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Author(s)	David Bartholomew
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AMAZING GRACE AND CHUCK (PG)

(TRI-STAR)

Color/1.85/Dolby

115 Mins.

Cast: Frances Conroy, Jamie Lee Curtis, Alex English, Gregory Peck, William L. Petersen, Lee Richardson, Vasek C. Simek, Joshua Zuehlke (alphabetical order).

Credits: Directed by Mike Newell. Written and produced by David Field. Executive producer: Roger M. Rothstein. Director of photography: Robert Elswit. Editor: Peter Hollywood. Production designer: Dena Roth. Music by Elmer Bernstein. Costume designer: Jack Buehler. Executive consultant: Ted Turner.

Ultimately winning little fantasy about a child leading the world to total nuclear disarmament takes a while to hit its stride and communicate its intentions. Could be a summer b.o. winner if the all-important youth audience takes it to heart.

87-92

In this modern fable for a troubled world, young Chuck (Joshua Zuehlke), after a personally harrowing class trip to a nearby Minuteman missile silo, decides to give up what he's best at, and quits pitching for his local ball team. As he's the best player, the team founders. Before he knows it, he is joined in his rural hometown by Amazing Grace (Alex English), a Boston Celtics star, and then by a couple of Miami Dolphins. The movement snowballs until the worldwide ("87 countries") pro and amateur sporting seasons are disrupted because the players won't play. As go pro sports in America, so goes the country economically and politically. So a low-profile, powerful industrial magnate (a nice, smarmy performance by Lee Richardson) tries to coerce Amazing to start playing again; a local Congressman tries to get Chuck's father (William L. Petersen) to get his son back on the mound; and finally the U.S. President (Gregory Peck, perhaps wittily warming up here for his *Dodsworth* remake) prevails upon Chuck. When Amazing stands up to the businessman and is killed by his henchmen, Chuck takes a vow of silence and is followed by the world's children. And *that* finally does the trick to bring about immediate worldwide nuclear disarmament (although the logistical details of that little plan aren't revealed by the film).

Despite the opening fairy-tale-like title, "Once upon a time there was a boy," *Amazing Grace and Chuck* takes a while to start percolating. The film's realistic setting and performances seem to promote audience perception of the picture as a rural adolescent drama—which is patently unbelievable and confusing in this context—rather than as a fantasy, until the story's more outlandish, if sincere (not to say innocent) elements cue the proper response. Getting the audience past this sticky conceptual wicket will be an interesting chore for the ad-pub people. For instance, we don't know how to respond to Chuck's decision to quit pitching—he doesn't do it as a "protest" except perhaps as unstated interior morality. And one's initial response to Amazing's decision to join him is simply that star pro athletes can afford to take a year or so off to protest nuclear weapons. However, by the time President Peck shows up on Chuck's doorstep and our Little Leaguer stoically blackmails him for a better disarmament plan than the one he's already quickly hammered out with the Soviets, we are firmly under control of and relaxing with this heartfelt, charming picture. Performances are earnest, and Denver Nuggets star and off-season poet Alex English is terrific as Amazing. David Field's screenplay and Mike (*Dance with a Stranger*) Newell's direction sensitively develop the many human relationships spurring and underpinning the fantasy. That said, there is definite playing to some obvious crowd-pleasing *Rocky* elements here, and the final half-hour of the picture continually threatens to veer off into sentimentality. But on the whole, *Amazing Grace* marks an auspicious and somewhat daring initial foray into independent production for former UA and Fox executive Field. Utilizing gorgeous locations in Montana, technical credits are sharp all around, and there's an especially fine score by veteran Elmer Bernstein.

—David Bartholomew