

The Blind Side: No one-eyed man or woman in this kingdom

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by John Lee Hancock; screenplay by Hancock, based on the book by Michael Lewis

For her performance in *The Blind Side*, Sandra Bullock won this year's Oscar for Best Actress. An argument could be mounted in support of Bullock's accomplishment, but the serious consideration of John Lee Hancock's banal film by the Academy voters indicates how distant they are from American realities and how wedded, moreover, the Hollywood establishment is to identity politics.

Although not offering so noxious a portrayal of the oppressed African-American population in the US as *Precious* does, Hancock's (*The Rookie*) movie is largely a fantasy about working class life and social relations in general.

The film is based on the true story of Michael Oher—now a member of the Baltimore Ravens professional football team and once a downtrodden homeless black teen from a Memphis housing project—but its real focus is the figure of Leigh Anne Tuohy (Bullock).

Leigh Anne is the irrepressible driving force behind the decision of the Tuohy family, whose wealth comes from fast-food franchising, to pluck Michael (Quinton Aaron) off the streets on a cold November night. The Tuohy children attend a Christian school where Michael happens to be enrolled. ("Lord knows that place could use some color," says Leigh Anne, a decorator.)

A large and agile teen, Michael was brought to the private school by its football coach (Ray McKinnon), who saw him as a potential asset. The hitch is that as a product of Memphis's tough Hurt Village, Michael is academically at ground zero. The child of a drug-addicted mother and long-absent father, Michael has passed through a succession of schools and foster homes.

Enter Leigh Anne. She not only provides a home for Michael in her quasi-mansion. She also ensures that his integration into the family—which includes cheerleader daughter Collins (Lily Collins) and the witty-beyond-his-years younger son S.J. (Jae Head)—is astonishingly (and unconvincingly) smooth. Leigh Anne

hires a dedicated tutor, Miss Sue (Kathy Bates), which prompts her husband Sean (Tim McGraw) to exclaim, "Who would have thought we'd have a black son before we met a Democrat?"

Leigh Anne is tough and can tackle the patronizing bewilderment of her fellow socialites or any threat to her family, including from drug dealers in Michael's former home base. ("If you so much as set foot downtown, you will be sorry. I'm in a prayer group with the D.A., I'm a member of the NRA [National Rifle Association] and I'm always packing.")

Even within the film's own terms, of course, the Memphis matron does not deserve all the credit. In the teachers' lounge, one of Michael's essays entitled "White Walls" is read out. It is perceptive and moving.

The real-life story of Michael Oher (born 1986) is remarkable. During his first nine years as a student, he attended 11 different schools, and alternated between foster homes and homelessness. Before he was 16, his estranged father, who spent time in jail, was murdered. When he entered Briarcrest Christian School at age 16, Michael had an I.Q. measured at 80.

In an article adapted from his book, *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*—on which the movie is based—Michael Lewis writes that the Christian school had never seen anything like Michael, "and that his life experience was so narrow that he might as well have spent his first 16 years in a closet ... It was as if he had materialized on the planet as an overgrown 16-year-old." The Tuohys provided Michael the first bed of his own.

Through a Herculean effort, Michael was able to reach a grade point average high enough to go to college and play football. In 2009, he was a first-round National Football League pick.

Writes Lewis: "He could read and write and now blended so well socially into rich white Memphis that rich white Memphis almost forgot he was black. Drowned in nurture, his I.Q. test score had risen between 20 and 30 points. And his new parents, Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, were so

pleased with the results of their experiment that they began to figure out how best to go back into the inner city and do it all again.”

So we see the filmmakers’ attraction to the Oher story. In the movie’s production notes, producer Broderick Johnson spells this out: “It’s an inspiring story in a world that is divided, in large part, by the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ It shows that you can be a good Samaritan and it can benefit you as much as the person you’re helping.”

This type of comment only invites cynicism. Apparently, well-heeled good Samaritans, who stand in need of having their horizons broadened, can change the world one poor black kid at a time. And the possible outcome of the ‘experiment’ is a pro football player, with an annual income in the millions of dollars.

In Hancock’s film, the parade of recruiting college football coaches filing into the Tuohy living room is clearly a high point for the family. Michael will bring them recognition. (Sean Tuohy was drafted by the New Jersey Nets, but did not make it in the National Basketball Association.) Even a lofty enterprise can yield a good return on investment. The filmmakers are transfixed by this win-win proposition.

Offshoots of this theme crop up throughout the film. “This team is your family and you have to protect them ... Tony is your quarterback. You protect his blind side. When you look at him, think of me—how you have my back,” says Leigh Anne in one of her motivational speeches to Michael, which pass for guidance from mother to son.

Bullock is a talented comic actress, but her role in this film seems an extension of her approach to Paul Haggis’s *Crash* (2005), in which she played a rich woman whose racism was vanquished by an act of kindness on the part of her Hispanic maid. Bullock’s conception of liberal “collective guilt,” which she expressed at the time, is not helpful: “If you leave this film and don’t see a piece of yourself, you’re a liar, an absolute liar. It may not be your time to see it yet if you don’t see a piece of yourself and just acknowledge it.”

In the production notes for *The Blind Side*, Bullock enthuses, “All I can say is, if there were more Leigh Anne Tuohys, the world would be a better place.”

Even if one were to accept the parameters of the film’s sanitized universe, the movie fails to demonstrate the truth of its theme as enunciated by producer Johnson. Michael and the Tuohys, except for the improvement of the former’s material circumstances, remain largely unaffected by their unusual relationship. The movie pays far more attention to football than it does to human interaction. Within this dynamic, Bullock is entertaining and does the best she can with a formulaic and predictable script. The rest of the cast cheerfully accommodates her.

But what, one wonders, would have happened if Michael had been unable to shed his childhood skin and attain football stardom? How much tension from an oppressed youth dealing with culture shock could have been absorbed in Leigh Anne’s tolerant world?

The filmmakers are largely unable to dramatize Michael’s personal development; throughout the film his internal life and thoughts remain a closed book. The content and reality of his life before the Tuohys are written off—it amounts to zero, or worse. The boy’s housing project is a nightmare whose inhabitants are semi-fiends. Attempts by the filmmakers to give Michael’s mother a human face are strained. He is simply a blank hard drive waiting to be formatted.

This notion is periodically reinforced. Says Sean to his wife: “Michael’s gift is his ability to forget.” And later, Leigh Anne to Michael: “The past is gone, the world’s a good place, and it’s all gonna be OK.”

Very comforting, but untrue, certainly for those who remain in hellish conditions—about which, it must be said (and this is *The Blind Side*’s most damning weakness), the filmmakers express no outrage whatsoever. The present social order squanders the talents of incalculable numbers of black and white youth. The Tuohys apparently acted decently, but the ‘haves’ as a whole are impervious to the conditions of the ‘have-nots.’ The ‘super-haves’ are outright criminals.

The Blind Side begins from the premise that racial prejudice and lack of compassion are what plague the US. No one would suggest that racism has disappeared or that the struggle against all forms of social backwardness has lost its significance, but the election of Barack Obama as president demonstrated that America is not dominated by racism. And an African American president’s implementation of an extremely right-wing program is further proof that social interests are what divide the US, not skin color.

The makers of *The Blind Side*, and the Hollywood elite generally, are pitifully out of sync with reality in the US. Their search for the “good Samaritan” savior, or saviors, suggests their own insularity and inability to see what’s in front of their faces.

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