



*"In Love on the Big Screen, William Torgerson does for movies what Nick Hornby did for music in High Fidelity."*

— Greg Downs, winner of the  
2006 Flannery O'Connor Award

a novel by

**WILLIAM J. TORGERSON**

Praise for

## **LOVE ON THE BIG SCREEN**

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“William Torgerson does for movies what Nick Hornby did for music...

He writes with sincerity, clarity, and, most importantly, an antic sense of humor about the way men use and misuse the conventions of love in popular culture to connect and fail to connect with the women around them. This is a novel about life at a Nazarene college, about the joy and tedium of playing basketball, and about the smothering intimacy of frustrated college roommates, but it is, mostly, about the unbearable, unbelievable, unforgivable foolishness of sensitive boys better at loving the women they see on the big screen than the ones they see in front of them. Underneath the jokes, the nicknames, the ruminations on morality, the lovely descriptions of that love game, basketball, and the lyrical evocation of college campuses, *Love on the Big Screen* is a painful novel about the painful way boys learn to become men by learning to love and not love and to be loved and to not be loved by the women around them. This is a book to laugh with and to ponder and, mostly, to read carefully.”

— Greg Downs, author of the collection *Spit Baths*,  
winner of the 2006 *Flannery O'Connor Award*

“...pursues truths about Hollywood’s impact on the way we see the world...”

“Torgerson captures both the sincerity and the satire of everyday life on a Midwestern evangelical college campus. His characters are accessible and true. *Love on the Big Screen* pursues truths about Hollywood’s impact on the way we see the world in a hilarious, compelling, and very honest way.”

— Matt Litton, author of *The Mockingbird Parables*

Praise for

# **LOVE ON THE BIG SCREEN**

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“William Torgerson captures young-male-angst in all its poignancy, stupidity, doubt and ego-driven certainty, confusion, and tenderness.”

“In *Love on the Big Screen*, through a relentless lens (read Hi-Def accuracy) William Torgerson captures young-male-angst in all its poignancy, stupidity, doubt and ego-driven certainty, confusion, and (most importantly) tenderness. We get stills and jump cuts. We get panorama and telescoping lens. Soft-focus. Close-ups. In the end we get a group of characters we both love and revile, in a story that demands our attention. Isn't that the human experience?”

— Steven Sherrill, author of *The Locktender's House*,  
*Visits From the Drowned Girl*, and  
*The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break*

“In the tradition of *Say Anything* and *High Fidelity*.”

“A wonderful coming of age romantic comedy in the tradition of *Say Anything* and *High Fidelity*. Bravo!”

—Lisa Kline, author of *Take Me*

Praise for

# **LOVE ON THE BIG SCREEN**

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“I know of few novels that capture the emotionally complex life of a college student as powerfully...

as William J. Torgerson’s *Love on the Big Screen*. Set at a small Christian college in the early 1990s, the book vividly brings to life the confusion, the camaraderie, the awkwardness of relationships, and the moments of exhilaration that everyone who has ever been a student will recognize. I loved this novel.”

— Joseph Bentz, author of *A Son Comes Home*

“Hilarious and moving”

“At the conclusion of Reagan’s America, Gary Willis asks, ‘What happens if, when we look into our historical rearview mirror, all we can see is a movie?’ In *Love on the Big Screen*, Bill Torgerson asks, ‘What happens when a son of the 1980s looks inward and finds only cheesy, irresistible, teenaged romantic comedies?’ In a novel with turns hilarious and moving, Torgerson navigates his hero Zuke through the perils of heart-sickness on a quest to distinguish reality from illusion. With riveting, crisp prose (that’s TOTALLY AWESOME!), Torgerson delivers a first of its kind—a soul from ‘Me Generation’ that was almost lost...at the movies.”

— Jeremy Collins, author of “Shadow Boxing,”  
a *Pushcart Prize* Selection

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**LOVE  
ON THE  
BIG SCREEN**

**WILLIAM J. TORGERSON**

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## Acknowledgements

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In order to create the world in this book, I placed the following nonfiction texts in conversation with my imagination: Dr. Leslie Parrott's *The Olivet Story*, *The Eighties* edited by Gilbert T. Sewall, and Dr. Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* and his *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*. I should also note that some of the headlines, world events, and last names contained in this novel were discovered either while reading old Olivet yearbooks or through browsing copies of the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper in the microforms reading room at the New York City Public Library on 42nd Street.

*I dedicate this book to my wife Megan,  
who not only carves out time and space  
with me for writing, but also provides the  
catalyst of love that makes our family go.*



## CHAPTER ONE

On his very first day as a student at Pison College, Zuke fell in love with a girl he'd never seen before, a young woman in his composition class named Abby Grant. From Zuke's front-row seat, it was the squeak of a chair sliding on the hardwood floors that caused him to turn his head, casually at first, and then snapping to attention as he caught sight of Abby sitting down late for class. Fresh from volleyball practice, Abby was covered with a salty glaze of dried sweat. Her hair was an unruly shock of red, wild as a strawberry patch, and it seemed to buck against the banana clip which held it in place. Maybe it was the tint of Abby's red hair that had such a lightning-bolt effect on Zuke's heart. He was a fanatic of the movies, mostly romantic comedies, and this was the fall of 1989, three years beyond Molly Ringwald's homerun of blockbuster hits: *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Pick Up Artist*. Zuke had seen them all, especially *Candles*, that one five nights in a row with his buddy Road Dog when they were still in middle school.

It wasn't just the joyful surprise of the nude shower scene that drew Zuke back to *Candles* night after night. For the first time in his young life, Zuke had found a role model who wasn't a basketball player: a character played by Anthony Michael Hall named Farmer Ted, a self proclaimed "King of the Dipshits" whose nerdy go-getter attitude had caused Zuke to believe that he, too, might one day rise from romantic obscurity. Zuke saw Abby's sparkly green eyes scan the classroom, maybe looking for a familiar face, maybe a friendly one. A kaleidoscope of color erupted into the room, all except for at the core of Zuke's vision, which remained as clear as the lens of a Hollywood camera, Abby at its center. Zuke felt a jolt at the near miss of her laser gaze and desire hurried into his chest for want of a day when she'd look at him and care about his life.

For the rest of class, Zuke stole looks to the back of the room

to see what he could learn: printed across the front of Abby's shirt was the phrase *Lady Oracles*, along with a gold number 3, bolded above a volleyball net that stretched across her chest. She was an athlete and so was he, an incoming freshman whose only reason for choosing the conservative college was so that he could play basketball. How in the world could Zuke, a nobody on campus, meet a girl as sparkling as Abby?

In *Say Anything*—Zuke's reigning favorite movie of all time—John Cusack's Lloyd Dobler proclaims that he is looking for a dare-to-be-great situation and now having spotted Abby, Zuke felt his own opportunity rise before him. Greatness—and the great life that surely must belong to anyone who dated a young woman as beautiful as Abby, was hanging right there before him, like a ripe apple in the back of the room.

For the rest of the class, Zuke marveled at Abby's visage and began to dream of plans for how he would meet her. In *Say Anything*, chance had brought Lloyd Dobler a seat by Diane Court at the mall and while Zuke admired Dobler's courage and his chivalrous attitude, he saw no reason to leave meeting the woman of his dreams up to something as random as circumstance. Zuke felt that part of reaching for greatness meant not only seizing opportunities as they arrived, but he also believed that he should shoulder some of the responsibility for creating those opportunities. This was an axiom for finding love that Zuke had previously put to practice when as a middle school student he'd first seen the girl who would eventually become his high school romantic steady.

Five years earlier, in the middle of the Reaganite eighties, Zuke and his family had just moved back to his parents' hometown of Horseshoe, Indiana. It was a little place of less than three thousand residents and so named for where it sat on the bend of the Tippecanoe River. Zuke was sitting on the green and paint-chipped wooden bleachers watching his younger sister play softball. It was here that Zuke first spotted Colleen, the opposing team's pitcher, as she mowed down batters with her lithe and whirling slingshot arm.

Colleen was uncannily strong for her fragile frame, with tanned skin from long summer days spent pedaling around town on her banana-seated Huffy bicycle. She sneered at the batters after she struck them out, a fierce girl for someone with the delicate beauty of a morning glory flower.

Prone to pouting on the bench if her coach removed her from the game, Colleen, who wore a big pink ribbon tied up in her hair, injured the opposing catcher when she bowled her over for the winning run. Colleen looked like one of Barbie's bronzed friends, but she hit with the passion of Mike Singletary, the Super Bowl shuffling middle linebacker for the Chicago Bears.

Zuke had been fourteen that summer day in Horseshoe, and upon seeing Colleen it was as if his soul had been inhabited by an otherworldly spirit of wonder. He began to admire her from afar, actually not that *afar*, since she was only twenty yards away and plainly visible through the silver-diamond spaces of air in the backstop, and it was as if she were a painting at an art museum that he'd decided to steal: perhaps, *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, a work which depicts the goddess as pale-skinned and naked. In the painting, Venus is a redhead—there's that tint again—and her hair trails across one of her breasts before it snakes between her legs. Zuke had first discovered Venus in his father's encyclopedias, and then later heard her alluded to in the 1987 film *The Pick Up Artist*, when Robert Downey Jr. hits on a character played by (no surprise) Molly Ringwald. Downey first tosses Ringwald one of his usual pick up lines, something to the effect that she has the face of a Botticelli and the body of a Degas. That particular pick-up line actually curdled a bit of disgust in Zuke's stomach. It was something Lloyd Dobler would never say, a character who had famously—at least famously in Zuke's mind—brushed broken glass out of Diane Court's way while they crossed the street on their first date. Ever since Zuke had seen the movie, he looked for ways to be a gentleman with the same mania he pursued the loose balls that sometimes scooted across the hardwood floors of basketball courts.

At fourteen, at least at Zuke's house, there was no calling girls and asking them out on dates. Even if his parents would have

allowed this, what was he supposed to do, swing by Colleen's place on his ten speed? Zuke was just socially savvy enough to realize that he couldn't stand outside Colleen's house and follow her wherever she went. So what Zuke did, was to try for the appearance of coincidence or destiny, to situate himself at opportune places at opportune times. He caught a break one morning at the town pool when he saw Colleen coming in as he exited from his morning swim lessons. Zuke went right home and asked his mother to buy him a summer pass to the pool. Because he was an edgy boy, the sort of kid to ask what he was doing next even when he was still in the throes of whatever his mother had planned for the day, Zuke's mom was happy to oblige him. Armed with the season pass, Zuke spent most of that summer in the town pool submerged under three feet of water breathing through a snorkel and weaving in and out of his peers as if they were branches of coral. Thank God his mother had at least persuaded him to leave his flippers at home. Zuke and Colleen never spoke the summer before his freshman year. As the saying goes, she didn't know he existed.

So it was Zuke's experience with Colleen and the many lessons provided by the romantic comedies he so loved that worked together to inform what Zuke did next when it came to Abby, this collegiate volleyball beauty. There in the front of the classroom, Professor Moore, a scary-skinny woman in her sixties quoted the poet Dickinson: "The butterfly's Numidian gown," she said, adjusting with one hand her large and round spectacles while waving the other around as if to capture an imaginary butterfly, "With spots of Burnish roasted on."

Professor Moore hadn't even noticed that Abby had come into the classroom late because as she stood at the front of the room, seemingly forgetting that she shared it with any students, Moore drew with her talon-like fingers what she described as the world's most beautiful insect.

Zuke had just determined Moore's mind to be as chaotic as an overturned hive of bumblebees when that little screech of Abby's

chair lit the fuse which would eventually ignite the star of emotion in Zuke's mind for Abby. Over the course of the rest of the class, Zuke pretended to stretch his back—well, he wasn't really pretending since his spine crunched loud enough that the young man next to him scooted his chair several inches away—Zuke was able to sneak several peeks at Abby and learn that she was likely dating a basketball player. This he discerned from the lettering on the sweatshirt draped across her desk which commemorated the Pison men's basketball team's four consecutive Lake Michigan Conference championships. Zuke was a member of the team but preseason conditioning hadn't even begun, and so he only knew two of his teammates, fellow freshmen who lived on his floor in Chapman Hall. He thought of Abby's attention as a fat man thinks of the marathon, a not too likely accomplishment, the summit of Everest as reached from the level cornfields of Indiana. Marriage was the flag spiked into the pinnacle of the relationship mountain, located somewhere beyond the first kiss, the place where the movies Zuke watched never seemed to go beyond.

Near the end of the composition class when Zuke first saw Abby, Professor Moore asked for a show of hands to see which students planned to major in what. "Business!" she called out. Zuke reached down to the metal rungs under his chair as if he needed something from his Trapper-Keeper, an action which allowed him to see if Abby had raised her hand. She didn't signal affirmatively until Professor Moore had asked about English. Zuke, having come to college mostly to play basketball, had not decided on a major, but suddenly, at the sight of Abby's raised hand, he felt confident regarding the nature of his studies at Pison Nazarene College. Following class, Zuke went directly to the registrar and filled out the paperwork that made him an English major.