's recently deceased husband

Daniel Hochleitner – Amish man, friend of the Lapps'

Paul Schaeffer – police officer, John's superior

McFee – corrupt narcotics officer

Fergie – associate of McFee

Elton Carter – John's partner on the police force

Elaine Book - John's sister

SYNOPSIS

A recently widowed young Amish woman named Rachel Lapp and her 8-year-old son, Samuel, leave their Amish community in Pennsylvania for a visit to Rachel's sister in Baltimore. While waiting at the Philadelphia station for a connecting train, Samuel goes to the men's bathroom and witnesses a murder. Police captain John Book arrives and, despite Rachel's concerns, insists that he needs Samuel to help him identify the murderer. Samuel does not see the murderer in the lineup, but while wandering around the police station, he sees a framed newspaper clipping containing a photo of an officer, McFee,

being commended for his work with youth; Samuel realizes that this is the murderer. Samuel tells John, who then tells his superior, Paul Schaeffer. But when John goes home later, he is attacked in the parking garage by McFee himself. John, realizing that Schaeffer is in league with McFee, immediately collects Rachel and Samuel and drives away with them so that all of them can hide.

John takes Rachel and Samuel to their house, where they are greeted by Rachel's father-in-law. John tries to leave, but he actually had been shot by McFee and now faints. John remains with the Lapps; Rachel tends his wounds. As he convalesces, John wears Amish clothes and tries to blend in. Despite their cultural differences (especially regarding the Amish insistence on non-violence), John and Rachel are drawn to each other – so much so that the community begins to gossip disapprovingly about them. John does farm work and helps with a barn raising, but he cannot resist punching a non-Amish hoodlum who insults an Amish man. John consequently decides to leave, which precipitates a kiss and an embrace between him and Rachel. But before John leaves, Schaeffer, McFee, and a third man come to the Lapps' farm to kill him. John kills McFee and the third man and persuades Schaeffer to surrender, and the Lapps remain unharmed. In the end, John leaves Rachel and returns to the non-Amish world alone.

SCENES

Funeral – A group of men and women dressed in nineteenth-century-style clothes converge on a large white building; some are walking through a field, while others ride in horse-drawn carriages. Inside the building, they sit in rows, many crying, as a man standing at the front of the room speaks in a language that is not English. A young woman, a little boy, and an old man sit in the front row.



Condolences – The same people gather informally in another space, where there is food and drink. Several men speak to each other, in both English and another language. In another room, several women surround the woman who had been sitting in the front row earlier. A tall, blond man approaches them and expresses his condolences to her in English, addressing her as Rachel. She thanks him, and he walks away.



Departure – Rachel, the old man, and the little boy ride in a horse-drawn carriage, sharing the road with trucks and cars of the 1980s. They then stand in a train station. The blond man from the earlier scene, addressed as Daniel Hochleitner, comes to join them and gives the little boy, whom he addresses as Samuel, a wooden toy. "You come back soon?" he asks Rachel, who does not reply but gets in the train with Samuel. The old man tells her to be careful out among the "English" (the Amish term for non-Amish people). Rachel and Samuel smile at each other as the train pulls away.



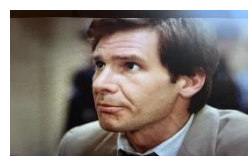
Witness to murder – Rachel and Samuel stand in the Philadelphia train station and learn that their connecting train to Baltimore is delayed. "Look at the cute little Amish boy!" someone says. Samuel is delighted by a drinking fountain. He explores the station on his own, promising his mother not to go far.



Samuel goes to the men's restroom. A man is washing his face; Samuel goes into a stall. Through a crack between his stall door and the wall, Samuel sees two other men come into the bathroom and kill the man at the sink with a knife. Samuel makes a sound; one of the killers begins to check each stall. Samuel latches his door firmly shut, but the man tries to force it open. At the last moment, Samuel slides under the partition to the neighboring stall and stands on the toilet to hide. The two men leave the bathroom.



Police – Police officers are now at the station. One of them, in plainclothes, comes over to Samuel and Rachel, saying that he needs to talk to Samuel. The officer tells Samuel that the man who was killed was a policeman; he asks Samuel to tell him what he saw. Samuel does so, saying that although there were two men, he only saw one of them, and that he had black skin.



Searching for the killer – The police officer, who identifies himself as John Book in response to Samuel’s question, and his partner take Rachel and Samuel to a seedy street corner near a bar and bring out a black man, asking Samuel whether he is the one he saw. Samuel says no. Rachel angrily says that she does not want them to be involved any further in this; John says they must because Samuel was the only witness. John takes Rachel and Samuel to his sister Elaine’s house to spend the night.

Lineup – John brings Rachel and Samuel to the police station the next morning. Samuel looks at a lineup of tall black men. He says that none of them was the one he saw. Rachel, Samuel, and John get lunch together at a hot dog restaurant. Rachel and Samuel pray before eating, which makes John look uncomfortable and stop chewing. Rachel smiles at him and begins telling him all the things his sister said about him, including things he tends to say while he is drunk. All three laugh.



Identification – Back at the station, Samuel looks through a book of photographs and shakes his head at all of them. While John is on the phone, Samuel wanders around the station. He sees a newspaper clipping in a trophy case containing a photo of a police officer being commended for his work with youth; it is the man whom he saw committing the murder. Samuel points this out to John, who looks surprised but nods and puts his arm around Samuel’s shoulder. John goes to a house and talks to an older man whom he addresses as Paul. He tells him that the Amish kid identified narcotics officer McFee as the killer. John provides some other reasons why it seems likely to him that McFee has become corrupt. Paul asks him what resources he needs to proceed; John tells him.



Attack – John drives home, but in the parking garage, he realizes that McFee is there and has a gun. The two men try to shoot each other; eventually McFee gets in his car and drives away as John yells at him. John is bleeding.



Hiding – John goes to Elaine’s house and tells her, Rachel, and Samuel, that he must take Rachel and Samuel away immediately. He tells Elaine to pretend she never saw them. Partway through the drive, John calls his partner, Carter, from a pay phone and tells him that he is going to disappear for a couple of days. He tells Carter to destroy all the paperwork related to the case and to be careful because their superior Paul Schaeffer is clearly involved in the corrupt dealings. Meanwhile, McFee, Paul Schaeffer, and a third man go to Elaine’s house. She says she does not know where John has gone.

Injured – John brings Rachel and Samuel to their house, where Samuel happily greets the old man with whom we saw him previously. John now tells Rachel that there will not be any trial and drives off alone. But John begins to look faint, and the car crashes into a birdhouse near the house. Rachel, Samuel, and the old man, identified as Eli, run over and discover that John is bleeding profusely. They take him inside. A man whom they call Stoltzfus examines John’s wounds and gives Rachel instructions for tending them. Rachel and Eli push John’s car into their barn with the help of a horse and close the barn doors. Rachel tends John’s wounds through the night; he sweats and shakes, and at one point he takes her hand.



Thwarted – McFee, Schaeffer, and the third man, now identified as Fergie, sit together around a desk. Schaeffer speaks on the phone with a police officer in Lancaster County, who explains to him why it would be extremely difficult to locate Rachel Lapp’s house, given the thousands of Amish people living in the area and the fact that so many of them have the same names. The officer says that he does not have the manpower to go door-to-door, and that the Amish do not have telephones. Schaeffer hangs up the phone, frowning.



Community values – John, in bed but no longer sweating, wakes to find Rachel and five elderly Amish men in the room. They are the community elders, come to see John for themselves. Soon after they leave, Samuel finds John’s gun in a drawer and begins to play with it. John sees him and gives him a stern talk about how dangerous guns are when they are loaded. He takes out the bullets and then gives the gun back to Samuel. At that moment, Rachel enters the room; she sends Samuel downstairs and sternly tells John that he must respect their ways while he is in their house. He agrees and gives her the gun and bullets to hide. Downstairs, Eli tells Samuel why the Amish are against violence.

Blending in – Rachel gives John a suit of clothes that had belonged to her late husband, saying that in his own clothes he would not be able to blend in with the Amish. He makes a comment about zippers, and she tells him about the tourists who come to stare and sometimes make fun of her and her neighbors. John puts on the clothes, which are a little too small, causing Rachel to laugh when she sees him. He takes his gun and leaves with Eli to use the pay phone in the nearby town. On the phone, he learns from Carter that Schaeffer and McFee are looking for him.



Learning the ways – Rachel labels jars of preserves in the kitchen. John comes back and gives the gun and bullets to her separately. He then goes outside, and Samuel explains their system for getting well water. He also shows John the corn silo and his kittens. John fiddles with his car in the barn, trying to get it working again. Eli comes in and says that if he is well enough to do that, he is well enough to do farm work for him. They agree that he will start milking cows the next morning.



Milking – In the dark, Eli comes into John’s bedroom and wakes him up, saying that it is 4:30 and thus time for milking. John sighs. Eli takes him to the barn and shows him how to milk. John slowly gets the hang of it. Then he joins Eli, Rachel and Samuel for breakfast. John tries to tell a joke but realizes that it is based on a television commercial, which of course the Lapps have never seen. Rachel smiles anyway.



Suitor – Daniel Hochleitner walks through the field and approaches John. He introduces himself and says that he came to see Rachel. Rachel and Daniel sit awkwardly on the porch swing together drinking lemonade. John walks past them and both look uncomfortable. John works on repairing the birdhouse he had crashed into with his car. Rachel brings him lemonade, saying that Daniel has left. She observes that he seems to know about carpentry, which he says he does.



Dancing – In the dark, John is again at work on the car with the help of a lamp held aloft by Rachel. Suddenly the car sputters to life and the radio starts playing “Wonderful World” by Sam Cooke. John smiles and starts singing along. Rachel smiles too, and they begin to dance together, by turns laughing and looking very seriously at each other. Eli suddenly comes in and chastises Rachel as John turns off the car and looks sheepish. Eli walks off with Rachel, telling her that she has brought fear to the house and is in danger of being officially shunned by the community. She says that she has committed no sin.



Pressure – Carter sits in Schaeffer’s office. Schaeffer asks him to tell him where John is, saying that he and John used to be partners and that he knows John is with the Amish. Carter is silent. Schaeffer says that the police force is like the Amish – that it too is a “cult,” or a “club,” with rules, which Carter is currently breaking. Carter remains silent.



Barn raising – John, the Lapps, Daniel Hochleitner, and many other Amish people converge for a barn raising. Daniel asks John if he is healed from his bullet wound; John says he nearly is. Daniel replies that this is good, because then John can go home. Throughout the day, John works with the Amish men on building the barn. The process goes smoothly. Rachel helps the other women make food. Rachel and John periodically look at each other, and they are noticed by other community members.



Attraction – John sits on the porch swing after nightfall and sees Rachel inside in the kitchen. Rachel then goes to a different room and bathes herself, with the door open. John comes in and she sees him looking at her through the mirror. Rachel, naked from the waist up, turns and looks straight at him. He looks at her, then looks down. She turns away and he leaves. In the morning, John approaches Rachel and talks to her through a fence. He says, “If we’d made love last night, I’d have to stay, or you’d have to leave.”



Carter killed – A busload of tourists arrives; many of them try to photograph the Amish people. John speaks sharply to one of them. John tries to call Carter from a pay phone again but is told that Carter was killed in the line of duty. John hangs up the phone, then calls Schaeffer at home. John reminds Schaeffer of what he used to say about dirty cops. Schaeffer brushes that off and says they are going to find him. John retorts that he is going to come for Schaeffer and do to him what he did to Carter.



John lashes out – John rides in the carriage with Eli on the way back to the Lapps’ farm. A group of hoodlums approaches their carriage and that of the Hochleitners. One of them rubs ice cream on Daniel’s face, laughing that he can do whatever he wants because the Amish will never retaliate. John gets out of the carriage. The hoodlum knocks his hat off. John punches him, then fights off another hoodlum who comes after him. Eli and the other Amish look disappointed; Daniel explains to a non-Amish man watching that this is his cousin from Ohio. The man remarks that the Amish in Ohio must be different, and that this will not be good for the tourist trade. The man tells an officer in a police car what happened.



Last night – Samuel plays with an elaborate wooden toy. Rachel comes in, and Samuel tells her that John gave it to him as a “special present.” Rachel looks out the window and sees John and Eli putting up the repaired birdhouse. She tells Samuel to go to bed. When Eli comes in, she asks whether John is leaving. Eli says yes, he will be leaving the next morning. “But why?” she says. Eli replies that John is going back to his world, where he belongs. Eli walks upstairs. Rachel looks again at John putting up the birdhouse. She slowly takes off her bonnet and puts it down. She goes outside and strides decisively toward John, who begins to run toward her. They embrace and kiss.



Invasion – A car approaches the Lapps’ farm. Schaeffer, McFee, and Fergie get out of it, carrying rifles. They enter the house; Rachel screams. Schaeffer assures her that they will not harm Samuel and only want John Book. She does not tell them where he is. Eli appears, carrying pails of milk. He shouts “Book!” and McFee hits him with his rifle. John shuts the door of the barn, where he is standing with Samuel. He runs with Samuel to a different part of the barn and tells him to run as fast as he can to the Hochleitners’ farm. Samuel expresses concern that they will kill John because he does not have his gun, but he hugs John and runs off as directed.



Barn showdown – John tries to start his car but is unsuccessful. Fergie and McFee both approach the barn. Fergie almost catches John, but he manages to hide and, eventually, to lure Fergie into the corn silo and then kill him by burying him in corn, causing him to suffocate. John gets Fergie’s rifle. McFee comes into the barn and approaches John, pointing his rifle at him. John shoots McFee first, killing him.



Summoning witnesses – While Rachel and Eli wait, trembling, in the house, Samuel sneaks back in. Schaeffer approaches and tells Rachel and Eli to come outside; he does not see Samuel. Before obeying Schaeffer, Eli motions to Samuel to ring the bell to summon the neighbors. Schaeffer enters the barn with a gun pointed at Rachel’s head. He insists that John put his gun down, or he will shoot Rachel. John complies, begging him not to shoot Rachel.



Schaeffer defeated – Meanwhile, many neighbors run up to the Lapps’ house in response to the bell. Schaeffer leads John out with his hands behind his head and a gun pointed at his back. But John turns around and asks Schaeffer angrily if he is planning to shoot him, or shoot Samuel, in front of all these people. The Amish neighbors look on in dismay as Schaeffer struggles for words. John seizes Schaeffer’s rifle and handgun and tells him it’s over. Schaeffer turns around and leans against the barn door. Several police cars arrive at the farm; John talks to the officers.



Parting ways – John and Samuel sit outside in the grass. John is now wearing his own clothes. He gets up, and he and Samuel say goodbye to each other. Rachel appears in the doorway of the house. She and John look at each other for a long time. Eventually, John walks to his car and Rachel returns to the house. Eli tells John to be careful “out among the English,” as he had once said to Rachel. As John drives off, Daniel walks toward the house.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

John Book John is a police captain in Philadelphia. He has a sister and two nephews but no other family. Very committed to police work, John is furious to learn about the activities of crooked cops. When he lives for a while with an Amish community, he is curious about their way of life, though he ultimately does not embrace it.

Idealistic When John realizes that the murder was committed by a police officer, he immediately goes to his superior, Schaeffer, to strategize how best to bring the officer to justice. When he realizes that Schaeffer is corrupt as well, he is incensed. He speaks angrily to his Schaeffer, accusing him of having “lost the meaning.”

Determined John wants justice to be served; he insists on using the Amish boy as a witness even though the boy’s mother is wary, and he is not afraid to pursue prosecution of a fellow cop who has committed a crime. When John realizes that the boy’s life in danger, his determination takes the form of working hard to protect the boy.

Caring John’s sister tells Rachel that John expresses excessive concern about his nephews because he has no children of his own. As a policeman, John sees himself as a guardian of society. After he meets Rachel and Samuel, John quickly comes to care for and about them; he is affectionate and protective with both.

Rachel Lapp Rachel is a young Amish woman, recently widowed and mother of a young boy, Samuel. She lives with Samuel and her father-in-law, Eli, on a farm in Amish country in Pennsylvania. Rachel is committed to Amish values, especially pacifism, but she also has an independent streak.

Pious Rachel has spent her life in an Amish community, and she subscribes to its central values. She works hard, prays before meals, and does not like to be involved in violence. Rachel has passed these values on to her son. Rachel’s eventual romantic interest in John does not change her religious beliefs.

Independent Despite commitment to Amish values, Rachel also has priorities of her own. She has no problem speaking bluntly both to John about the danger of his handgun and to her father-in-law about her

right to a private personal life. Near the end, she chooses to remove her bonnet and kiss John, defying Amish mores.

Caring Rachel cares a lot for other people. She is both firm and loving toward her son. She does housework for the family uncomplainingly and helps neighbors. When John is wounded and in danger, she insists on taking him in and caring for him. When her feelings for John become romantic, she expresses that to him.

Samuel Lapp Samuel is an eight-year-old Amish boy, the son of Rachel and of a recently deceased father. He lives with Rachel and with his grandfather, Eli. Witnessing a murder in the outside community scares him but does not fundamentally change him. Samuel attends school, does chores at home, and clearly loves his mother and grandfather.

Open Samuel approaches the world outside his Amish community with openness and curiosity. He wanders on his own at the train station and later at the police station, looking at everything with wide eyes and trying out unfamiliar contraptions like the drinking fountain at the train station. He is also open to new people, like John, whom he quickly trusts and likes.

Innocent Samuel has lived a sheltered life, and he always obeys his mother and other adults. He is curious but not reckless, obeying instructions not to stray too far. So when he sees a murder committed in a public restroom, he is terrified, clearly never having seen anything like it before. Later, Samuel is curious about John's gun, not realizing how dangerous it is.

THEMES

Culture clash Like Weir's earlier films *The Last Wave* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Witness* centers on a character's exploration of a culture not his own. Amish culture and mainstream American culture are represented by Rachel and John, respectively. Rachel introduces John to Amish culture's insistence on non-violence and on "plainness," manifested in the simple clothing they wear. We see also the Amish people's religious practices and reliance on simple machinery and technology, as well as their rigid social expectations. Weir's films tend not to be preachy, but there is a slightly positive connotation to the film's presentation of Amish non-violence and a slightly negative connotation to its presentation of Amish social expectations. On the other side, John's mainstream American culture involves more social freedom but also a great deal of violence and sometimes loneliness. In one scene between John's superior, Paul Schaeffer, and John's partner, Elton Carter, Schaeffer states that the police force is like the Amish community in that it too is a "cult" or "club" with rules that must be followed – and that Carter is currently flouting by refusing to reveal John's whereabouts. This statement is reinforced by Weir's placement of this scene right after a scene in which Rachel is chastised by Eli for flouting Amish mores by dancing with John.

Love Familial and romantic love are prominent themes in *Witness*. Though we learn nothing about the recently deceased Jacob (Samuel's father and Rachel's husband), the whole film portrays strong family love among Rachel, Samuel, and Eli. These three people frequently embrace, help each other, and encourage each other to behave in the way they believe to be right. Despite Eli's criticism of Rachel in one scene, he seems to love and respect her overall. Meanwhile, all three come to love John Book in their separate ways, and to be loved by him. John puts his life on the line to protect them from the corrupt cops. He puts down his gun when Schaeffer points a gun at Rachel. The romantic love between John and Rachel is a driving force in the film. It begins to develop early on and is sustained throughout the film via the exchange of glances and one scene in which they embrace and kiss. John articulates the barrier to their love when he says, "If we'd made love last night, I'd have to stay, or you'd have to leave." One or the other would have to give up their life for them to be together, and ultimately neither is prepared to do that.

Violence As a police officer, John's life contains a great deal of violence. His job is to stop others from committing violence; in order to do that, he sometimes commits violence himself. Several scenes in the film depict this. Meanwhile, the Amish are committed to non-violence; they do not fight in wars, they do not own weapons, and even when they are attacked, they do not fight back. Rachel is very concerned

about her son's exposure to violence and to weapons; she wants to take Samuel away from the station instead of having him identify the murderer, and she becomes angry at John when she sees him and Samuel handling John's handgun in her home. Both Samuel and John are affected by their brush with the other culture's attitude toward violence. When Eli gives Samuel a lecture about the Amish attitude toward violence, Samuel counters that if he had a gun, he would only use it on a bad man. John, meanwhile, although he does punch the hoodlums who bother the Hochleitners, and although he does kill McFee and Fergie, manages to avoid killing Paul Schaeffer, instead persuading him to surrender.

Society vs. the individual A major theme of the film is each individual's negotiation of their relationship to the larger society. Overall, whereas Amish culture values the collective, mainstream American culture values the individual. But, as Paul Schaeffer articulates, the police force is like the Amish community in that it has rules that must be followed. John is pursued and his partner is killed for defying those rules. Meanwhile, Rachel is chastised and gossiped about because of her clear liking for John. Ultimately, John is rewarded for flouting the rules of police comradery: he brings the corrupt cops to justice. Rachel, on the other hand, is not rewarded for her assertion of individuality. Although she does not transgress to the point of being officially "shunned" (which, as Eli points out, would mean that he could not sit with her or share food with her), Rachel ultimately is absorbed back into the collective, remaining in Amish society. The film does not take a clear stance on the conflict between society and the individual; while the soaring score that accompanies the Amish barn raising glorifies a collective effort, Rachel's defiant speech to Eli and dramatic decision to remove her bonnet and kiss John are also presented as triumphant moments.

Transgression Transgression is defined variously by different characters and groups in the film. John believes that McFee, Schaeffer, and Fergie have committed a terrible transgression by becoming corrupt and engaging in criminal activities. He punishes them for this with death or exposure. In Schaeffer's opinion, though, flouting police hierarchy and brotherhood is a greater sin; for this, John's partner, Carter, is killed, and John narrowly avoids the same fate. Meanwhile, the Amish community has a similar attitude toward the seriousness of transgressions but defines them differently. Amish transgressions include engaging in violence, wearing conspicuous clothing, using advanced technology, marrying outside the community, and, for women, removing the bonnets that cover their hair. The Amish characters are largely compliant over the course of the film, and they often articulate full-throated approval of these rules; for example, Daniel Hochleitner, Rachel, and Eli defend the Amish insistence on non-violence. But Rachel's clear romantic interest in John puts her on the verge of transgressing the community's rule against relationships with outsiders (and, presumably, any extramarital sex, though the film does not articulate this). Although Rachel does transgress in a small way by removing her bonnet and kissing John, she ultimately does not transgress enough to be "shunned."

Law Enforcement John is an idealistic policeman, firmly upholding law and order himself and expecting his colleagues to do the same. The film portrays the prevalence of corrupt cops on the police force, as well as the danger they pose to colleagues and citizens alike. Carter dies for refusing to join them. The film also hints at the police force's poor treatment of African Americans. Because Samuel has identified the murderer as a tall black man, John first looks for the murderer in a bar frequented by many African Americans. The one he drags out of the bar to be seen by Samuel from the police car shakes his head and scoffs when Samuel says he is not the one; the man is clearly angry with John for going after the wrong black man. The murderer turns out to be a widely respected African American cop. John's partner, Carter, is also African American. Meanwhile, Fergie and the man murdered in the bathroom (also a cop) are both white. Ultimately, the film suggests that black and white cops can be good or bad. It also maintains faith in John as a genuinely good officer. Still, the film also demonstrates that the Amish can manage their own affairs without the help of cops carrying guns.

Tradition vs. modernity Like Weir's early film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Witness* stages a conflict between tradition and modernity (which could perhaps also be expressed as nature vs. civilization). The Amish live in a more traditional society in which human beings are closer to nature, as evidenced by the Amish people seeming to rise up out of the fields in the opening shots and by frequent portrayals of farm work in the film. The Amish till the land and work with livestock. They also maintain traditional religious practices and a strict separation between male and female roles. They do not use modern technology. By

contrast, John lives in Philadelphia, a gritty modern city. The film's shots of Philadelphia emphasize concrete, tall buildings, traffic, and violence – all traits that appear very foreign to Rachel and Samuel. John is a thoroughly modern, urban man who drives a car, uses a gun, has had sexual relationships with women without being married to them, and has never milked a cow before – although he does know some carpentry. The clash between tradition and modernity is most evident in the scene in which Rachel holds a lamp while John tries to fix his car, hidden the barn; when he succeeds, the radio comes on, and John and Rachel dance to a modern song in their Amish clothes, surrounded by bales of hay.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did you feel about the ending? Did you find yourself wanting Rachel to go with John, or John to stay with her? Or did you agree with the characters that they should both stick to their original cultures?
2. Did you think that the film took a stance on whether Amish or mainstream American culture is "better"? If so, what would that stance be?
3. How did you feel about the portrayal of Amish culture in the film? Was the collective nature of Amish society appealing to you, or did it seem too restrictive?
4. What did you think about the film's portrayal of race? Did it seem problematic to you? Why or why not?
5. What did you think about the character Daniel Hochleitner?