

Critic's Comments on

A Lion in the House

★ ★ ★ ★ Four Stars (Highest Rating)

"A FILM OF QUIET, ALMOST INCALCULABLE POWER. The children are only one point in the film's larger design. The doctors and nurses are presented as deeply committed to their patients' care, medically and, in most cases, emotionally. Says one oncologist, "I want it to be hard. If it starts to get easy, I need to pick something else to do." In almost every case, the physicians become welded into the inner family circle. "A Lion in the House" is one of those experiences that leave a viewer with a profoundly enriched awareness of life's fragility and our own unexpected strength."

- Ty Burr, *The Boston Globe*

"RICHLY REWARDING. A documentary of STUPENDOUS POWER."

- Dorothy Rabinowitz, *The Wall Street Journal*

"ASTONISHING. IMMENSELY REWARDING. The old adage that no great movie is too long applies in spades to "A Lion in the House." Bristles with a tension to rival any of TV's highly-rated medical dramas. Such a remarkable series of profiles in courage, and in the human will to live, that pic's cumulative effect is nothing short of humbling, cathartic and even euphoric."

-- Scott Foundas, *Variety*

★ ★ ★ ★ Four Stars (Highest Rating)

"HEARTBREAKING and INDELIBLE."

- Tom Gliatto, *People Magazine*

"ESSENTIAL VIEWING, not only as an antidote to the idiotically sentimentalized depictions of childhood cancer we see in most television and movie dramas, but for what it tells us about the way kids and parents bear up — or not — under adversity no one should have to experience. By the end of the movie, having lived for a few hours with these families and their doctors, I understood that any of us who think we know how we'd act in their place are fooling ourselves, and that *A Lion in the House* has achieved NO LESS THAN A REDEFINITION, AND A NECESSARY COMPLICATION, OF HEROISM ITSELF."

-- Ella Taylor, *LA Weekly*

"A LION IN THE HOUSE IS A DEMONSTRATION OF TV'S LONG-OVERDUE PROMISE TO SERVE AS A NATIONAL TOWN HALL MEETING. There needs to be a mature conversation in this country about serious illness (which most of us will have) and end-of-life issues (which all of us will have) and how ill-equipped we are to respond humanely to both, not just personally but through our health-care system. The children can lead us there."

-- Aaron Barnhart, *The Kansas City Star*

“POWERFUL ‘LION’ IS PROOF OF PBS’S WORTH. "A Lion in the House" premieres two weeks after a House subcommittee approved a \$115 million cut to CPB's budget -- a 23 percent decrease from 2007's previously approved amount. They would do well to watch "A Lion in the House," a work that is a balm to any family with a loved one fighting an illness.

Soon into the documentary it's obvious that the "lion" is not in the cancer, but in these kids' spirits. Every one of their soaring heights are matched by incomprehensible lows, all caught on film. Coaxing out tears is easy. Seducing people into profoundly bonding with these young subjects is more difficult, and Reichert and Bognar achieve that. Employing no saccharine tactics to force our emotions, the directors involve us by letting the boys and girls tell their own stories.”

-- Melanie McFarland, **Seattle Post-Intelligencer**

“A POWERHOUSE DOCUMENTARY that transfixes viewers for every second of its near four-hour length.”

-- Jan Stuart, **Newsday**

“A PROFOUNDLY ILLUMINATING and UPLIFTING VIEWING EXPERIENCE. A REMARKABLE and DEEPLY MOVING DOCUMENTARY. The reward of trusting oneself to such skilled filmmakers is that one leaves the film feeling more INTENSELY ALIVE -- as well as more deeply connected and concerned about others. One of the most extraordinary moments comes immediately after the death of a 7-year-old. Dr. Robert Arceci, chief of the children's oncology unit, calls the staff together to talk about the child and her death. Viewers see and hear Arceci read from “The Plague” by Albert Camus: "Until my dying day," he quotes an "old doctor" in the book as saying, "I shall refuse to love a scheme in which children are put to torture." The passage is perfectly pitched to the sense of sorrow and rage felt by the medical caregivers.”

-- David Zurawik, **Baltimore Sun**

“An ASTOUNDING ACCOMPLISHMENT. Incredible, full-tilt access to the families, doctors and nurses. It provokes TEARS, LAUGHS, INSIGHTS, FAITH, SYMPATHY and GREAT RESPECT for the resilience and strength of the patients and their parents and siblings.”

-- Clint O'Connor, **Cleveland Plain Dealer**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Five Stars (Highest Rating)

“Most of us have seen nothing like this in our lives and will give thanks if, off screen, we never do. Yet it is A TRANSFORMING PIECE OF CINEMA.”

- Nigel Andrews, **Financial Times**

“Heroism is too often defined in relation to warfare. This amazing collection of characters reminds us that being heroic is a struggle to do the right thing in the face of an untenable situation. A MUST SEE DOCUMENTARY.”

-- Lisa Kennedy, **Denver Post**

“FASCINATING. This SPELLBINDING, very detailed look at a group of kids and their families we get to know at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center is such a cross-section of real people and life-and-death situations that you get immediately pulled in, unable to turn away.”

-- Marilyn Moss, *Hollywood Reporter*

“A FILM THAT STANDS ALONGSIDE “HOOP DREAMS” AND THE WORK OF FREDERICK WISEMAN. Documentaries can take us to exotic locales, introduce us to fascinating people and tackle thorny issues. But "A Lion in the House" does something even more remarkable; it allows us access to the most difficult, inspiring and private moments in the lives of supposedly average people, achieving the sort of intimacy that's possible only when a subject has complete faith in the filmmaker. A RIVETING, UNFLINCHING, HEARTBREAKING CHRONICLE. A FILM THAT NEEDED TO BE MADE – AND NEEDS TO BE SEEN.”

-- Marc Mohan, *The Oregonian*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ (Five Stars – highest rating)

“FASCINATING. Guarantees you won't leave unmoved.”

-- Pete Vonder Haar, *Film Threat*

“Exiting the theater after such a headlong dive into our own fears brings not sadness, however, but elation and a sense of connectedness. It's a confrontation with death, but it heralds something that even our greatest, most layered and symbolic fictions, like Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) or Lynne Littman's *Testament* (1983), could never manage. This is not something as simple as “truth” or “reality” or any other doc catchwords—*A Lion in the House* is nothing less than a work of towering human *empathy*, and goes further in uniting its audience in one conjoined emotional experience than any other film I've ever seen.”

- Michael Koresky, *Cinemascope*

“A RIVETING four-hour documentary. The extraordinary access Reichert and Bognar were given create a highly detailed portrait, as they gently take their cameras into hospital rooms, medical staff meetings, and each of the families' homes. The filmmakers use all of this remarkable footage WITHOUT A HINT OF EXPLOITATION, instead approaching the subject with a DEEP RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING for what the families are going through, as they, too, had seen their own daughter through a year of chemotherapy and radiation treatments before being asked to film this important documentary. The end result is a HEARTBREAKING FILM that not only functions as A GRACEFUL WORK OF ART, but also as a tool for anyone dealing with a similar situation in their own life.”

- Jonny Leahan, *IndieWire*

“ONE OF THE FINEST FILMS YOU'LL SEE THIS YEAR. The overall impact is cathartic, in keeping with the Isak Dinesen quote that provides the film's title — which says that you don't know what it's like to be alive until you've lived with lions.”

- Jim Ridley, **Nashville Scene**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ (Five Stars – highest rating)

“A REMARKABLE and IMMERSIVE NEW DOCUMENTARY. A serious and careful attempt to illustrate what it means to be a child diagnosed with a potentially terminal illness and, in some cases, to die. What also emerges is a snapshot of America now; these different children – black and white, rich and poor – and their disease together act as mirrors on racial divisions, economic rifts, personal ambitions, collective hopes, deep-rooted fears and the routines of normal life made obvious by abnormal circumstances. A LION IN THE HOUSE presents the unthinkable and the unforeseen plainly, uncensored and sensitively thanks to an enormous investment of time and intelligence.

-- Dave Calhoun, **Time Out London**

“An EPIC JOURNEY of emotion and human endurance.”

- Steve Ramos , **Cincinnati Citybeat**

“Reminds you what it is to be human.”

- Duane Dudek, **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

“A Lion in the House' is FUNNY and TRAGIC, inspiring and heartbreaking, challenging and rewarding - a RIVETING, DEEPLY MOVING EXPERIENCE.”

- Melissa Starker, **Columbus Alive**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ (Five Stars – highest rating)

“Already acclaimed as one of the year’s most significant achievements in documentary film, Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert’s study of the impact of childhood cancer on five families in Cincinnati lasts nearly four hours - I think I cried for two of ‘em. It’s impossible not to be pulled into the material, which is often emotionally wrenching yet also precisely delineates many complex issues surrounding the disease. While the catastrophic toll on family members is obvious, the many moments of hope, love and resilience make the agonies easier to bear both for the people on the screen and in the audience.”

- Jason Anderson, **Toronto Eye Weekly**

“ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL FILMS YOU WILL SEE ALL YEAR. Films with this much emotional depth are rare, providing profound, resonant glimpses into the human experience. An epic glimpse at life and death that explores the complicated and complex issues we all face during our time on this planet.”

- David Walker, **Willamette Weekly, Portland**

“ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT, EMOTIONALLY HARROWING MOVIES EVER MADE. ONE OF THE MOST ESSENTIAL, TOO. You can't shake this movie off, nor would you even want to. Observes with unerring patience and astonishing detail what it means to be dealt the

worst possible hand in life -- and then it watches with A MIXTURE OF COMPASSION AND AWE as five UNIMAGINABLY BRAVE youths keep fighting to survive. It's ROOTED IN A DEEP SENSE of INSPIRATION and OPTIMISM -- if these kids can face cancer, then what could life possibly give the rest of us that we wouldn't be able to handle?

Documentarians often live or die based on how much access they have to their subjects, and it's here where Bognar and Reichert soar: The filmmakers were invited by the doctors at Cincinnati Children's to make a film about their hospital; and the families seem to have placed no restrictions on what could be filmed. The combination of Bognar and Reichert's unflinching (but never exploitative) devotion to telling these stories, and the doctors' and families' EXTRAORDINARY BRAVERY AND OPENNESS has resulted in a ONE-OF-A-KIND GIFT TO US ALL -- a kaleidoscopic portrait of the modern healthcare system that's even more illuminating and multi-faceted than Frederick Wiseman's classic films 'Titicut Follies' and 'Hospital.'"

-- Christopher Kelly, **Fort Worth Star-Telegram**

"PROFOUND, RICH, EXASPERATING, MOVING. Among the most talked-about titles at this year's Philadelphia Film Festival. While Bognar and Reichert are more than alert to the hills-and-valley nature of treatment (warning: While never exploitative, the film doesn't hold back), just as powerful is how attuned they are to the resulting mood swings, sudden decisions and philosophical inquiries."

-- Matt Prigge, **Philadelphia Weekly**

"An extraordinary expression of will, endurance and fortitude."

- Robert Denerstein, **Rocky Mountain News**

"CERTAINLY ONE OF THE BEST FILMS I'VE SEEN IN AGES. And while it's extremely difficult to bear witness to the passing of some of these wonderful kids, "A Lion in the House," in its graceful and empathetic storytelling, never allows for maudlin tears. The filmmakers' commitment to their subjects creates ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX, AND UNBLINKING, PORTRAITS OF LIFE AND DEATH THAT HAS EVER BEEN PUT ONSCREEN, but in the end, the film's true power lies in the openness of the five children whose lives are already so unfathomably complicated - for weeks after seeing the film I was haunted by dreams about them. Thanks to these brave souls, and their amazing parents, "A Lion in the House" is not a film about death, but about cherishing life.

- Danielle McCarthy, **Reverse Shot**

"UNFORGETTABLE. Some of the kids die, some survive, but all of them face the illness with a dignity that's the definition of heroism. Bring tissues, BUT DON'T MISS THIS ONE."

- J.R. Jones, **Chicago Reader**

"A little MASTERPIECE. I guarantee you won't be able to turn away. Unsentimental, spare and unobtrusive. NOTHING SHORT OF ASTONISHING."

- Keith Austin, **Sydney Morning Herald**