

# Analysis of 'witness' directed by peter weir essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Amish are a charming people, gentle oddities in today's techno world. They don't do handguns, cars, or telephones, and they're exceedingly clannish in their desire to keep out technology generally and outsiders in particular. The basis for Witness is an age-old fish-out-of-water story: a modern man trying to fit in with the quaint Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Taken on that basis alone, Witness is a success; it's when the "real" world intrudes, with its drugs and crooked cops and dead partners, that the movie falls apart.

Harrison Ford plays John Book, a big city cop who's more or less happy with the world and his place in it. A case comes to him just like any other case: A young Amish boy, Samuel Lapp (Lukas Haas, Mars Attacks!), is the only witness to a murder of an undercover cop in the men's room at a train station, and before you can say, "Police corruption," Ford's joined the boy and his widowed mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis, Top Gun) on their farm in Lancaster County. He's hiding from his evil bosses (who kill his partner because he won't locate Book for them) and protecting the boy from them as well. Little Samuel Lapp is the only witness, you see, and Book really wants to get these creeps.

Of course, Book and the lovely Widow Lapp are attracted to one another. Problem is, the Amish don't take well to outsiders, and they certainly don't consider it meet that one of their own would become romantically involved with a big city cop who carries a gun and can't milk a cow to save his life. For them to be together forever, which is clearly what they'd both like, either he'd have to stay and become Amish, or she'd have to leave her life behind entirely and join him in the real world.

<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-witness-directed-by-peter-weir-essay-sample/>

Eventually the two worlds collide when the baddies show up in the farm country. Will Book manage to wipe out the bad guys? Will the would-be lovers live happily ever after? Will Lukas Haas ever lose that big-eyed horrorstricken look? This is a Harrison Ford picture; lay your bets...and prepare to be wrong. Witness' greatest saving grace is the somewhat surprising ending. It doesn't outweigh the utter predictability of the rest of the film, but it at least puts a spin on the well-worn plot.

Harrison Ford is known for this sort of role: tough, honorable, and secretly a bit of a softy. There's no stretch for him here; he's playing entirely to type as John Book. He's strong, believable as a tough guy/good guy/lover-God knows he's done this sort of thing so often, he should have it right. The Academy® nominated Ford for Best Actor for his portrayal of John Book; the fact that he's had tons of practice with this sort of character may've been why he didn't win.

Ford's performance as a lover is even better, when you consider how miscast the role of Rachel Lapp is; it's got to be difficult to make love to someone who's so far off the mark as Kelly McGillis. She isn't a bad actress, really, but she's way outside her range here; she makes of the respectable and confused Rachel Lapp a naturally slutty woman who, in the real Amish society, would be shunned on general principles. Her performance is so one-dimensional, there's never any question that her character's outlook might affect the outcome of the affair with Book; you know from the get-go she's going to abandon her faith and life for a good lay.

Lukas Haas is every overbearingly cute child actor in the world. There's nothing here to complain about, but nothing to praise either—not a good thing in the actor who's portraying the most important character in the film. He could easily be replaced by any one of a dozen kids, and it wouldn't make any difference at all.

One performance surprises with its strength and thoughtfulness: Alexander Godunov, the famous ballet dancer, brings a dignity and stolid power to the part of Daniel Hochleitner, Rachel's discarded suitor. What could've been a part characterized by whining or snide bitterness becomes in Godunov's hands a patient and good man who's willing to pick up the pieces of his beloved's life if he has to. Excellent job.

Directing Harrison Ford is no challenge; just point the camera and let him do what he does. Especially with a role that's a carbon copy of all his action roles, it requires no thought and little effort to photograph him well. Director Peter Weir does well with this no-brainer; it's with other cast members and the beauty of Lancaster County that he stumbles a tad.

Weir fails to take advantage of Kelly McGillis' occasional sparkle, choosing for some reason to photograph her in profile or silhouette more often than not. These are some God-awful strange angles he's got going here. Godunov doesn't get much in the way of flattering angles, either, and the lighting on him makes him look positively green through much of the picture.

How you could make a film about the Amish and not fully utilize the gorgeous scenery of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is beyond my comprehension. Weir's got the lush green looking kinda grey, and the blue  
<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-witness-directed-by-peter-weir-essay-sample/>

sky only a couple of shades lighter than the grass. Stormy days have their own beauty, of course, but he makes it look like it's a huge fog (or smog) pit. The pacing, too, is weird; the film jerks from zero to sixty with no lead-in for the change in mood. It stops being exciting pretty early on, becoming instead just a boring and pretentious attempt to offer surprises where there really aren't any. (The Academy® graced Weir with a nomination as Best Director for this one, but I can't imagine why.)