



SEARCHING for BOBBY FISCHER



Rated: PG • **Running Time:** 1 hour, 51 minutes
Starring: Max Pomeranc as Josh Waitzkin; Joe Mantegna as Fred Waitzkin; Ben Kingsley as Bruce Pandolfini; Joan Allen as Bonnie Waitzkin; Laurence Fishburne as Vinnie
Director: Steven Zaillian

Themes: Preserving decency and innocence in a cutthroat world, developing one's gifts, sportsmanship, the father-son bond, the pressure of high expectations, unconditional love, kindness, well-roundedness

Cautions: Two misuses of the Lord's name

Story Summary

Searching for Bobby Fischer opens with black-and-white newsreel footage of America's most famous chess player overdubbed with biographical insights by a young boy. The child explains that, after becoming world champion in 1972, Fischer made his most unexpected move of all ... *he disappeared*. No one knew where he was or why he had chosen a life of seclusion. Years went by. No Bobby Fischer. The movie's cryptic title alludes to two searches. First, the chess community continually had its eyes open for Fischer in the form of a talented stranger who might wander into a pick-up game and display his signature, grand master panache. At another level it reflects the search for Fischer's heir apparent, that gifted prodigy who might become the next world-class phenom.

However, this true story isn't about the iconoclastic Bobby Fischer. It's not really even about chess. It's about a 7-year-old boy with a special gift, and how his exceptionally kind heart impacted various adults in his life who had their own ideas about how to hone his talent.

After seeing men playing speed chess in the park, Josh Waitzkin becomes enthralled. Pawns. Knights. Rooks. Bishops. It becomes a new interest on his long list of playtime activities. But those around him quickly realize he has an uncanny head for the game. His devoted father, Fred (who wrote the book on which the film is based), is committed to helping Josh excel. That includes hiring a classically trained tutor named Bruce Pandolfini—a strict mentor who knows the amateur circuit, including what it can do to promising young minds that aren't properly trained to win. Making Bruce's job more difficult is Vinnie, a homeless man who

encourages Josh's love for "speed chess," a variation Bruce eschews as the game's undisciplined evil twin. In the midst of this ideological tug-of-war, Josh's mother pledges to do whatever it takes to

preserve her son's sweet spirit in this take-no-prisoners subculture obsessed with winning ("He's not weak," she tells Fred, "he's decent. And if you or Bruce or anyone else tries to beat that out of him, I'll take him away"). She needn't worry. The boy knows who he is ... and who he's not:

Bruce: Do you know what the word *contempt* means? It's to think of [opponents] as being beneath you, to be unworthy of being in the same room with you.

Josh: I don't feel that.

Bruce: Well you'd better start, because if you don't think it's a part of winning, you're wrong. You have to have contempt for your opponent. You have to hate them.

Josh: But I don't.

Bruce: They hate you. [Josh shrugs.] They hate you, Josh.

Josh: But I don't hate them.

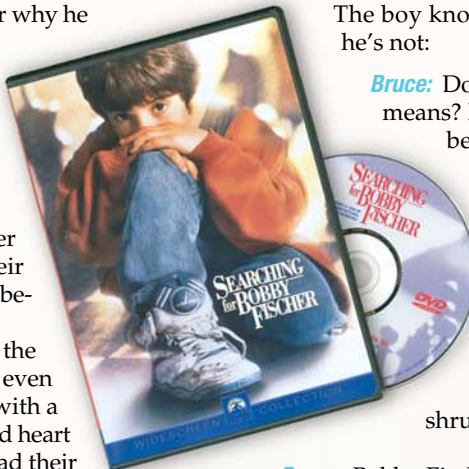
Bruce: Bobby Fischer held the world in contempt.

Josh: I'm not him.

Bruce: You're telling me.

In the months and tournaments that follow, Josh experiences a series of ups and downs. He takes the chess world by storm, then struggles with the pressure of being ranked No. 1. Inexplicable losses put stress on Josh's relationship with his dad, forcing both to refocus on what's most important. Along the way, Josh meets Jonathan, an intimidating child prodigy whose ability is equaled only by his smug, rude demeanor. "He's been my student since he was four," his teacher boasts. "His parents have given him to me. He does nothing but play chess. No other interests." Quite a contrast to young Waitzkin. Eventually, Josh and Jonathan face off in a climactic battle. It may come as little surprise that Josh wins, but it's *how* he wins that will put a lump in viewers' throats. And through it all, Josh's kindhearted nature emerges unscathed.

No knowledge of chess is required to enjoy *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, though it doesn't hurt. At its core, the story is about one family's emotional journey. Yes, Josh Waitzkin





The real Josh Waitzkin, then and now



is a brilliant chess player. More importantly, he's a decent, sensitive, merciful competitor. Because the film emphasizes the latter, this underappreciated gem embodies the warmth, innocence and virtue of its young hero.

Before You Watch

If you and your teen enjoy playing chess, play a day or two before you view

the film (since matches can run long, combining one with the movie and follow-up discussion could be too much for one evening). Take time to survey the board, handle the pieces and form strategy. It can be a fun way to prepare to relate to Josh's world.

Bible Bookmarks Ex. 20:12; Prov. 18:3; Jer. 48:29; Matt. 5:7; Mark 8:34-36; Rom. 12:14-16; Eph. 6:4; 2 Pet. 1:7

Talking Points

1 Discuss how Josh's words and deeds reveal a good heart and reflect biblical virtues. How does Josh show kindness (2 Pet. 1:7), mercy (Matt. 5:7), empathy (Rom. 12:14-16) and respect for his parents (Ex. 20:12)? Talk about how he refuses to arrogantly hold others in contempt (Prov. 18:3, Jer. 48:29).

2 Bruce worries that speed chess will undermine the structured method he's trying to teach Josh, yet the boy's ultimate victory comes from drawing upon both. How does this ability to be disciplined and boldly spontaneous relate to the Christian life?

3 Talk about Vinnie's statement, "You're playing not to lose, Josh. You've got to go to the edge of defeat." Relate it to Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-36. Why do you think people are so often tempted to hold back and not put everything on the line, be it in matters of religious faith, romantic love or the pursuit of personal success?

4 How do the members of the Waitzkin family honor and love one another? Share some examples together. Be sure to praise teens when a character trait gets mentioned that also happens to be a strength of theirs.

5 Ephesians 6:4 warns, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children." How can overly competitive parents, such as Morgan's dad, exasperate their children? What would be a healthier approach for parents to take?

6 What does our culture value most in athletes, "winning" or "character"? What evidence have you witnessed that supports your claim? Why do you think this is the case?

Josh Waitzkin is a brilliant chess player. Even more importantly, he is a decent, sensitive, merciful competitor.

7 What is our responsibility to our God-given gifts? Does a math genius have an obligation to pursue rocket science? Is a biology whiz bound by social duty to work at curing cancer? How does this relate to spiritual gifts?

8 There are so many interesting characters in this film, it's a great opportunity to develop a sense of empathy by having teens step back and view events through the eyes of various supporting players. You might also ask, "With which character do you most identify? Why?"

9 Contrast Josh's varied interests with the obsessive single-mindedness of Jonathan. Which do you think is healthier and why?

10 Look closely at the relationship between Josh and his dad. In what ways do they see the "chess thing" (as Josh's teacher calls it) differently? How do father and son grow to understand, respect and love each other more deeply through it all?

11 Jonathan's tutor tells Bruce, "There are only so many things you can teach a child, and finally they are who they are." What do you think he meant by that? Do you agree?

Follow-Up Activity

Attend an athletic event featuring competitors under the age of 10. The nature of the sport isn't important. You're there to listen to the parents and coaches, specifically how they handle the young players. Are they supportive? Do they lack perspective? Do you hear hyper-competitive parents living through their children? Afterward, talk about what you witnessed, and compare the people you encountered to the chess parents in the movie.

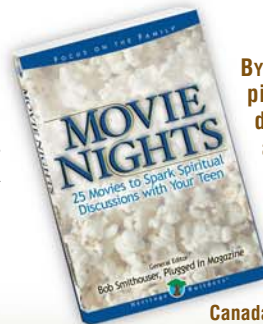
Just for Fun

- One year after this movie came out, 17-year-old Josh Waitzkin won the U.S. Junior Chess Championship. His little sister, Katya, makes a brief appearance in the film as his first opponent (the girl ranked 82nd) in the climactic National Championship tournament.

- Despite critical raves and a terrific cast (with minor roles filled by William H. Macy, Laura Linney and Tony Shalhoub), *Searching for Bobby Fischer* vanished from theaters after three weeks on just 219 screens. Its studio, Paramount Pictures, released

the gory horror sequel *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* the same weekend (8/13/93) on 1,355 screens. Sadly, even when Hollywood creates a great family film, the system often fails to support it. —by Bob Smithouser

A **plugged** Resource
online



BY THE BOOK: "For better or worse, motion pictures speak to a captive audience in a dynamic way, communicating the beliefs and agendas of the people who create them. Therefore, it's critical that films not be viewed passively."

—Movie Nights

You can request this resource by contacting Focus on the Family at 800-232-6459 (in Canada, 800-661-9800).