

# THE CHAMBERLAIN STORY

## The Tragedy and Vindication of an Adventist Family

For almost a decade Seventh-day Adventists in Australia and in other parts of the world have been following, with conflicting emotions, the alternatives of Michael and Lindy Chamberlain's ordeal. Their family tragedy has split Australian public opinion, antagonized the experts, rocked the judiciary, fascinated the media, and brought our church under the international spotlight. While new books and articles on the Chamberlains continue to be published, a full-length motion picture based on their story is being shown in movie theaters around the world. *Dialogue* has asked four seasoned observers to outline the facts, review the books, comment on the film, and draw the lessons from this extraordinary case. Here are their reports.

### The Facts of the Case

On August 17, 1980, Azaria, the 10-week-old baby of Adventist Pastor Michael Chamberlain and his wife, Lindy, disappeared from their tent at Ayers Rock, in Australia's Northern Territory, where they had been camping.

For the past nine years Lindy has consistently maintained that a dingo (an Australian wild dog) took their daughter. However, since the tragedy first came to public notice, many have doubted her story.

Early in 1981, the coroner at an inquest into Azaria's disappearance exonerated the Chamberlains, agreeing that a dingo had taken her.

However, the Northern Territory Government soon reopened the case, ordering a second inquest. Evidence given at this inquest related mainly to what was alleged to be fetal blood in the Chamberlains' car.

Lindy was charged with murdering Azaria, and Michael was charged with being an accessory after the crime. During the subsequent trial, scientists disagreed vigorously over the forensic evidence. On October 29, 1982,

the jury convicted Lindy of the murder of Azaria. The next morning Michael was given a suspended sentence for being an accessory after the crime.

Lindy was immediately imprisoned in Berrimah Jail, Darwin. Three weeks later she gave birth to another daughter, Kablia. After one hour the baby was taken from her.

An appeal to the Federal Court of Australia in 1983 failed, as did a further appeal to the High Court of Australia a year later.

Chamberlain support groups throughout the country lobbied for a judicial inquiry into the case. A submission in the middle of 1985 outlined new forensic evidence and new eyewitness evidence. However, the Northern Territory Government refused to act.

It was a frustrating time—all legal avenues were now closed to the Chamberlains. However, on February 2, 1986, police, searching for a lost climber, found a small matinee jacket partially buried about half a mile from where Azaria Chamberlain had disappeared five and a half years earlier.

The find was significant because Lindy had consistently maintained that Azaria was wearing such a jacket when she disappeared. She positively identified the jacket as Azaria's.

In response, the Northern Territory Government immediately freed Lindy and established a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Chamberlain convictions, under Justice Trevor Morling. But Lindy remained a convicted murderer—her name was still not legally cleared.

On June 2, 1987, after an 11-month inquiry, Justice Morling handed down his findings. His 300-page report was comprehensive. There was no question that he had gone as far as he could within his powers and terms of reference to support the Chamberlains' innocence. He said that if the evidence he had examined had been presented at the trial, the judge would have been obliged to direct the jury to acquit the Chamberlains.

The Northern Territory Government pardoned Lindy and Michael—but did not quash the original convictions. The Chamberlains and their supporters im-

mediately set about to clear their names completely.

Finally, on September 15, 1988, a three-judge panel in the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal unanimously overturned the six-year-old convictions. The

hearing, which officially ended the most sensational criminal case in Australian history, took two minutes.

The acquitted Chamberlains are currently seeking compensation

from the Northern Territory Government.

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## A Flood of Publications

**A** growing volume of books and articles have focused on the ordeal of the Chamberlain family. Here is a summary review of the most notable ones.

\* Richard Shears, *Azaria* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 252 pp.; and James Simmonds, *Azaria: Wednesday's Child* (West Melbourne: TPNL Books, 1982), 216 pp. These two volumes are similar in size, content, and style. Written by journalists, both books were rushed into print within weeks of Lindy Chamberlain's guilty verdict in Darwin. Both authors have reported on the events with reasonable objectivity. Simmonds reports that he—in common with most others involved in the trial—considered the case against Lindy very weak. "Before the jury returned, verdicts of guilty had seemed the slimmest of possibilities."

\* Guy Boyd, *Justice in Jeopardy* (published by the author, distributed by Kingfisher Books, 1984), 207 pp., illus. with black and white photos. The late Australian sculptor Guy Boyd, with his wife Phyllis, were two of the strongest supporters of the Chamberlains in their ordeal. They organized Save Lindy Chamberlain campaigns in many cities and secured 131,000 signatures for their memorial "A Plea for Justice," which they presented to the Governor General in Canberra. This book is a compilation of materials relating to the trial. Of great interest is a statement of Dr. Frederick H. Smith, a psychologist with the Northern Territory's Department of Health, in which he reports, "Mrs. Chamberlain is innocent of the charges for which she has been imprisoned. Her guilt as has been portrayed in her

conviction is, in my firm opinion, so unlikely as to constitute a virtual psychological impossibility. I would stake my professional working life on that judgment."

Phil Ward, *Azaria: What the Jury Were Not Told* (Sydney, published by the author, 1984), 192 pp. After Lindy's imprisonment, Adventist Phil Ward spent months as a self-appointed detective trying to piece together the facts related to Azaria's disappearance. He names policemen and rangers whom he accuses of criminal conspiracy. The story makes exciting reading, but Ward has been unable to prove his charges and has been successfully sued for libel by those whom he exposes.

\* John Bryson, *Evil Angels* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 536 pp. Bryson, a lawyer and skillful writer, first explains who Seventh-day Adventists are, starting with William Miller. Then he sketches the tragic events at Ayers Rock in 1980 and gives an insider's look at what went on before and during the inquests and trial as seen by lawyers and media people. This book was the basis for the motion picture "A Cry in the Dark." When actress Meryl Streep read Bryson's book, she enthusiastically accepted the challenge of playing the role of Lindy in the movie.

\* Ken Crispin, *The Crown vs. Chamberlain: 1980-1987* (Albatross Books, Australia, 1987), 384 pp.; (U.S. edition, *Lindy Chamberlain: The Full Story*,

Southeastern California Conference Photo



Michael and Lindy Chamberlain, with their two younger children, Reagan and Kahlia, answer questions during a recent public appearance in California.

Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press). The first half of this book retells the story of Azaria's disappearance and the aftermath. The second part deals with the long struggle to clear the Chamberlains' records of alleged criminal activity. Crispin, a lawyer, appeared for the Chamberlains at the Morling Commission that established their innocence. Some readers will find the latter part less exciting reading, but it continues the narrative almost to the present day, giving information unavailable in the earlier books.

\* Chamberlain Innocence Committee, *New Forensic Evidence* (1985), 40 pp. This small paperback presents magnified color photographs of crucial items in the trial—canine teeth, spray paint patter on the Chamberlains' car, cuts and tears in clothing—giving the reader a close look at forensic evidence used and misused by an array of "experts."

\* Periodical articles include "The Dingo Defence" by Stuart Tipple in *J. D. Magazine*, 1985; and "Who Killed Azaria?" by Lowell Tarling in *Spectrum*,

August and October 1985, and "Michael, Lindy and Adventists" in *Spectrum*, February 1989. *The Azaria Newsletter*, edited at Cooranbong by Nonie Hodgson, has provided information, commentary, and even interesting trivia related to the case.

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## Approaching the Movie

**M**agic words taught and entertained us for thousands of years. Narrators and poets kept our heritage vivid and our faith alive. Travelers sang of distant lands and heroic deeds in a changing world. The medium was the *word*. Reality lay in the mind of the listener, shaped and limited by his experience and imagination.

Film, the 20th century technological version of the ancient storytellers' art, *can* be a great gift, if we approach it prepared. And our approach to film evaluation requires asking two important questions, that are still answered with words: (1) What changes occur in the thinking and lives of the characters, and why? (2) What changes occur in me as I watch, and why?

Let the answer to Question 1 show that the changes were honestly and reasonably motivated—or perhaps that they were contrived and manipulated to make the story more sensational or pleasing. And let the answer to Question 2 be determined by how I feel as I leave the film: renewed, cleansed, enlightened, grateful, angry, or aghast. Or perhaps cheated, cheapened, emotionally

used by shock tactics or maudlin sentimentalism.

This two-question analysis might be briefly applied to the film "A Cry in the Dark." The changes are these: Lindy Chamberlain and her husband, Michael, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, are at a crowded Australian camping spot on an August night in 1980. A dingo is seen leaving their unattended tent. Their sleeping baby, Azaria, has disappeared and is never seen again. Two years later, Lindy is sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor for the murder of the baby. Her husband is given a suspended sentence, to care for the two boys and the new baby girl born in prison.

Scene after scene can offer only partial answers to the question, Why—for there is no body, no weapon, and no motive. Local authorities and aborigines apparently accept the dingo-did-it-story. Lindy is outwardly cold, detached, and even defiant at questioning. Michael agreeably takes photos for the press and refers calmly to "God's will." Newspapers headline rumors. "Experts" are interviewed concerning dingoes, blood stains, and religious cults. Australians freely

offer their verdicts around their TV sets and in public T-shirts proclaim "The Dingo Is Innocent." The Chamberlain house is searched by police. The children are hounded by the press and tourists. Michael's professional future is destroyed while he tries to cope with the two boys and the prison-born baby.

Changes continue. After three and one-half years, Azaria's torn jacket is discovered, corroborating Lindy's story of the dingo. She is released, and the Chamberlains try to put their lives back together.

There is no satisfactory answer to the *why* of this witch trial and miscarriage of justice. In fact, the story is too bizarre to be believable, had not the principal film makers been so committed to reality. English producer Verity Lambert, Australian director Fred Schepisi, and American actress Meryl Streep put forth incredible efforts to maintain truthfulness, from the important to the trivial.

The *why* of Question 1 may include certain personality characteristics of the Chamberlains, sensation-seeking media, religious bigotry, prejudice, government

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bungling, the fallibility of experts, and avid public acceptance of media reports.

Question 2 of the analysis—the changes occurring in me, the viewer—were on two levels: One was astonishment and dismay at the speed with which we (the public) jump to conclusions, when published stories fit our prejudices. The other was anger at the appalling injustice visited on

completely innocent people, and a deepened distrust of legal systems and their impartiality.

The *why* certainly includes my own guilt at the memory of former snap judgments of public figures. It is also related to sympathy for fellow Seventh-day Adventists misjudged because of "peculiarities." And my anger may well be related to fear. It could happen to me, to any of us.

Putting questions and answers into words has forced a focus on change and meaning for the

viewer. "The Word" may have meaning far beyond Scripture in giving us a perspective on technological marvels of entertainment. This can be gain indeed, for these marvels shape our culture, our experience, and our competence as 20th century Christians.

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## What Can We Learn?

**T**he story of Lindy and Michael Chamberlain, a tragedy of biblical proportions, has lessons for each of us:

**The impact of the media.** The Chamberlains were tried in the press before their case ever reached court. The mystique of Ayer's Rock, a little-known religion, controversy over the dingo—the story contained sensational elements, and the press had a field day.

A populace fed on TV felt itself competent to decide guilt or innocence on the basis of bite-size segments. The Chamberlains didn't react as they "should"—they didn't collapse in grief in front of the camera. And Lindy had a "killer's eyes"—she obviously was guilty!

The potential of the media to skew the course of justice should horrify us all. It also should make Adventists more ready to come to the defense of members of other minority groups who are bound to suffer at the hands of the media.

**The impact of the secular society.** James M. Wall, editor of *The Christian Century*, recommends "A Cry in the Dark" as one of the 10 best movies of 1988 because it is "the portrait of religious

bigotry in a secular society that can't understand how Seventh-day Adventist parents can accept their personal horror as God's will" (January 18, 1989).

More and more, we live in a post-Christian age. Adventists, like others who hold to biblical faith, increasingly will face misunderstanding and impugning of motives from secular men and women.

Not even North America is exempt. Although religion here appears to play a greater role than in any other Western countries, society is ready to react viciously against anyone who does not behave according to its expectations.

**In a religious vacuum, people believe the worst.** Adventists offering human sacrifices—whoever would believe such nonsense?

Thousands of Australians, that's who. Adventists have been in the land 105 years; we own and run hospitals and the huge food chain, Sanitarium Health Foods; yet thousands of Australians believed the worst about us.

We have done a superb job of hiding our light under a bushel. People have heard the name Seventh-day Adventist, but know almost nothing about us.

We need an aggressive plan to present the facts about Seventh-day Adventists. Many of us need to cultivate more non-Adventist friends.

**Don't attribute everything that happens to "God's will".** Many of us have fallen prey to a comfortable theology: If you love God, the good times will roll. God will protect you, keep you healthy, make you rich. He'll even help your football team win!

But a symphony of suffering runs through the Scriptures. Until Jesus comes, justice and injustice, love and force, truth and the lie, crisscross. At times God and his people seem helpless in the face of evil.

After all, we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth—who was denied justice and executed on a Roman cross. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29, NIV)

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## FIRST PERSON

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# LEARNING TO TRUST IN GOD

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María Neira Rodríguez

The first time I attended a retreat for Seventh-day Adventist university students in Colombia, several years ago, I had just started my studies towards a degree in civil engineering. The meetings were stimulating and I very much enjoyed the friendly atmosphere. During the retreat I was impressed with the experiences told by some of the students and, although I had not yet joined the Adventist Church, I decided to obey God in everything and not take any more classes or exams on the Sabbath.

When I returned home and started the second semester, I had to drop a course that met on Saturdays. I had fulfilled my promise to keep the Sabbath holy, but began to fear that I might not be able to complete the program and receive my degree. Since I was working during the day and

attending classes in the evenings, I knew that several of the key courses were offered only on Saturdays. I had not yet learned to trust completely in God!

I finished the third semester of studies and enrolled in the fourth. But the course I had dropped during the second semester still haunted me. I had to take it in order to proceed with my coursework. I prayed earnestly asking for God's help in solving this problem. After speaking repeatedly with the teacher, I was able to make special arrangements for that course and passed the exam.

Eventually I completed the two semesters of my third year of studies while keeping up with my job. Several times I had to receive permission both from the academic dean and from my boss to take some courses on weekday mornings instead of on the Sabbath. My

situation became more difficult when I enrolled in the fourth year, because from then on all courses were taught in the evenings or on Saturdays.

The basic course on Roads and Highways was always offered on Saturdays. What was I to do? I decided to take the other fourth-year courses, hoping that in time the schedule would change. However, my hopes did not materialize.

A colleague who knew my predicament suggested that I make a formal request to the dean of students. But fearing that it might be turned down and I would be asked to drop out from school, I chose not to do it and instead to go on as far as I could with my coursework. Now I acknowledge my lack of faith and my naivete. At that time, however, I thought that if I continued taking as many courses as I could, at least by the time I was let go by the university I would have learned many things that I could put to good use. (It didn't occur to me that technical knowledge without a recognized degree has little value in civil engineering!)

Somehow I was able to proceed with my studies and complete the 11th semester. But when I was registering for the only two courses I could take in the 12th—the last one in the program—I was found out! The registrar told me I was in violation of the policies and therefore could not go on with my coursework. I was sent to the academic dean who, in turn, presented the matter to the academic council, which decided that it was too complicated for

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#### DISCUSSION

1. As a Bible-believing Christian, how do you understand and relate to the suffering of innocent people? What role does "the will of God" play in human suffering? Can you explain your views to others? How would you have reacted if the Chamberlains' tragedy would have been your own? What would you have done, as a fellow Seventh-day Adventist, to support them in their ordeal?
2. What is the public image of Seventh-day Adventists in your country? Why? Should we be concerned about how our church is perceived by the

media and by the public at large? What can we/you do to make our Christian message and mission better known and appreciated?

3. What personal criteria have you developed, as an Adventist, for the selection of the TV programs and the movies you watch? Is the place where a film is shown an important factor in your decision to watch it or not? Why? In addition to the approach recommended in the article, what other questions would a Christian ask in evaluating a movie? (For example, What view of life comes through? Are the decisions of the characters morally right? How does the basic message of the movie relate to the teachings of the Bible?)