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SXSW Film Fest: Day 4

Posted in *SXSW 2008, Film* by Hank Sartin on March 11th, 2008

After a nice break for dinner, I hit the best thing I've seen in Austin. Kurt Kuenne's *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* is an emotional gut-wrencher. To give you an idea of how powerful it is, I'll just say that there was a lot of audible sobbing during the credits (and no, not just from me), and the first question in the Q&A started like this: "First of all, holy crap. Wow." Then the questioner got choked up.

Kuenne's childhood friend Andrew Bagby was murdered by Bagby's former girlfriend. She then fled to Canada, and an unbelievable set of circumstances unfolded. She was pregnant with Andrew's baby, and during the insanely slow extradition process, she had the baby. Bagby's parents, determined to raise their grandson, moved from California to Canada and began fighting for custody. Kuenne decided to make a film for the child, Zachary, to tell him what a great guy his father Andrew was. If you've read or heard about David Bagby's book *Dance With the Devil*, you know the twists and turns of this story. I hadn't heard the story, and so, like many in the audience, I was following the story with innocent eyes.

Kuenne's most notable strength is his willingness to vary his tempo. Many documentarians seem to believe that the tempo for all docs should be slow and patient, with lots of long takes. Kuenne blazes through some of the material with a frenzy of editing. And Andrew's parents, David and Kathleen Bagby, let us see them at their rawest, even when David is raging and swearing about the woman who murdered his son.

In a perfect world, this film would be the last thing I'd see and I'd go home on a guaranteed high note. But tomorrow holds two more films and a few interviews. They have a high standard to live up to now.