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Cinematical.com review by Kim Voynar

With some films, you can give someone an idea of what it's like by describing it in relation to other films - "It's kind of like *Back to the Future* meets *Reservoir Dogs*, with a dash of *Forty Shades of Blue* (and wouldn't that be the most bizarre film ever?)". [*Forgiving the Franklins*](#), the first feature film by writer/director Jay Floyd, though, utterly defies that kind of shoeboxing. The film tells the tale of the Franklins, a Southern fundamentalist Christian family with a handsome son who plays football, and a perfect cheerleader daughter.

They eat meals together; they say grace together; they go to church together. Betty and Frank, the parents of the family unit, have perfectly respectable, completely dispassionate sex together. Son Brian agonizes over whether he'll be playing football on Friday night; daughter Caroline, a lovely girl, is convinced she's fat, ugly and stupid, and is certain she's a disappointment to God.

On the way to church one Sunday, the family's car is hit by a truck and everyone except Caroline is killed - or are they? Frank, Betty and Brian end up in a strange barren land, where they wander around looking for Caroline and end up meeting Jesus, who is nothing like they expected him to be. Jesus returns them to their bodies after graphically removing their "original sin", with the admonition to really live this time. They wake up from comas to a complete and "miraculous" recovery. Caroline, who was never in a coma, has a hip injury that has ended her career as a cheerleader - the one thing in life where she felt successful.

The change in the Franklins is immediately apparent. Frank and Betty suddenly discover passionate sex after years of marriage; Brian realizes he's gay and embraces it rather than running from it. Betty sheds her clothes along with her inhibitions, strolling right out the front door in the buff to fetch the morning paper. Caroline is understandably shocked by this sudden predilection for nudism in her previously conservative family, as is Betty's best friend Peggy Lester, a childless fundamentalist Christian who thinks of Caroline as her own daughter - literally. As the Franklins continue to lead their new, uninhibited lifestyle, they find themselves attacked and rejected on all sides, and must reassess their place within their community.

Forgiving the Franklins is exactly the kind of film a festival like Sundance should be about: low-budget, completely independent, reflecting the vision of the filmmaker, and unapologetically putting out a point of view for the audience to either love or hate. A lot of films out there do this purely solipsistically, with nothing relevant to say to a broader audience; *Forgiving the Franklins* isn't one of them, however. The film uses satire and deadpan delivery (which works better at some points of the film than others) to mirror a

society that's grown increasingly intolerant. Floyd is exploring what lies at the very heart of fundamentalism of any stripe - that innate human desire to separate "us" from "them". After all, how can I be certain I'm going to heaven after I die, unless I convince myself that "they" are going to hell because they don't follow the same rules I do? If the Franklins' fundamentalist neighbors accept them in their completely unhibited state, what would that say about the validity of the rules they themselves live by?

Peggy and Caroline are the most complexly drawn characters in the script. Peggy is a mess of contradictions, a devout Christian filled with envy and intolerance, but also capable of deeply loving. She loves Betty, but not unconditionally; her own marriage is bereft of both love and children, and deep inside she resents Betty for having what she doesn't, which ultimately drives the film's dark conclusion. Caroline is the saddest character in the film; a beautiful girl who cannot see herself as beautiful, she embodies all that is wrong with the media messages young girls are given about their bodies and what constitutes acceptability and desirability. Caroline has set standards for herself that she cannot possibly meet, and her prayers to God are as much a diatribe of self-loathing as requests for divine intervention.

Floyd and his cast have made a compelling movie about the nature of social mores and intolerance. Floyd's vision of Christianity may make some viewers uneasy and outright repel others, but as he noted in the Q&A, the people who will hate this film are not the people he made it for. "They are the people who made my life miserable, who made my friends' lives miserable. I don't care if they like it or not," he asserted. *Forgiving the Franklins* is not going to please everyone, and it probably won't play well in the Bible Belt, but it is both funny and insightful, and overall was one of the most unique and compelling films playing at Sundance.