

Daniel Pearl's tragic death in *A Mighty Heart*

By Hiram Lee
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A Mighty Heart, directed by Michael Winterbottom, screenplay by John Orloff, based on the memoir *A Mighty Heart: The Brave Life And Death Of My Husband, Danny Pearl* by Mariane Pearl with Sarah Crichton

More than five years have passed since American journalist Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and killed in Karachi, Pakistan, by a group calling itself the National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty. Since that time, a number of books and films have attempted to shed light on the circumstances surrounding Pearl's death. Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, based on the 2003 memoir of the same name written by Pearl's wife Mariane, is the latest to address the case, but in spite of a few privileged and humane moments, it proves largely not up to the task.

As *A Mighty Heart* begins, we find Daniel Pearl (Dan Futterman), South Asia bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, and his pregnant wife and fellow journalist Mariane (Angelina Jolie) living in Karachi with family friend Asra Q. Nomani (Archie Panjabi). Karachi is Pakistan's largest city, densely populated, and in the words of Mrs. Pearl in her memoir, it "draws the desperately poor like a torch draws fireflies."

Daniel is about to take a taxi to meet a contact who will then take him to Sheikh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, a religious leader suspected of involvement with "shoe bomber" Richard Reid. Pearl has been warned of the dangers involved with such a meeting by Randall Bennett (Will Patton), security officer of the US consulate in Karachi, but is told that so long as the meeting occurs in a public place the reporter should be safe.

When Daniel leaves, Mariane goes off on her own assignment and later meets Asra to shop for groceries in preparation for a dinner party to be held that evening. We don't learn much about the dinner guests in the film. They are well dressed, rude and generally anti-American. The book is much clearer, and in its description of the guests, provides some insight into the enormous social inequality in Pakistan.

Of one guest, Mrs. Pearl writes, "He is a young man born under an old star, the scion of one of the families that has controlled this territory since British colonialists carved it up over two hundred years ago. To be sure, the modern world has chipped away at the old feudal system, and it has evolved since the relatively recent formation of Pakistan. But it strikes me as barbaric that feudal lords continue to exercise a quasi-divine authority over tenants and sharecroppers, limiting access to

education, a decent legal system, and, of course, land. Our guest's family, we've heard, owns eighty thousand acres in this province—remarkable, since land reform supposedly limits ownership to 150 acres."

It is passages like this that lend the book whatever strengths it may have, and the absence of such passages providing context in the film adds to its considerable weaknesses.

When Daniel doesn't arrive for dinner at the appointed time, Mariane and Asra immediately begin to worry. The Pearls have made a point of calling each other every 90 minutes when on separate assignments, but this time Mariane hasn't heard from her husband. When she tries calling Daniel now, she gets no answer. In a flurry, she and Asra begin to go through his files and his e-mails. Attempts to call several of Daniel's contacts go unanswered. They become worried by a suspicious e-mail address used by the individual who set up the supposed appointment with Gilani.

Following desperate calls to the US consulate, the house is soon filled with law enforcement officials. The latter turn the place upside down searching through drawers, papers and hard drives. One suspects they're spying on the family as much as they're trying to help them. An investigator identified as Javed Habib (Irfan Khan), head of a counterterrorism unit, leads the task force in charge of finding Daniel. Mariane and Asra will come to have great affection for the calm and professional Habib whom they will nickname "Captain."

As the investigation takes off, it becomes ever more clear that a massive connecting of dots will be required to solve the mystery of Daniel's disappearance. Finding Gilani and Omar Saeed Sheikh, a known kidnapper with alleged ties to Al-Qaeda, will be key to the investigation. Investigators draw up a chart containing names uncovered in connection with the case and lines going back and forth between them to show the relationships of the various individuals or groups to each other. Soon the chart, not unlike the film itself, will be a spider's web of difficult-to-decipher information.

The kidnappers finally make contact, sending an e-mail with the now-infamous pictures of Daniel. His hands are bound; in one picture, a gun is held at his head. The text of the e-mail says Daniel is being held in "inhuman" conditions much like those of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. If the treatment of the detainees at Guantánamo improves, say the kidnappers, so will the treatment of Daniel Pearl. In the e-mails and a local

newspaper, Daniel is accused of being an agent for both the CIA and Mossad.

As the search intensifies, Mariane accompanies US consulate officials to meet with Moinuddin Haider, Pakistan's interior minister. This provides the film with one of its more memorable scenes. Haider is irritated by Pearl's disappearance. Implying that Daniel was somehow reckless and largely at fault for his own kidnapping, he asks Mariane why Daniel should have been meeting with such dangerous people to begin with. "I don't think this is the business of a journalist," he says. "Forgive me for correcting you," Mariane answers, "but it is absolutely the business of a journalist." Finally, Haider clearly hopes to turn the Pearl kidnapping to the advantage of the Pakistani government. He tells Mariane he has evidence that Indian intelligence services are involved with the disappearance. "They're trying to embarrass Pakistan," he says. Mariane is disgusted.

In the remainder of the film, we are treated to one montage after another of police breaking down doors, confiscating computers and questioning people who refuse to give up answers. The investigators' methods are horrifying. A man suspected of involvement in the crime is hung from a ceiling by chains around his wrists and tortured. In order to put pressure on Omar Sheikh, two male members of his family are taken into custody. "We will fight kidnappers with kidnapping," says Captain. In the book, the truth is even more disturbing. Omar's entire family is taken in. "They're detaining the family as bargaining chips," writes Mrs. Pearl, "turn yourself in, Omar, and we'll give you an uncle, two cousins, and your grandfather. Bring us Danny, and you can all go."

Given the overall thinness of the work, viewers—so emotionally invested by this time in Captain's pursuit of the kidnappers—may very well interpret *A Mighty Heart* as supporting the use of such brutal tactics or at the very least willing to overlook their use if the ends justify the means. The filmmakers seem insufficiently concerned about this danger.

The ghastly denouement of the story comes as it must, bringing with it the revelations that Sheikh Gilani knew nothing of Daniel's kidnapping, that the proposed meeting with Gilani was only bait to attract Pearl and, most incredibly, that Omar Sheikh had been in the custody of Pakistan's notorious Inter-Services Intelligence force while the other branches of law enforcement searched for him in vain. The video of Daniel's killing will soon surface. On it, he is made to state that he and his family are Jewish, then he is blindfolded and beheaded.

While there are a few moments of real emotion and insight in *A Mighty Heart*, the bulk of Winterbottom's film is strangely unmoving, a police procedural presented as a rather cold list of events: First this happened, then this, then another thing, etc. Little room is left for interpretation or understanding. Indeed, it's quite easy for the viewer to lose his or her way, so quickly are the names of individuals and organizations thrown about

without any real context to supply a better understanding of their roles.

In February 2002, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that Pearl's death "has been met not only with revulsion, but also with deep sadness." The WSWS commented that from the beginning of the episode, "the young man was seen as a human being in a desperate situation, held responsible for events over which he had no control." The article went on to say, "Nothing justifies or excuses the Pearl kidnapping, but it emerges within a definite historical and political context. To make sense of it, in the first place, one would have to grasp why the US and, by extension, anyone associated with its government, military or media should be so despised in the region. Such an examination would have to take into account the last several decades at least of American policy in the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the suffering it has inflicted on masses of people in the region."

Little of this understanding finds its way into the film. In her book, however, Mariane Pearl proves somewhat more sensitive to the tragic details of life for a great many people in Pakistan. Of her early days in Asra's large home situated in a well-guarded, gated community, Mariane writes, "To the left of our bed, a small window covered with wire looks out onto a room off the courtyard where a foldout cot occupies the place of honor next to a clothesline draped with children's clothes. This is the property of the house servants, Shabir and Nasrin, who could themselves be called the property of the house, because Asra hired them when she rented the place. I visited their room. They have nothing. They sleep on the floor, and their tiny daughter, Kashva, a doll-like girl with short hair, sleeps tucked between her parents. Nasrin is pregnant. I dare not say 'like me,' so different will our two children's destinies be."

The human element that is strongly felt in Mrs. Pearl's memoir is sorely lacking in the film. Consequently, we are left with a very dry good-against-evil story, which is not unlike a number of other works in the kidnapping thriller genre.

However, in revealing Daniel Pearl's talents and his humor, along with his willingness to be critical of the official positions of the US government and to challenge his editors, Mrs. Pearl went a considerable way in her memoir—much further than Winterbottom and screenwriter John Orloff have gone in their adaptation of her work—toward exposing the moral and political bankruptcy of those who would resort to killing an innocent man like her husband in an attempt to strike a blow against US imperialism.

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