

ALFRED C. KINSEY: PERVERT, PROPHET, OR PATSY?

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Kinsey, directed by Bill Condon, starring Liam Neeson and Laura Linney
(Fox Searchlight, 2004)

Loosely based on Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's biography *Kinsey: Sex—The Measure of All Things*, Bill Condon's recent film about the famous sex researcher will hopefully do a great deal to restore Kinsey's reputation, slightly tarnished of late. As a matter of fact, it's surprising we had to wait so long for major film to take Kinsey as its subject, since in many ways his life and work make such a fitting match with Hollywood's odd combination of prurience and prudishness. Surprisingly, however, Kinsey's contribution to our modern understanding of sexual behavior has been either widely overlooked, or else misunderstood. It now appears to be an undeniable fact that, apart from his other achievements, Kinsey's research has led to the tacit acknowledgment that sexual proclivities have nothing to do with morality, and perhaps this film's box-office success will help to audiences to understand the enormous historical significance of Kinsey's work.

Having said that, of course, *Kinsey* is a fairly conventional Hollywood biopic, and, as in all such movies, the protagonist's life and story is shaped and revised to fit the appropriate narrative arc. Liam Neeson cuts a noble figure as Alfred C. Kinsey, who was surely never this handsome or charming, and Laura Linney endows his understanding wife, Clara, with an almost saintly patience

and forbearing. Kinsey's relationship with his father is essentially constructed through internal narrative corroborations to provoke a conventional response, and to anticipate later developments in his life. As in a dream, different characters become composite types: Kinsey's research team is condensed into the figures of Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde Martin, and Paul Gebhard, and his antagonists into the stage villain of Thurman Rice, played by Tim Curry. The sequences hinting at Kinsey's own sexual experiments are disappointingly restrained tame, suggesting that nothing went on behind the curtains of suburban Bloomington than a spot of friendly wife-swapping caught on film (for research purposes only, of course).

Familiar tropes and conventions include a montage of talking heads representing Kinsey's interviews, manipulated time sequences, jaunty music (including, inevitably, Cole Porter's "Let's Do It"), and shots of comical Kinsey memorabilia (headlines, cartoons, and magazine covers) to suggest the public attention attracted by the professor's reports. Those familiar with Kinsey's life and work will notice other important changes made by Condon's narrative. For example, the montage of interviewees includes both men and women, suggesting that research for Kinsey's male and female studies was conducted simultaneously, not six years apart, as was the case. The film also suggests Kinsey's research came under sustained attack from moralists, pressure from religious and conservative groups, and suspicion from the academic community—when, in fact, Kinsey's work was considered far less controversial in the 1950s than it is today.

It is only in recent years, in fact, that Kinsey has been the target of systematic attacks by the Christian right, which says a lot about the so-called "sexual freedom" his work is supposed to have encouraged. Indeed, for such a staid and gentle movie, *Kinsey* has attracted an unusual amount of attention in the media, from both admirers and detractors. The latter group, led by conservative campaigner Judith Reisman (who admits she has seen only the first ten minutes of the film), have launched a series of attacks on *Kinsey* based on Reisman's claim that, as a man with deep homosexual leanings, Kinsey deliberately set out to "prove" that same-sex desires were "statistically common" in order for society to accept

“perversion” as “normal.” Apparently, members of groups such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America were reported praying outside theaters showing the film, warning moviegoers that Kinsey was to blame for the “sexual revolution” and a panoply of related ills, from high divorce rates to AIDS and child abuse. Of course, this controversy can only have helped bring more attention to the film.

Nevertheless, it seems difficult to believe that people are still interested in blaming Kinsey for the decline of Western morality, especially in the United States, since in many ways, society seems more confused and anxious today about sexuality than it was in 1947, when Kinsey’s first report was published. People may not have known much about each other’s sexual preferences and proclivities in 1947, but – as Kinsey’s findings revealed—that didn’t mean they didn’t have them. Kinsey’s research simply told us what was going on behind closed doors. As his character says in the film, “Everybody’s sin is nobody’s sin. And everybody’s crime is no crime at all.”

On the other hand, although it has been condemned by detractors, the film has received unanimous praise from critics, who, when describing it, all tend to use words like “thoughtful” and “important.” It has been widely cited as a definite Oscar contender, though some feel it might be considered too “serious” for mainstream audiences. In fact, the word most often used to describe the film is “intelligent,” an accolade that seems almost as inapplicable as Reisman’s attacks. *Kinsey* essentially reduces a complex life to a simple formula, enacting fantasies of reassurance through the presentation of one-dimensional characters, predictable “ironic twists,” moral reductions, and melodramatic mini-narratives of good and evil. While it may not be quite as reductive as similar Hollywood rewritings of history, *Kinsey* still slides glossily over the surface of events, magnifying the significance of some rather ordinary people, and failing to adequately probe the motives or psychologies of its characters. All it takes for a film to be considered “intelligent,” it seems, is that it deals with sexual issues without being conspicuously sexy, which makes me wonder what has been learned from Kinsey’s work after all.