



Discussion guide developed by Heartland Truly Moving Pictures to accompany *Phoebe in Wonderland*, a Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. A Truly Moving Picture Award winner is a film that unlocks the vast potential of the human spirit and enables us to view stories that display courage, integrity and hope, taking entertainment to a higher level.

www.TrulyMovingPictures.org



One Film Can

Heartland Truly Moving Pictures, a non-profit organization, recognizes and honors films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life. We believe that one film can move us to laughter, to tears, or to make a difference. *Phoebe in Wonderland* is a movie that demonstrates that One Film Can.

Synopsis

Daniel Barnz's *Phoebe in Wonderland* is the fantastical tale of Phoebe (ELLE FANNING), a young girl who longs to be in the school production of *Alice in Wonderland*. After her peculiar drama teacher Miss Dodger (PATRICIA CLARKSON) casts her, Phoebe struggles to control her behavior so her Principal (CAMPBELL SCOTT) will allow her to continue being in the play.

As Phoebe's stress mounts, her behavior grows worse, creating intense pressure on her parents Hillary and Peter (FELICITY HUFFMAN and BILL PULLMAN). Hillary, who already feels a failure in both her personal and professional life, desperately tries to understand and help her daughter. But this connection proves elusive as Phoebe begins retreating to an imaginary fantasy world peopled by characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, a world which grows increasingly disturbing and treacherous.

As Alice observes to the Caterpillar, "It is very confusing being so many different sizes in a day," and in the end both Hillary and Phoebe (under Miss Dodger's tutelage) must try to navigate the strange, painful, exhilarating transformation from chrysalis to butterfly.



Phoebe in Wonderland © 2009 THINKFilm



Teacher: “Rule one. Good Job Jenny asks questions only when it’s time for asking questions. Good job, Jenny!”

Phoebe: “How will we know when it’s time for questions?”

The discussion above takes place at the beginning of *Phoebe in Wonderland* and sets the stage for Phoebe’s difficulty coming to terms with the rules and expectations set out for her by others.

Take Phoebe’s experiences in and out of the classroom into consideration as you discuss the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- How is Phoebe’s experience living with Tourettes Syndrome in every-day-life similar to Alice’s journey through Wonderland?
- What do you think of director Daniel Barnz’s decision to not explore too deeply the disease that afflicted Phoebe? How would your movie-watching experience have been altered if you had known more about the syndrome from which Phoebe suffered?
- Can you identify with Phoebe’s inability to accept commonly expected reactions and behavior in certain situations? Why?
- Although Phoebe doesn’t have support and understanding from many of her peers or teachers, there is one teacher who supports her. Do you believe that Phoebe has the same support from Ms. Dodger as she has from her mother? How do these women treat Phoebe similarly? In what ways do they treat her differently?
- Do you believe either woman’s approach to dealing with Phoebe better than the other’s? Why?
- What are some other ways that children have trouble “fitting in” as they grow up and encounter new situations? If you are a parent, teach or mentor, how can you help make their journey a better experience?



“And her poetry. Like Whitman. Phoebe too, these rhymes and rhythms and interior monologues she creates – you’ve never seen anything like it and...” Hillary to Peter’s colleagues about their children.

Hillary sings the praises of both her daughters to others, and throughout the movie she demonstrates how proud she is of both of them. However, Hillary is also frustrated with Phoebe at times.

Think about instances in the movie when Hillary is supportive or frustrated by Phoebe and use those to help discuss the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- As a parent can you understand Hillary’s frustration by Phoebe’s behavior?
- In the *Phoebe in Wonderland Press Notes*, Daniel Barnz suggests that some parents desire to have unique and different children, but struggle with the fine line between having a unique child and one, like Phoebe, whose differences cause her to be too different to fit in. Have you ever experienced this conflict as a parent? How have you dealt with it?
- The movie demonstrates that sometimes it is easy to overlook problems your child might have if they demonstrate other positive or intelligent behavior. Discuss some scenes in which Hillary and Peter attempt to overcompensate for Phoebe’s problems by highlighting her intelligence. Can you identify with Phoebe’s parents in these instances?
- Think about the dynamic between Hillary and Phoebe and the story of *Alice in Wonderland*. How does Hillary’s fascination with the book and Lewis Carroll create obsession and some insecurity for Phoebe?
- Can you identify with Hillary’s conflicted emotions between being a good mother and being a published author?
- Phoebe’s behavior is a stress on Hillary and Peter’s marriage. Children, regardless of whether they are well behaved or have developmental disorders, can cause stress on a marriage. Consider some of the conversations between Peter and Hillary regarding being published and think about the guilt that Peter has because of his success. Is this a dynamic similar to that which you have to wrestle with in your marriage? What are some ways with which you deal with it?



I was The Weird Kid growing up – probably less Phoebe and more Jamie (though without his guts). The irony of being tortured as a kid is that at a certain point in your life – if you’re a storyteller – you become grateful for the pain you experienced because it feeds you creatively.

Writer/Director Daniel Barnz

Daniel Barnz’ original script is based in part on his experiences growing up and not fitting in. He, like many of us, found strength from the sometimes difficult experience of growing up. Think about some of your experiences growing up as you discuss the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- Daniel Barnz discusses in the *Phoebe in Wonderland Press Notes* that Miss Dodger’s character was based in part on the desire he had as a child to have someone tell him that all the struggles of being a kid would pay off as an adult. Did you ever have a teacher like Miss Dodger or did you long for a teacher such as this?
- As an adult looking back on being a child how do you view Miss Dodger’s advice to Phoebe?
- Are either Phoebe or Jamie’s experiences in school familiar to you? In what way?
- Phoebe’s difficulties not only affect her, but they also affect her family, particularly her sister, Olivia. Consider the relationship that the siblings Olivia and Phoebe have with one another. While the difficulty of raising a child like Phoebe is a stressful task for her parents, it is equally stressful for her sister. How does having a sister like Phoebe affect Olivia?
- Olivia’s character was not explored in depth in this movie. Were there aspects about her character that you would like to know more about? What are they? Why?

**Visit [HeartlandTrulyMovingPictures.org](http://www.heartlandtrulymovingpictures.org)
to watch an exclusive discussion with Writer/Director Daniel Barnz
during the 2008 Heartland Film Festival.**

<http://www.trulymovingpictures.org/interview-view.aspx?id=85>



Truly Moving Moments

Phoebe in Wonderland has been honored as a Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. This award was created to honor films released theatrically that align with Heartland's mission to recognize and honor films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life.

These award-winning movies are made up of moving and inspiring moments – those moments that cause you to think, see something in your life differently, be inspired to do something. It's what makes the movie and its message remain with you well after you've left the theatre.

Think about *Phoebe in Wonderland*. What were the moments that stood out to you? How did they make you feel? How will they cause you to think about things differently in the future? Share those Truly Moving moments with others at www.TrulyMovingPictures.org. Simply create a membership or login if you already have one and then search the movie list for *Phoebe in Wonderland*. You can leave your review of the movie or thoughts about your Truly Moving Picture in the "Thoughts and Reviews" section.



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