



January 2020

## Minari

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### Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2020) "Minari," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/16>

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## Minari

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Minari* (2020), directed by Lee Isaac Chung.

### Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



**Minari (2020), dir. Lee Isaac Chung**

Jacob Yi (Steven Yeun) is a Korean immigrant who dreams of having his own farm, and not just endlessly “sexing chicks”—a tedious job of separated the males and females, as the males are then destroyed as useless—and so he takes his family from California to Arkansas, where he has bought a piece of property. His wife Monica (Yeri Han) is horrified when she sees that they are going to live in a mobile home, and she worries they will go broke. Jacob knows he will have to work to convince her that this is right for them, as she fears for the survival of their marriage in this context, as well as the ability of their children, preteen Anne and 7-year-old David, to adapt to it. David has a heart defect, and Monica is concerned that they live too far from a hospital. Largely for this reason, Jacob consents to let Monica’s mother live with them, so that Monica can work and grandma can watch the children.

Grandma (Yuh Jung Youn) teaches the children to swear and play cards, which might seem cool to kids, but David insists she is not a “real grandma” as she doesn’t act like one. And yet the two of them eventually bond, partly because they are both so badly behaved. When David plays a trick on her and gives her his pee to drink rather than Mountain Dew, his father wants to beat him, but grandma begs him not to, claiming that it was hilarious, after all. The family begins to make friends at a local church, and although it has no other immigrant families, the community welcomes them completely. Jacob also hires Paul (Will Patton), a Korean war veteran, to help him with the farming: Paul is a Pentecostal Christian who speaks in tongues and exorcises spirits from the land and from their mobile home, which Jacob regards with great suspicion. Paul doesn’t go to their church on Sunday and instead drags a full-size cross down the road, reenacting Christ’s journey to Calvary as his own personal ritual. In spite of his peculiarities, he is a good and loyal friend to the Yi family.

For his part, Jacob tells his son David that farming, and life in general, must be based on reason and facts rather than superstitions and faith. He rejects the help of a “dowser” who will use a stick to find water on their property, instead relying on common sense. Monica, on the other hand, is more likely to turn to prayers and faith for help, which Jacob regards as a waste of time—and yet he carries his own perhaps unreasonable faith in his farm’s ability to prosper, which Monica does not share. He asks her to believe in him and his dream, which becomes increasingly hard when debt, drought, and fire each take their toll. But in the end, they all realize the need for faith in order to survive as a family in this new land. Chung’s film is beautifully filmed and acted, and is a poignant memoir of immigrant dreams and hopes lost and found, with wonderful and likeable characters. It also never becomes maudlin or cliché, perhaps because Chung himself grew up on a farm in rural Arkansas, which results in a depiction that is realistic, hopeful, and loving.