

# Ordinary, but . . . privileged



by Frank McGinn

Judith Guest was an "ordinary person" when her novel **Ordinary People** was published. She was an average suburban housewife and mother when her unsolicited manuscript was plucked from among the thousands submitted daily to major publishing firms by hopeful unknowns. Most of whom are destined to remain so and catapulted onto the best seller lists. So we can assume that when she chose her title she used the term the way all of us "ordinary people" use it — to differentiate from the playboys, politicians, rock stars and other world shakers whose lives appear exotic and exciting. Slightly self-conscious, slightly defiant, the book's title declares its intent to highlight the unobtrusive and the recognizable.

In his directorial debut, Robert Redford is carefully faithful to this intent. Alvin Sargent's screenplay is an almost literal adaptation of Guest's novel and Redford remains way back, letting the tale tell itself. He directs like a cat burglar, efficiently but invisibly, and wearing gloves so as not to leave fingerprints. From the opening credits the simple white on black, no music, to the final, misty fade, he demonstrates sensitive but controlled craftsmanship. Get the scene on, let it make its point, then get it off. No razzle, no dazzle. In brief, an unobtrusive means of presenting recognizable people.

The ordinary people are the Jarrets, an upper-middle class family living in a nice suburb of Chicago. Dad (Donald Sutherland) is a tax attorney, Mom (Mary Tyler Moore) is sociable and sporty and Conrad (Timothy Hutton) is an involved high school student. They make a nice picture in their nice life but underneath they are tense and uncertain. Conrad is recently back from the hospital following a suicide attempt, which followed the accidental death of his brother. He is guilt-ridden and

needs psychiatric help. Dad is very worried and Mom wants to maintain appearances, come what may. A wise and caring doctor (Judd Hirsch) precipitates a change in Conrad, opening him up to his feelings, which in turn precipitates a change in the family unit, as they all learn to come to terms with their feelings.

If this sounds familiar it is either because Guest really knows her ordinary people, among whom are you and me, or because you've seen the story several hundred times on various sensitive television shows. I think it is a little of both. Many of the individual scenes are accurate portrayals of the kind of ambiguity and choked emotion found in genuine family situations. Mary Tyler Moore proves wonderful at the denial of warmth and the maintenance of a distant facade. She makes her universally-loved self unlovely and unlikeable by holding her face in one or two cold, aloof expressions, instead of allowing her features the mobility she displays as a comedienne. Her smile and her look of not understanding and not wanting to understand are familiar sights but when isolated and locked on, they are terrible to behold. Donald Sutherland's quiet, fuzzy husband, dim but good-hearted, provides a good foil for the MTM monster. And when she and Hutton play one of their non-interaction scenes, the tension resulting from their lack of communication makes them look like two gunfighters stalking one another at high noon.

But the overall picture is too pat and predictable. We know that the WASP characters are too uptight to express their feelings and that the good, Jewish psychiatrist will liberate them. We can anticipate the shouting scenes and the hugging scenes and the trouble-adjusting-at-school scenes, and we are right on schedule. *Ordinary People* has excellent acting,

some powerful scenes and the proper, discreet direction, so don't knock it. It just doesn't quite break its mold and tell us something extra about ordinary people.

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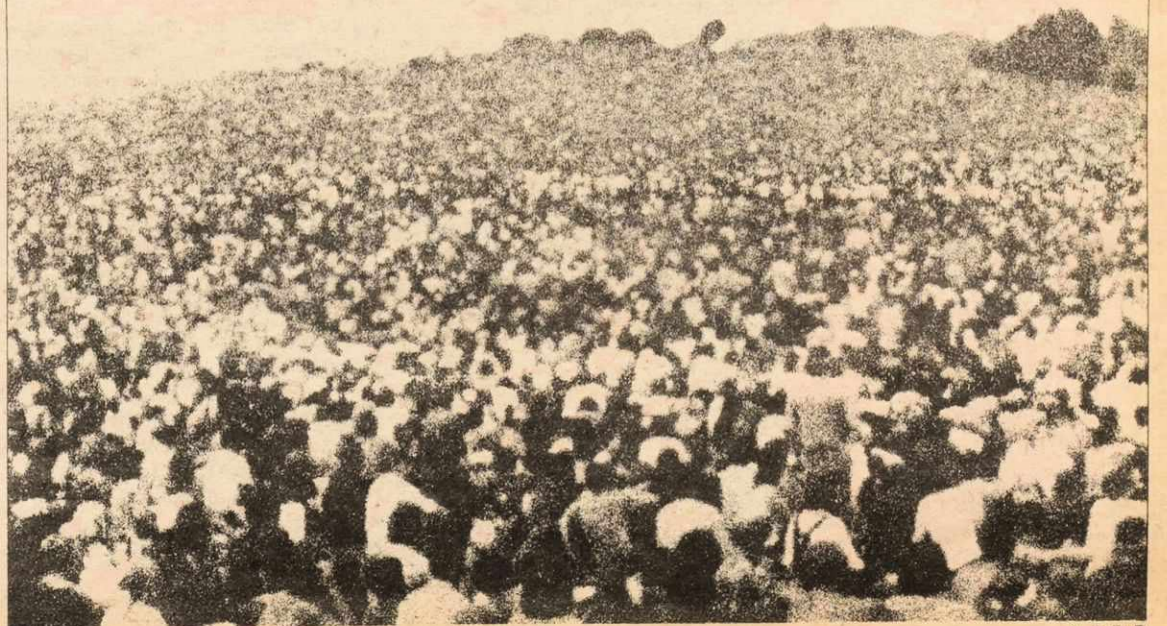
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