

Movie Titles that begin with “B”

Babel * Babies * Babyteeth * Baby Driver * Baby Mama * Bad Company * Bad Education(2004) * Bad Education(2019) * Bad News Bears * Bad Santa * Bad Times at the El Royale * A Bag of Marbles * Bagdad Café * Ballet 422 * The Band's Visit * Bandits * The Banger Sisters * The Bank Job * The Banshees of Inisherin * Barbara * Barbarian Invasions * Barbershop * Barney's Version * Barbie * The Basket * Batman Begins * Battle of the Sexes * Being May Tyler Moore * Beasts of the Southern Wild * Beautiful Boy * Beautiful Boy (2018) * The Beautiful Country * A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood * A Beautiful Mind * Beauty And The Beast + Be Cool * Beatriz At Dinner * Becoming Frederick Douglass * Becoming Jane * Bedazzled * The Bee Gees * Before Night Falls * Before Midnight * Before Sunset * Before The Devil Knows You're Dead * Begin Again * Beginners * Behind Enemy Lines * Being Julie * Being Mary Tyler Moore * Being the Riccardos * Belfast * Belle * Ben Is Back * Bend It Like Beckham * Bernie * The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel * Best Of Enemies * Best In Show * Best of Enemies(2015) * Best of Enemies(2019) * The Best of Youth * Better Days * Better Life * Beyond The Lights * Beyond The Sea * Big Eyes * Big Fish * The Biggest Little Farm * The Big Kahuna * Big Miracle * The Big Sick * The Big Short * Big Trouble * The Big White * The Big Year * A Bigger Splash * Billy Elliot * Birdman * Birds of Prey * The Birth of a Nation * Birthday Girl * Bisbee '17 * Biutiful * Black Book * Black Hawk Down * Black Mass * Black Panther * Black Sea * Black Snake Moan * Black Swan * BlackBerry * Blackfish * BlackKlansman * Blades of Glory * Blaze * Blended * The Blind Side * Blindspotting * Blonde * Blood Diamond * Blood Simple (re-release) * Blood Work * Blow * Blow the Man Down * Blue Collar Comedy Tour * Blue Jasmine * Blue Jean * Blue Valentine * Bobby * Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius * Body Heat * Body of War * Bohemian Rhapsody * Boiler Room * Bombshell * Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story * Bonneville * Bon Voyage * Book Club * The Book of Eli * The Book Thief * The Bookshop * Booksmart * Borat! * Born In China * Born Into Brothels * Born Yesterday * Boston Strangler * Bottle Shock * Bounce * The Bourne Identity * The Bourne Legacy * The Bourne Supremacy * The Bourne Ultimatum * Bowling For Columbine * Boy * Boy Erased * The Boy In The Striped Pajamas * The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind * Boyhood * The Boys Are Back * The Boys in the Band * The Boys in the Boat * The Brave One * Breach * The Break-Up * Bridesmaids * Bridge of Spies * Bridge to Terabithia * Bridget Jones's Baby * Bridget Jones's Diary * Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason * Brideshead Revisited * Bright Star * Brittany Runs A Marathon * Broadway: The Golden Age * Broadway Rising * Brokeback Mountain * Brokedown Palace * Broken Embraces * Broken Flowers * The Broken Hearts Club * Brooklyn * Brothers (Danish 2004) * Brothers (U.S. 2009) * The Brothers Bloom * Bruno * Bubble * Buck * The Bucket List * Bullit * Bully * The Burial * Buried * Burslesque * Burn After Reading * The Burning Plain * Butterfly

BABEL: As the biblical title would suggest, this is a film about failures to communicate. Three seemingly unrelated stories taking place in four widely differing cultures ultimately are tied together in unexpected ways. Barbara and I both were impressed by the power of this film, but I fear many will not have the high regard we do. User Reviews on the Yahoo Movies website range from A+ to F. Professional Reviews range from A to C-. The biggest names in the cast are Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, but it is an ensemble effort that is skillfully carried along by a first rate cast of lesser known actors. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, who received accolades for his direction of **21 Grams**, uses a similar nonlinear approach in this film. Scenes are often like fragments of a puzzle which take shape gradually. It is my hope that the chaotic array of tragic misunderstandings in Babel will leave viewers better prepared to cope with the dangerous world in which we now live. **GRADE B+**

BABIES: Put a baby on a blanket in the middle of the living room floor and the watching adults will be thoroughly entertained. That's essentially what director Thosmas Balmes does in his documentary, *Babies*. Balmes followed the first year in the life of four babies: Ponijao, from Namibia; Hattie, from the United States, Bayar from Mongolia and Mari from Japan. There is no dialogue except for the murmurs of their parents and the coos and spontaneous exclamations of the babies themselves. I loved every minute of it. The look of concentration and wonder on a baby's face is universal. You can practically hear their brains humming as they learn about themselves and the world around them. I was particularly interested in the different parenting styles. The American and Japanese babies are over stimulated, with a multitude of toys, exercise classes, etc., while the little girl in Namibia and the little boy in Mongolia have few toys and seem to thrive from a sort of benign neglect. It's very clear that all four babies are loved. Three of the families have a pet cat, and we see the babies interacting with them, as well as with assorted dogs, goats, and cattle. It's quite amazing to see how the animals tolerate the prodding and poking of the babies. The year that Balmes shot the film was 2006 and he has since shown it to all four families. His favorite reaction was that of Bayar, now almost 4 years old. After watching the film on the director's computer he said, "This is a film about me, the sky, and how my big brother has been beating me up!" (Did I mention that we see a few scenes of sibling rivalry?) Balmes was wise to keep the film quite short, although I probably could have watched those darling babies for hours! **B+** for me and **B** for Gary. **GRADE B+/B**

BABYTEETH (2019 on Hulu and also a rental on Prime): A straightforward and, at the same time, almost poetic take on how devastating cancer can be, not simply for the teenager, but for everyone who loves her. Milla is the seriously ill teen, and she falls in love with Moses who is a druggie and her parent's worst nightmare. This Australian film is not typical in the genre of sick teenagers who fall in love. It is a truthful look at a young woman who is dying but bravely fighting against death. It is told in episodic scenes with titles, chronicling how Anna, the mother, and Henry, the father, and Milla are handling, or sometimes not handling, her illness. Moses is an unorthodox character—he obviously cares for Milla, but sometimes acts irresponsibly, even when her father invites him to live with them. As Henry puts it, "We don't like you but Milla thinks you're someone special." After the devastating ending a previous ominous scene is shown in which Milla asks her father to take care of Moses. While Gary and I appreciated the movie, it is not like **The Fault in Our Stars**, and we realize the others might not care for, as one critic put it, "An inspired, un-schmaltzy antidote to the 'cancer weepie.'" **GRADE B+**

BABY DRIVER: (2017) This is a time of year (June/July) when promising movies are hard to find. So even though this is not a genre Barbara and I go out of our way to attend, the Tomatometer score of 98% from 131 critics and an Audience Score of 93% and boasting a supporting cast with names like Kevin Spacey, Jon Hamm, and Jamie Foxx were motivating enough for us to give it a try. The film was written and directed by Edgar Wright who is an English director, screenwriter, producer, and actor. He is best known for his film

trilogy consisting of *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007), and *The World's End* (2013). Barbara and I saw none of his earlier films so we had little idea of what we would be viewing other than some hints from the trailer. We knew it was a fast-paced action filled crime thriller, but we were both pleased to find that it is more than that. I will remember it as a smartly written original fantasy in which the evil bad guys (Jamie Foxx, Jon Hamm, Kevin Spacey) are so exaggerated as to be enjoyably cartoonish. And the good guy is really good, but has been coerced into an evil plot he is trying to escape. The good guy, is played by Ansel Elgort, a name we have not heard of but is a talent to be watched. His energy level is infectious and he carries the film with a strong performance. By the films end the Crime Thriller has nearly turned into a love story and the killer soundtrack has become as important as many of the characters.

GRADE B

BABY MAMA: Both Barbara and I are enthusiastic Tina Fey fans so we were anxiously awaiting the opening of *Baby Mama*. High expectations often end in disappointment, but not this time. Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Steve Martin, Sigourney Weaver, and a strong supporting cast were great fun to watch in this predictable but laugh-out-loud comedy. Fey plays a single 37-year-old type A career business executive whom of late is hearing the ticking, if not the chiming, of her biological clock. Being told she has about a million-to-one shot at getting pregnant kicks her into problem-solving gear and she starts the search for a surrogate mother (baby mama). The unlikely choice played by Amy Poehler is a comically crude, down-on-her-luck, South Philly girl who proves to be a great foil for Fey. Predictably, Steve Martin adds texture and many smiles as a laid-back 60's throwback. Weaver is very funny as the head of the surrogacy agency that bring Fey and Poehler together. To be fair, many critics were less enthusiastic than I was. I say "B+" and Barb says "B". **Grade B+/B**

BAD COMPANY: Jake Hayes (Chris Rock) is a street-wise New Yorker who makes his living playing chess in the park and scalping tickets to sporting events. Unbeknownst to him, he has a twin brother (they were separated at birth) who is a CIA operative. When the brother is killed in the midst of an important mission, the CIA approaches Hayes and offers to pay him a lot of money if he will impersonate his twin and complete the mission. He must work with Gaylord Oakes (Anthony Hopkins) his brother's partner in the mission. I was puzzled as to why Hayes's training consisted mostly of recognizing fine wine and cognac. What does that have to do with buying a suitcase nuclear bomb from some Russian thugs? The only good thing in this film, is Chris Rock. He is a funny man, and we liked him in spite of the totally implausible thriller aspects of the movie. The movie seemed incredibly long and all the battles with assorted baddies and terrorists got quite tedious. Funny how in movies like this, the good guys never get hit. Only the bad ones get killed. The climax of having to disarm a bomb only seconds before it explodes is such an old chestnut that it was laughable. Hopkins is always believable, but he could have phoned this one in. We liked Kerry Washington who plays Hayes's girlfriend, although her part is minimal. Only because of Rock are we willing to give this one as high as **GRADE C**.

BAD EDUCATION: 2004 Pedro Almodóvar is a talented filmmaker and a superb storyteller. His stories are always unique and unpredictable. They are a journey of discovery for the audience. He draws us into the story with striking visuals and characters that gradually unveil their secrets. The first Almodóvar film we saw was *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. We also enjoyed *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*. I don't want to give away any of the plot in *Bad Education* because it will be better if you discover it for yourself. It's enough to say that child abuse at the hands of a Priest is a significant event in the lives of two young men. There are numerous flashbacks, a movie within the movie, and Gael Garcia Bernal (Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries*) plays three characters. He is remarkable in all three roles. (That all sounds complicated, but it is not difficult to follow.) Fele Martinez is also excellent as the young filmmaker. Some scenes involve explicit homosexual behavior and that may be difficult for some, but we think the film is definitely worth seeing. Gary says B; I saw B+. **GRADE B+/B**

BAD EDUCATION 2019 (HBO Max) (2019/2020) With the reduced number of new releases due to Covid 19, I was happy that HBO picked up and released a film that was well received in several Film festivals and well-liked by most critics. (93% on the Tomatometer) Terrific performances by Hugh Jackman, and Allison Janney make this offbeat story, inspired by true events, well worth seeking out. In the wealthy Roslyn school district located on Long Island, New York, a school with a spotless reputation, people were shocked when an embezzlement scheme surfaced. School Superintendent Frank Tassone (Jackman), together with his assistant, Pam Gluckin (Janney) stole millions from the school. It turned out to be the largest public school embezzlement scandal in history. Film Director Cory Finley found dark humor within the scandal, adding entertainment value to the gripping true-life drama. Jackman portrays Frank Tassone, the school superintendent and Allison Janney plays his business manager. The excellent supporting cast included Ray Romano best known for his role on the TV sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Also worthy of mention is Geraldine Viswanathan, an Australian actress who plays a young journalism student who did the research and broke the shocking story in her school paper. Barbara and I watched the truth-is-stranger-than-fiction story on HBO when it was new, but somehow it never made it into Movie Views. We watched it again in 2022, but my original review still stands. **GRADE B**

(An interesting postscript to the story: Frank Tassone has been released from prison and is forbidden from holding any job that requires handling money. He currently lives a low-profile life in New York but still receives a generous pension of \$170,000 a year (the result of an oversight in state pension law.)

BAD NEWS BEARS: Billy Bob Thornton reprises his *Bad Santa* character in this remake of the 1976 Walter Matthau film. Thornton is very good at playing a profane, alcoholic loser who, way down deep, is kind of sweet. Directed by Richard Linklater, the film is surprisingly low-key. I expected a higher energy level, but I guess low-key is Thornton's stock in trade. Thornton plays Morris Buttermaker, who is, as he explains it, "a drunk who makes a living killing rats to live in a trailer." For reasons that are never fully explained, he agrees to coach a little league baseball team.—a team of losers who have been rejected by the other teams in the league. Greg Kinnear is a rival coach and Marcia Gay Harden is the mother who sued the league to allow the kids to play. If you saw the 1976 version, you pretty much know the story. Not much new here, except for Billy Bob. The kids are fine and there are plenty of laughs, but we can't go higher than B-. **GRADE B-**

BAD SANTA: This is a perverted Christmas movie and it takes slightly perverted mind to enjoy it. I'm almost afraid to admit that we did enjoy it. It's terribly profane. It's also quite funny. But, and this is a big "BUT," if the thought of Santa using obscene language and engaging in explicit sex bothers you, avoid *Bad Santa*. (Everyone in the movie uses four-letter words almost constantly.) Willie T. Soke

(Billy Bob Thornton) and Marcus (Tony Cox) are thieves who hire themselves out to a different department store each Christmas as Santa and his helper elf. While on the job, they case the store and on Christmas Eve they crack the store's safe. This year they are in Phoenix, AZ. Bernie Mac is amusing as the store's security chief, and John Ritter, in his last movie role, is the timid Store Manager. Lauren Graham (from TV's *The Gilmore Girls*) is a bartender who has a soft spot for older men in Santa suits. Willie loves liquor and hates kids, and he is especially annoyed when a chubby boy becomes obsessed with "Santa." Thornton is wonderfully consistent as the world's worst Santa and I admire the filmmakers for not tacking on a traditional happy ending. (See Ebert's comment below.) If you feel overdosed on sweet syrupy Christmas spirit, this would be a good antidote. Terry Zwigoff directed and the film is rated R. **GRADE B -- Roger Ebert:** *The ending is happy in the same sense that a man's doctors tell him he lost his legs but they were able to save his shoes.* (Ebert also thought the movie was *demented, twisted, and unreasonably funny.* He gave it three and 1/2 stars.)

BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE: (2018) Gary and I once stayed at the Cal-Neva Lodge and Casino in Tahoe. It had a painted line down the middle of the swimming pool. On one side was Nevada, and on the other was California. The fictional setting for this movie, the El Royale Hotel, was especially interesting to us since it was based on the Cal-Neva. Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack often performed at the Cal-Neva, so it was believable that J. Edgar Hoover might have bugged the rooms, but to tell more would spoil the surprise. An odd assortment of characters comes to the El Royale Hotel for the night and they are played by Jeff Bridges, Dakota Johnson, Cynthia Erivo and John Hamm. Lewis Pullman plays the shy young clerk at the El Royale. They all have secrets--secrets that are revealed as the story unfolds. There is a lot of mayhem and blood, but it all makes sense once you know the backstory of the characters. There is also music provided by a classic Wurlitzer jukebox and by Cynthia Erivo, who has a magnificent voice. I predict we will see and hear more of this talented singer/actor. A hunky Chis Hemsworth appears toward the end as a Manson-type cult leader. I won't get into the plot because the fun of this movie is discovering each character's story. This is an old-fashioned B movie, so we thought it was appropriate to give it a grade of B. **GRADE B**

The actual hotel in *Bad Times at the El Royale* is in Los Angeles near the base of the Hollywood hills. According to the California El Royale's website, the hotel, which has an old Hollywood feel to it, has served as a location for many film sets.

A BAG OF MARBLES/Un Sac De Billes: (2017) Just when you thought all the Holocaust stories had been exhausted, comes this French movie about two brave Jewish boys escaping Nazi persecution in occupied France. It is based on the autobiographical novel of Joseph Joffo, and tells the story of his flight to the Free Zone along with his brother Maurice. Their father thought it was better not to travel as a family so two older brothers fled separately from Joe and Maurice. The family was reunited in Nice, which was occupied by friendly Italian troops. But, when the Italians left, the Nazis entered and the family was once more at risk. Joe is beautifully played by Dorian Le Clech, but I was unable to find much information on this talented young actor. To quote Matt Fagerholm of RogerEbert.com, "The great value of Christian Duguay's film is the degree to which it makes such a barbaric and bewildering chapter in human history comprehensible for young audiences." I do hope that young people see this movie, and I hope they understand what prejudice can do to a country and its people. It was nice to see the two brothers as they are today at the end of the film. We loved this one and give it high marks. **GRADE A**

BAGDAD CAFÉ: (1988) Barbara and I were first charmed by this quirky feel-good independent film over twenty years ago. We recently viewed it again and were once again delighted. If you gravitate toward fast moving action films with chases, explosions, and lots of killing, this is not the movie for you. This is a warm hearted fantasy with a haunting theme song that has been pleasantly running through our heads for over two decades. The film is in English even though it was made on a low budget by a West German film maker. A German tourist finds herself stranded in the Mohave Desert after a quarrel with a very disagreeable companion. She makes her way to a rundown truck stop called the Bagdad Café. The café is owned by an eccentric woman who is also having relationship problems. Probably the best known name in the cast is Jack Palance who brilliantly plays a character unlike what most people would expect. It is an older film (1988) available through Netflix. Barbara and I agree that it is worth 90 minutes of your time if you love films with heart. **GRADE A**

BALLET 422: (2015) This documentary provides us with a gorgeous glimpse into the world of modern ballet. Ballet has been with us for a very long time. It originated during the Italian Renaissance in the 15th century. The focus here is on the creation of the 422nd original dance from New York City Ballet, one of the foremost dance companies in the world. We are offered a rare "fly on the wall" peek into the highly-guarded world of professional ballet. There are no interviews and no voice-over narration. Multiple scenes go by without anyone speaking. Through first rate camera work we follow 25-year old Justin Peck, an up-and-coming choreographer, creating a new work: *Paz de la Jolla*. *Ballet 422* focuses on the mere two months Peck was given to put *Paz de la Jolla* together. It culminates on the stage at Lincoln Center for the world premiere. We felt privileged to go from first rehearsal to world premiere in a beautifully crafted hour and twelve minutes. It was compelling to watch highly motivated creative artists, including choreographer, professional dancers, lighting designers, costume designers, and professional musicians intensely focused on their work. Barbara and I have brought enough theatre productions to life to appreciate the anxiety and ultimate thrill the artists were experiencing. This documentary may have limited appeal, but we enjoyed it. **GRADE B**

THE BAND'S VISIT: This is light hearted and charming independent film that few will ever see or even have an opportunity to see. Although for some it may seem slow moving, Barbara and I were both won over by the characters and the story. It is a film about cultural differences and human similarities. A small Egyptian Police band has traveled to Israel to play for the opening of a new Arab Cultural Center. Because of a little communication problem, they end up in a small Israeli town with no Cultural Center and according to an informed resident, "no culture." The Egyptians speak Arabic and the Israelis speak Hebrew so the compromise language is English. Although it was one of the most acclaimed foreign films of last year, it was not eligible for an Academy Award because more than half of it was in English. It is refreshing occasionally to see a film that focuses on common human values rather than political and religious differences. This is a film both of us will remember with fondness. **GRADE B+**

BANDITS: This is the most amusing film we've seen recently. The critics were rather pompous about *BANDITS*, but many of our readers have told us that they enjoyed it. Barry Levinson directed this story of Joe (Bruce Willis) and Terry (Billy Bob Thornton). They

are a criminal odd couple: Joe is a man of few words and he is very, very cool. Terry is a lactose intolerant hypochondriac who develops symptoms for every disease he hears about. Collapsing on the dance floor because he believes he has a brain tumor is one of Thornton's funniest scenes. Joe and Terry escape from prison in a cement truck and embark on careers as bank robbers. They develop a unique MO, which earns them the nickname of "The Sleepover Bandits." Joe's cousin, Harvey (Troy Garity), an aspiring stunt man, drives their getaway car and he has some amusing moments. When Kate (Cate Blanchett), an unhappy housewife, finagles her way into the "gang," both Joe and Terry fall in love with her. This makes *Bandits* a romantic crime caper comedy. Thornton is very funny and Willis is, well, Willis. They work well together. Blanchett shows a flair for comedy, plus, she looks great in all those wigs. There are some slow moments here and there, but it is always entertaining and the ending is great fun. **GRADE B+** (Be sure and stay for the outtakes. There is a great line--Willis is talking to the TV host. He says, "'Expect the unexpected. That's good advice. Except that if you're expecting the unexpected then it isn't unexpected is it? And that leaves you vulnerable to the REALLY unexpected."

THE BANGER SISTERS: It is reported that Sarandon and Hawn jumped at the chance to work together in this film. Too bad they couldn't have landed in a better script. These two actresses are remarkable and they are the strength of the movie. It's only strength, I'm afraid. There are too many unmotivated actions and too many unbelievable emotional turn-arounds to raise the script to the level of the acting. Goldie Hawn has the role with the most depth and she is adorable as a sixties groupie whose claim to fame involves an X-rated evening with Jim Morrison. She and Sarandon were best friends in the sixties, and such famous groupies that Frank Zappa named them "The Banger Sisters." Sarandon has become Lavinia, a typical Suburban Mom, and she wants to forget her checkered past. When Suzette turns up on her doorstep, she is forced to reconnect with her groupie-self. We rather liked Geoffrey Rush as a conflicted writer, although most of the critics have ignored his efforts. Sarandon does her best to give Lavinia some poignancy, but Goldie pretty much has a corner on that market. At 56, it is amazing that she can still play "cute." It is fun to watch these two amazing women, but we can't give the movie a higher grade than **C+**

THE BANK JOB: This British bank heist movie is based on a true 1971 bank robbery. It's difficult to know if it accurately portrays what happened, because information on the original heist was suppressed for reasons of National Security. Suppressed primarily because it involved compromising photographs of a member of the Royal family. However, the low level villains who carried out the bank vault heist had no idea of what was involved. (I like the way the film referred to street criminals as "villains.") When Terry (Jason Stathan) is approached by an old friend with a "fool-proof" plan to rob the safety deposit boxes in a London bank, he agrees. He puts together a crew and they proceed to tunnel into the vault. While he and his men retrieve cash and jewelry from the boxes, his friend, Martine (Saffron Burrows) secures the compromising photographs. The whole caper has been engineered by a high-level government security agency who desperately wants those photos. However, unbeknownst to the agency, there are other extremely sensitive photographs and documents in those boxes, and soon everyone is desperate to retrieve their property: Everyone is after Terry and his friends. How he manages to keep the loot and escape arrest is the best part of the movie. We thought the film was tightly paced and, although complicated, relatively easy to follow. The costumes and settings evoked the ambience of London in the early 70's. I have been a Stathan fan ever since seeing him in the *Transporter* films. A native of London's east end, his accent is natural and he is a great combination of toughness, humor, and likability. As with most heist films, your sympathies are for the bank robbers. We give this movie a solid B. **GRADE B**

THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN: 2022 (Streamed on HBO Max) This movie got a Golden Globe nomination in the category of "Best Picture - Musical/Comedy," but we didn't find much to laugh about. We chuckled, but we did not laugh. Writer and director, Martin McDonagh, reunites actors from his 2008 film, *In Bruges*, which Gary and I both loved—Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson. McDonagh also wrote and directed *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), which we also loved and earned Oscars for Frances McDormand and Sam Rockwell. We didn't love *The Banshees of Inishertin* but thought it was an interesting rumination on friendship. The description of the move on IMDb is, "Two lifelong friends find themselves at an impasse when one abruptly ends their relationship, with alarming consequences for both of them." Ty Burr had a more complete take on the movie: he said, "A man – Brendan Gleeson's Colm – whose depressive despair turns him toward the beauties of music but away from his fellow man, and another man – Colin Farrell's Pádraic – whose dim and gentle soul is slowly crushed and made cruel by his friend's abandonment." He further likened the script as "one worthy of McDonagh's great countryman, Samuel Beckett." No wonder we couldn't get a handle on the movie! The extras following the movie asked which character you most identified with, and we answered Pádraic, but in reality, we both identified with Pádraic's sister, splendidly played by Kerry Condon. She and Barry Keoghan, as Dominic, gave the film a much-needed reality, for it was, in the end, a fable about friendship and the consequences of the withdrawal of it. The location was photographed beautifully, and the music added to the fantasy. **GRADE B+/B**

BARBARA: (2012) Winner of the Best Director prize the Berlin Film Festival and Germany's official Oscar submission for Best Foreign Language Film, *Barbara* is set in East Germany in 1980 and is billed as a Cold War Thriller. I don't know if I have, through the years, developed a taste for foreign films or have developed a tolerance for them. Although I liked this quiet slow moving subtitled film, I have to confess that it never accelerated to the level of "thriller" for me. A gifted German actor, Nina Hoss, plays a doctor who has been banished to a rural hospital as punishment for applying for an exit visa. She is under the watchful eye of the police and has learned to trust no one. Despite her unsmiling and guarded demeanor, Hoss is mesmerizing in her role as the title character. Slowly, her dangerous secrets are revealed and ultimately she is forced to make a profound decision about her future. Professional critics loved the film and I sometimes wonder if they use a different set of criteria to evaluate foreign films. Actually Barbara and I often ask ourselves the same question when trying to put a grade on foreign films we see. If you have limited experience with foreign films, I don't think this is a good one to cut your teeth on. But if you are a foreign film buff, I think it is worth your time. **GRADE B**

THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS: (2003 film seen on video) This French-Canadian film won an Oscar last year for Best Foreign Language Film. It is about a man named Remy, a college professor who has devoted his life to wine, women, and left-wing causes. Now he is dying. His son, who has been long estranged from Remy, travels to his father's beside to care for him. and by the end, the two are reconciled. Thumbs Up

BARBERSHOP: (2002 movie seen on video) Funny film about an assortment of characters who hang out in a South Side Chicago barbershop. **Thumbs Up**

BARNEY'S VERSION: Paul Giamatti unexpectedly won a Golden Globe Award for his outstanding performance in this independent film. Many of our readers will fondly remember Giamatti from the film *Sideways*. He is a wonderful actor, but if it weren't for independent films, he would probably be lost among hundreds of other talented actors. Barbara and I love independent films and this is one of the better ones. Giamatti plays Barney, who in the first scene is accused of murdering one of his closest friends. This film is based on an award winning novel with the same title. Barney gives us his version, not just of the accusation, but of the high points of his entire adult life. I could mitigate it by saying Barney is a deeply flawed individual, but the truth is that he is a schmuck—a Canadian schmuck who drinks too much, smokes too much, and really pisses most people off. Giamatti is perfectly cast. So is Dustin Hoffman who plays Barney's father, Izzy, (Hoffman's son also appears in a small role.) It comes as no surprise that Barney falls in love with a beautiful and classy lady well played by Rosamund Pike who is a guest at his second wedding. The surprise is that she ultimately falls in love with Barney and they have a reasonably normal life while raising a family. A touching ending brought tears to my eyes, but I am easy that way. I doubt that Barney's Version will play in a lot of theaters, but we think it is worth saving on Netflix for later viewing. **GRADE B+**

BARBIE: 2023 (Seen in a movie theatre) I never played with a Barbie—I had a baby doll—but my daughter did. In fact, my daughter encouraged us to go to the *Barbie* movie. We didn't laugh as much as she did, but I must admit there was a lump in my throat at the end. When America Ferrera, as Gloria, launched into her impassioned speech about how women can't win, I heard Gary laugh for the first time. I like the fact that the BBC London critic said, "I think has a lot to say about the modern world – both in terms of feminism and gender equality." Written by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, directed by Greta Gerwig, the movie's box office reached a Billion dollars, a record for a movie directed by a woman. The film stars Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, Will Ferrell (as the CEO of Mattel), Kate McKinnon, and America Ferrera. Margot Robbie is also a producer who saw huge potential in the *Barbie* movie. "The word itself is more globally recognized than practically everything else other than Coca-Cola," Robbie said. The movie's story is simple: Barbie and Ken live in Barbie Land where everything is run by women, and everything is pink. But *Barbie* is having an existential crisis and she goes to Weird *Barbie* (a very funny Kate McKinnon) who tells her to go to real life to resolve her crisis. *Barbie* and Ken go to real life and they see that everything is run by men. Ken discovers patriarchy and he is never the same—except at the end, of course. Musical numbers are plentiful and things get alright by the end of the movie. The swimsuit Robbie wears in the Dawn of Woman sequence is a replica of the one worn by the first Barbie doll in 1959. Over the course of the Perfect Day, *Barbie* changes clothes constantly. The progression—poodle skirt, disco look—amounts to a survey of Barbie fashion over time, says Jacqueline Durran, the film's costume designer. Rolling Stones titled its review: "*Barbie* May Be the Most Subversive Blockbuster of the 21st Century. And it might be! Chicago Reader critic said: "Greta Gerwig serves up a frothy confection of fashion and fun coupled with searing social critique of the iconic doll in the movie *Barbie*." Mattel gave Gerwig total control of the script, and the script is what convinced Gosling to take the part. (He used his own singing in the musical numbers and he was good!) Robbie and Gosling earned their \$12.5 million each for taking the role of *Barbie* and Ken. Both are terrific! We settled on a grade of B for our enjoyment of it, although Gary said "For what they were going for, they did an excellent job." **GRADE B**

The best-selling Barbie doll is Totally Hair Barbie, released in 1992.
Totally Hair Barbie has sold more than 10 million dolls worldwide.

THE BASKET: The AZ Republic critic raved about this film, so Gary and I went expecting something special. It was not special. It was not even good. The story is hokey and predictable, and there are so many subplots you need a basket to hold them all. There is a German war orphan story, a basketball story, a child getting picked on at school story, a wife standing up for herself story, a W.W.1 veteran story, and a teacher (Peter Coyote) tells the story of an opera to his class. By the way, the title of the German opera is, you guessed it, "The Basket." And there's a basket in the basketball story too. Isn't that clever? The only good parts of this movie are the photography, which is pretty, and the presence of Karen Allen and Peter Coyote, two actors who don't work often enough to please us. We wish they had been in a better movie. Oh yes, basketball was a new sport in 1918 and that was marginally interesting. We can't even recommend this one for video viewing. **GRADE: D**

BATMAN BEGINS: Yes, the special effects are spectacular, but what we liked best was the story of how Bruce Wayne became Batman. We could almost believe that the frightened child who grew into a man dedicated to fighting evil was real. Christian Bale is outstanding as a complicated super-hero who doesn't rely on magic powers. It was fascinating to watch Wayne develop his crime-fighting persona, design his costume and weapons, and learn to handle the Batmobile. This version of the story is far superior to the other Batman movies. We loved Michael Caine as Alfred, Wayne's butler/valet/father figure. There is a great deal of hand-to-hand combat in the film and this was less interesting to us. That may be partly because the entire film is shot in semi-darkness and it was almost impossible to figure out what was going on in the fight scenes. And because this genre is not a favorite of ours to begin with. Liam Neeson, Rutger Hauer, Gary Oldman, and Katie Holmes are all fine, but our favorite character was Morgan Freeman's Lucius Fox. Both Caine and Freeman supply some welcome humor. The film was shot partly in Chicago, but except for Lower Wacker Drive, I couldn't recognize much of the city. Apparently the Chicago Board of Trade building was used as the Wayne Corporation headquarters. There was enough of the Bruce Wayne story for us to give the film a B, but too many murky fight scenes for us to grade it any higher. I'm sure it will be an "A" movie for lovers of this genre. **GRADE B**

BATTLE OF THE SEXES: (2017) In 1973 there was an historic event: Billy Jean King and Bobby Riggs met in the Houston Astrodome for a tennis match dubbed "The Battle of the Sexes." The event was internationally televised and the reported world-wide audience of 90 million watched King win over Riggs in three sets. King's win is considered a milestone in public acceptance of women's tennis. Riggs was the ultimate showman and hyped the tournament as the men's answer to the woman's lib movement. Since he handily beat Margaret Court four months previously, Riggs was confident he would win and banish women to the bedroom and kitchen where they belonged. The film stars Emma Stone and Steve Carell as King and Riggs. They both look amazingly like the tennis players and are wonderful. Stone gained 15 pounds of muscle to make her look more like a tennis pro. It also made her feel more like her character. The film makes us aware of some of the background of the famous tennis match. In 1970, nine women tennis players had rebelled

against the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA) because of the wide inequality between the prize money paid to the two sexes. Billy Jean King was one of the original nine. Ousted from the USLTA, the women competed against each other in the Virginia Slims Circuit. We also learn that at the time of the tennis conflict, King was also conflicted over her sexuality. To come out as gay in the early seventies would have set back the WTA, which was founded by King and her husband. She waited until 1981 to publicly come out. Our audience obviously remembered the match and were appropriately enthusiastic. Gary and I wonder if young people will bother to see the movie. **Battle of the Sexes** is probably only a B movie, but the tennis match was an A+ event, and that raises our grade to a B+. **GRADE B+**

BEING MARY TYLER MOORE: 2023 (Seen on MAX) Mary Tyler Moore is best known for her roles as Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966) and as Mary Richards on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), which helped define a new vision of American womanhood. We remember her skilled performance as the chilly Beth Jarrett in the film **Ordinary People** (1980), for which she was nominated for an Oscar. She helped women everywhere gain a sense of self, but she didn't like the word, "feminist," and never referred to herself as one. However, she had an indelible impact on generations of women who came after her. She was the first woman to wear pants as Laura Petrie, because, as she said, "My friends and I don't do housework in a dress and heels." As Mary Richards, she showed that a single woman could be happy and fulfilled in her career and with her friends. She was strong and determined to succeed, but after her success in television, she flopped in her first Broadway show as the star of a new musical version of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1966, but the show, titled *Holly Golightly*, was a flop that closed in previews before opening on Broadway. (Moore got a bit of her own back in 1980 when she received a Special Tony Award for her performance in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*) Her personal life was not without health problems and sadness: Moore was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 1969, and the death of her son in 1980 devastated her. An audience member upon viewing the documentary said, "She really paved the way for us young working women in the 70s." Although one critic, who gave the movie a positive review, said, "My one complaint is that the documentary occasionally drags and feels repetitive during its two-hour runtime." The movie is long for a documentary, but Gary and I are fans of Mary Tyler Moore and remember her as Laura Petrie and Mary Richards. If you, like us, remember her fondly, you will love this comprehensive and touching documentary. We did. **GRADE A**

(P.S. On May 8, 2002, Moore was present when cable network and the City of Minneapolis dedicated a statue in downtown Minneapolis of Mary Richards, her character in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. It depicts the iconic moment in the show's opening credits where Moore tosses her tam o'shanter in the air, in a freeze-frame at the end of the montage.)

BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD: This is the kind of film that wins major awards at independent film festivals, but which rarely receives wide distribution in larger theaters. It has already won a Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and the Camera d'Or at Cannes. And we think it is deserving of any other awards that might come its way. This may be unlike any film you have ever seen. It shows us an unfamiliar world through the eyes of a brave, imaginative six-year-old girl named Hushpuppy. The girl is played by Quvenzhané Wallis and she is stunningly good. She also delivers one of the most effective voice-over narrations I have heard in a long while. It is hard to believe it is her first film role, but she did beat out 4,000 other kids to win the role. Perhaps equally amazing is the untrained leading man. Dwight Henry, playing Wink, Hushpuppy's father, was hired from behind the counter of a New Orleans bakery. Incredibly it is the directorial debut for Benh Zeitlin who also coauthored the film. Set in the squalor of a fictional Louisiana bayou called "the Bathtub," Wink and Hushpuppy, along with an assortment of rowdy neighbors, live on the wrong side of a levee facing a catastrophic hurricane that could destroy the only world they know, or care to know. For my money it is a brilliant hour and a half of filmmaking that deserves a wider audience. **GRADE A**

BEAUTIFUL BOY: How many times have you heard people say, "When I go to a movie, I want to be entertained." If this is the way you feel, I strongly recommend that you skip this film. That shouldn't be hard since I doubt this film will play in major theaters. **Beautiful Boy** is primarily an actor's showcase in which Maria Bello and Michael Sheen deliver powerful performances in an excruciatingly painful drama about a couple caught up in a devastating tragedy. In his first directing credit, writer/director Shawn Ku credibly deals with emotions that go beyond marital tension and even the death of a child. In the first few moments of the film, the parents learn that there has been a mass shooting at their son's college. As they agonize in fear that their son might have been a victim, police come to inform them that their son was the shooter and he ended the rampage by taking his own life. Waves of denial, grief, guilt, and rage play out in the inevitable emotional turmoil that follows. I think Barbara was more emotionally involved in this film than I, but we agree on the grade. **GRADE B**

BEAUTIFUL BOY: (2018) The leading cause of death of Americans under 50 is now drug overdoses. This sobering statistic is brought to painful life in **Beautiful Boy**. The movie stars Steve Carell as David, a father trying to save his addict son. The son, Nic, is played by Timothée Chalamet, who got rave notices in last year's *Call Me By Your Name*. Both give Oscar-worthy performances in this astonishing film. Drug addiction shatters everyone in the family as this movie so agonizingly shows us. And yet, the movie is quite beautiful in the way it depicts the torment of parents trying to save an addicted child when they didn't cause it, they can't control it, and they can't cure it. The movie is based on two memoirs, *Beautiful Boy* by David Shef and *Tweak* by Nic Shef. Gary and I weren't sure we wanted to see the movie because we thought it would be too depressing, but **Beautiful Boy** was both devastating and wonderful. Worthy of mention is Maura Tierney as Nic's stepmother, Amy Ryan as Nic's mom and LisaGay Hamilton in a moving cameo that would make a terrific audition monologue. In spite of its low critical score on *Rotten Tomatoes*--68%--we give the movie high marks for its emotional impact. **GRADE A**

THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY: (2004 film seen on video) One of the many tragedies of the Vietnam War was the estimated 50,000 Amerasian children left behind. They were considered children of the enemy and shunned by much of society. This film focuses on the story of Binh, a shy Vietnamese man in his 20's who embarks on a personal journey to America to find the father that disappeared from his and his mother's life when he was a baby. Slow moving but ultimately powerful and poignant story. **THUMBS UP**

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: (2019) In a timely story of kindness, Tom Hanks portrays Mister Rogers, America's most beloved neighbor. Fred Rogers was an American television personality, musician, puppeteer, writer, producer, and Presbyterian minister. He was known as the creator and the sweet and gentle host of one of the most beloved children's public television programs

ever to enter our living rooms. It ran from 1968 to 2001 and reached five to ten million preschool children each day. Tom Hanks, who won back-to-back Oscars for *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump* is perfect in a leading role. Seemingly without effort he expertly captures the essence of the lovable Mr. Rogers. *A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood* is a drama, not a documentary. The definitive Documentary was a 2018 movie titled *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (See [Movie View Archives](#)) Although the advertising and marketing for *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* focuses heavily on Mr. Rogers, he is more of a supporting character than the lead. The story is based on a real life friendship between Fred Rogers and journalist Tom Junod. In the film, Junod is given the name of Lloyd Vogel a troubled journalist who grumbles when getting an assignment to do a profile on the PBS icon—the guy with a hokey kiddie-show. Vogel is played by Matthew Rhys, a Welsh actor known for playing Philip Jennings in the acclaimed television series “*The Americans*”. The journalist soon learned that Mr. Rogers was unlike anyone he had ever met and the story focuses on how the gentle philosophy of Rogers impacts his life. I don't want to make *A Beautiful Day*..... sound squishy or sentimental, *but it is full of warmth and kindness and it does tug a bit at the heart strings, especially if you have fond memories of Mr. Rogers.* **GRADE B+**

A BEAUTIFUL MIND: Gary went to this movie with great expectations. He was not disappointed. Finally an "A" movie! It may be true that Akiva Goldsman, who wrote the screen play, changed some of the events in the life of John Forbes Nash, the Nobel Prize Winning mathematician, but he nevertheless wrote a fascinating script. It may also be true that the script makes Nash more likeable than he was in real life. But, under Ron Howard's direction, the film gives us a glimpse into a brilliant and troubled mind that is extraordinary. Russel Crowe delivers a performance that is, quite simply, brilliant. Crowe truly inhabits the role. He deserves to win the Oscar. Jennifer Connelly is Alicia, Nash's wife. When Nash was in first grade, his teacher told him he had "two helpings of brain and a half-helping of heart." Alicia is Nash's heart, and Connelly is outstanding in the role. Nash was a victim of schizophrenia and suffered from debilitating delusions. Howard has chosen a stunning way to present these delusions to us. We seem to enter the mind of the mathematician and see his psychotic world the way he does. Robert Wilonsky, who writes for the Los Angeles New Times, said that *A Beautiful Mind* is "everything most movies this year have not been: deeply felt, genuine, gracious." It is, indeed. And we give it an unqualified **GRADE A.**

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: (2017) This iteration of the classic fairy tale is visually lavish and musically engaging. In addition, Emma Watson is delightful as the young girl who falls in love with a prince turned into a horrible beast by a sorceress. The classic fairy tale was first published in 1740, and has undergone many changes through the years. The current version has gotten criticism for its “gender politics,” but that element didn't bother us at all. Beauty and the Beast first appeared on the screen in a French film in 1946, and Disney's first version was an animated one in 1991, and that movie featured the theme song that is also the centerpiece of the 2017 movie. Written by Alan Menken & lyricist Howard Ashman, it was first performed by Angela Lansbury as Mrs. Pitts, and went on to win best original song at the Golden Globes and the Oscars. The first time we hear the song today, it is sung as a duet by John Legend and Ariana Grande. Emma Thompson plays Mrs. Potts in the current version and also does perform the song. The movie includes new songs written by Menken and Tim Rice. Kevin Cline is Belle's father and Josh Gad provides some humor as a companion to Gaston (Luke Evans), who is an obnoxious narcissist who wants to marry Belle. Disney is a master at animating inanimate objects, and a bevy of well known actors bring those objects to life, including Ian McKellen, Audra McDonald, Stanley Tucci, Ewan McGregor and the previously mentioned Emma Thompson. I loved the Busby Berkeley quality of the *Be My Guest* number, and even heard faint overtones of *Les Miz* when Gaston urges the villagers to follow him to slay the Beast. This was not a favorite fairy tale of mine and I cannot grade it as high as I did the 2015 *Cinderella*, which got an A from me. However, director Bill Condon has put together a beautiful film, and I can say A-. Gary, who has a problem with fairy-tale movies, says B-. **GRADE A-/B-**

(Note: There was a TV version of *Beauty and the Beast* starring Linda Hamilton and Ron Perlman.)

BE COOL: This sequel to *Get Shorty* tries very hard to be cool. Mostly it isn't. Travolta and Thurman are definitely cool, especially when they reprise their dancing from *Pulp Fiction*. Vince Vaughn, as a white man who thinks he's black, is funny, but the rest of the movie is decidedly uncool. Chili Palmer, tired of making movies, gets into the music business and finds that it is even more messed up than the movie business. Palmer takes over the management contract for Linda Moon, a talented young singer capably played by Christina Milian. All sorts of complications and criminal behavior follow. The plot is one big mess and, even if I wanted to, it would be impossible to give you a synopsis. Milian is a singer/song-writer who is completely credible as Linda Moon. The film features assorted gangsters, including Cerdric The Entertainer as a gangster/music producer. Robert Pastorelli, in what must have been his last movie role, plays a hit man, and Steven Tyler (Aerosmith) appears, rather unsuccessfully, as himself. The Rock is out of character as a gay would-be movie actor, and Harvey Keitel is a gangster/manager who is almost always on the telephone. Grandson Nathan thought it was a good movie, but Gary and I can't go higher than C. Even that is a stretch. **GRADE C**

BEATRIZ AT DINNER: (2017) Earlier this month we saw Wonder Woman in a battle between good and evil. *Beatriz at Dinner* is a very different movie from *Wonder Woman*, but the conflict is the same. In a movie written expressly for her, Salma Hayek is a Mexican immigrant masseuse and an almost painfully caring woman who is stranded at a client's high-class dinner party. The other guests are business associates and one, played beautifully by John Lithgow, is an evil real estate developer named Doug Strutt. At first, Beatriz thinks Strutt may be the developer who ruined her childhood village with a resort hotel that destroyed the landscape and went bankrupt after a year. Eventually, she realizes that Strutt is symbolic of all that is evil in the world. The spell-binding conversation and verbal sparring between Beatriz and these one-percenters slowly builds to a breaking point. It is difficult to discuss the film without disclosing its dramatic ending, but I will endeavor to do so. The cast, including Chloë Sevigny, Amy Landecker, Jay Duplass, and Connie Britten as Beatriz's client, is uniformly excellent, and the script by Mike White is stellar. Director Miguel Arteta has the light touch needed for this politically relevant movie. Hayek said recently in an interview that this was the role of a lifetime. She believes the film is about the longing that everyone has for “that place that is pure...where we once were innocent.” It is also a conflict between good and evil, healing and destroying. As Beatriz says, it can take only two seconds to break something but it can take forever to fix it. We met movie viewers Diane and Lee coming out of the theatre and agreed that we were all intrigued by the film and startled by the ending. While *Beatriz at Dinner* isn't an “A” movie for Gary and me, it is one we will long remember. **GRADE B**

BECOMING FREDERICK DOUGLASS: (Available for streaming on PBS. If you donate \$50 or more to your local PBS, you can stream for free.) This is a short one hour story of how Frederick Douglass, a man born into slavery, became one of the most prominent statesmen and influential voices for democracy in American history. Born in 1818 in Maryland, he escaped from slavery in 1838. It is

estimated that more Americans heard Douglass speak than any other 19th-century figure — Black or White. Unfortunately, books and documentaries can't do justice to the abolitionist's powerful voice, of which there are no known recordings. But there are photographs. Douglas embraced photography as a tool for social justice. The documentary explores how Douglass controlled his own image and was eloquent when describing the grim horrors of slavery. He was described by abolitionists in his time as living evidence against slaveholders' arguments that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens. Barbara and I loved this educational film and hope it finds its way into high school history and civics classes. **GRADE A**

BECOMING JANE: (2007 movie seen on DVD) If you like Jane Austin as much as I do, I recommend this film. The film purports to tell the story of Austin's unhappy love affair and to explain why she never married. Kevin Hood based the story on Austin's letters, and some of the characters are actual people. Anne Hathaway is the perfect Jane Austin and James McAvoy, who plays the impetuous young Irishman who catches her fancy, is also excellent. Neither has any money and their romance flies in the face of the sense and sensibility of the times. Julie Walters (who I always remember as Rita in *Educating Rita*) and James Cromwell play Austin's parents. Maggie Smith is at her most imperious playing the local noble woman. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

BEDAZZLED: (2002 film seen on video) It's *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, only in this movie, Daniel is Brendan Frazier and the Devil is Elisabeth Hurley. A clever script makes this film not as bad as it sounds. **THUMBS UP**

THE BEE GEES: HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART (2020 recorded from HBO) Barry Gibb said that he and his twin brothers, Robin and Maurice, had a dream and the dream came true. Barry is now 74, and his memories form the basis of this documentary history of the Bee Gees, and what a history it was! Featuring archival interviews with the late Robin and Maurice, the movie tells about the family singing group's rise to stardom in the 60s. They disbanded in the early 70s because fame and the egos that came with it led to sibling spats. The group came back together after several years and in 1975 decided to relocate to Miami where they discovered that Barry had a terrific falsetto. "My whole life, I didn't know I could do this," Barry says. That falsetto, and the rise of the then underground disco scene, led to some of their most iconic songs. Who can forget the opening of *Saturday Night Fever* and John Travolta walking the street to the Bee Gees' *Staying Alive*? They penned four more songs for the soundtrack of the movie which won them an Album Of The Year in 1978 at the Grammys, and was inducted into the Grammy Hall Of Fame in 2004. But just as suddenly, the '80s revolt against disco, in part because of racism and homophobia, wrapped them in backlash. They couldn't buy their way onto the radio, so tared they were with the label "Disco." But, if you think they've never heard the Bee Gees, you have almost certainly heard one of their songs. Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton, Celine Dion have all recorded songs written for them written by the Bee Gees. That's why, at the end of the film, Barry says that it was all about the song-writing. Gary and I remember *Saturday Night Fever* and we loved the music. I had no idea that the Bee Gees had such history, and we encourage everyone to look for this documentary. You won't be disappointed. **GRADE A**

BEFORE NIGHT FALLS: We are really at odds with the critics on this film. The story of Reinaldo Arenas, a homosexual Cuban poet and novelist who was persecuted by Castro's government, has been praised for its visual creativity. We thought the story was disjointed and difficult to follow. It seemed to have been produced for people who had read Arenas's memoirs and were familiar with his story. In addition, the mixture of reality and imagination was frequently confusing, and the sound quality and the accents made it hard to understand. I was irritated by the constant use of hand-held cameras. Scenes shot that way are almost impossible for me to watch. They give me a headache. The director, Julian Schnabel apparently subscribes to the current conceit of jittery camera work and natural light. Definitely not my favorite things! Javier Bardem, as Arenas, was good, but since we didn't care for the film, we wouldn't have thought of him for a best actor nomination. Sean Penn appears in a cameo, although we never recognized him. John Depp plays two different characters: He first appears as "Bon Bon," a prancing transvestite who helps Arenas by smuggling his manuscripts out of prison. His second character is a sleek and handsome military officer. Gary gives it a C-, but, because I was alternately bored and irritated, I give it a D. **GRADE C-/D**

BEFORE MIDNIGHT: (2013) This delightful film is the third in Richard Linklater's trilogy comprised of *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*. Eighteen years ago, in 1995, if you were very lucky, you were introduced to Jesse played by Ethan Hawke and Celine played by Julie Delpy. A chance meeting on a Budapest-to-Vienna train and a few hour layover in Vienna changed their lives, though they were not fully aware of it at the time. The film was mostly intimate conversation, but it was so well written and played that we couldn't take our eyes off the screen. Nine years later, in film time and in real time, Jesse and Celine met again by chance, this time in Paris for another intimate and intense conversation and the second leg in Linklater's trilogy. Now, nine more years later, in *Before Midnight*, we get the third film and have the opportunity to see them again. Barbara and I were at the theater for the first showing of this latest film on the day it opened. We loved it, possibly even more than the first two, and harbor hopes that nine years from now we can see the fourth episode. This one is set in Greece and conversations are as witty and charming as ever and we marvel at how a scripted performance can seem so real and changes in mood so seamless. Jesse is a successful novelist and Celine a political activist and though unmarried, they have been living together for nine years. Jesse has a child from a previous marriage and they are also raising their own offspring, twin girls. The focus in this latest film has changed from the hopes and dreams of youth to the reality of daily living. Even a love story that began as beautifully as Jesse's and Celine's must face the consequence of past mistakes and the routine of daily problems. Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy share screenplay credit with Linklater on the second and third film in the trilogy and they continue to hold our attention with their wit, charm, and incredible believability. The small supporting cast fit in perfectly and added even more interest to a terrific movie. I must caution our readers who prefer action films far more than romantic comedies, you may want to avoid *Before Midnight*, but Barbara and I and most critics loved it. We give it our highest grade. **GRADE A**

BEFORE SUNSET: In 1995 Richard Linklater directed a delightful little film called *Before Sunrise*. In it, a young American (Ethan Hawke) and a French student (Julie Delpy) meet on a train. She is bound for Paris and home, he is flying back to the States from Vienna the next morning. He persuades her to get off the train and spend the night exploring Vienna. The film is the story of their conversations as they wander around Vienna and fall in love. When they part in the morning they agree to meet back in Vienna in six months. We saw *Before Sunrise* on video and were charmed by it. Were delighted to learn that Hawke and Delpy decided to do a sequel. The two actors, along with Linklater, wrote the script for *Before Sunrise*, and in it we learn what happened to the young lovers

since Vienna. It is nine years later and Jesse has written a best-selling novel about his night with Celine. He is in Paris signing his book at a quaint bookstore, when he sees Celine in the audience. Jesse has only a couple of hours before he must catch a flight back to America, but he wants to spend the time with Celine. The camera follows them as they walk and talk. Richard Linklater films them in long, uninterrupted takes, so that the film feels like it exists in real time. And the dialogue is wonderful--funny and touching and sounding remarkably spontaneous. It's a credit to the writers and the actors. We loved this movie just as much as the first one--maybe even more. Hope we're still around to see what happens to Jesse and Celine. We've always admired Hawke as an actor and Delpy is one of the most charming young women to grace the screen. **GRADE A**

BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD: Were I to write a one word review of this film it would be, "WOW!" Eighty-three year old legendary director Sidney Lumet summons his genius and film mastery to give us what I think is a nearly flawless film. If you were as old as Barbara and I you would remember the power of his *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), *Serpico* (1973), and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). I like "thrillers," but they are usually filled with unlikely incidents that strain credulity. Not once in this film did I have to suspend disbelief. Superb directing and believable characters portrayed by a brilliant cast combine to bring us a tight story of two brothers who try to relieve some of their financial woes with a crime that goes horribly wrong. The cast includes Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ethan Hawke, Albert Finney, and Marisa Tomei. In less talented hands a non-linear story line can be confusing, but here it serves to clarify and enhance the drama. It is hard to predict so far in advance, but I believe this film deserves several academy award nominations. The Irish among you will recognize that the title of the film comes from an old Irish Toast: "May your glass be ever full. . .And may you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you're dead." **GRADE "A"**

BEGIN AGAIN: (2014) John Carney wrote and directed *Once* in 2006, the independent movie that was such a success that it became a Broadway hit show by the same name. Carney tried to work his magic again with this story of a once successful music producer (Mark Ruffalo) who hasn't produced anything of significance for a long time. His marriage is on the rocks, he drinks too much and his partner wants him gone. Enter a young song writer (Keira Knightly) who has traveled here from England with her longtime boyfriend (Adam Levine). When said boyfriend becomes a rock star, their relationship seems over. When Ruffalo chances to hear Knightly singing in a small café, he thinks he has found something special. What follows is the best scene in the movie: As Ruffalo listens to Knightly's rather thin voice, he imagines a full production with instruments and backup singers. It sounds great. The scene emphasizes how important the music producer is. No wonder singers often lip-synch when they appear on TV. Without full backup, their songs just wouldn't sound the same. Ruffalo and Knightly decide to make a demo by recording outdoors in various locations around New York. The friendship they forge while working together brings about significant changes in both of them. CeeLo Green, playing a rapper whom Ruffalo helped make famous, adds a nice touch. We also meet Ruffalo's wife (Catherine Keener) and daughter (Hailee Steinfeld). All the actors acquit themselves delightfully. This is a feel-good movie with songs that are sure to please. We gave *Once* a grade of B when we saw it and think that *Begin Again* deserves the same. **GRADE B**

BEGINNERS: There is a mixture of joy and sadness in this story of a father/son relationship and we liked the characters and the creative way in which the story was told. The movie is aptly titled, since the father and son in the movie are both beginners. The father, Hal (Christopher Plummer), is beginning a new life out of the closet at age 75. The son, Oliver (Ewan McGregor), is beginning a new relationship with a charming French girl, Anna (Mélanie Laurent). The movie is also about endings. Hal only announced he was gay after his wife's death ended their 44-year marriage. What's more, shortly after starting his new life, Hal learns that he has terminal cancer. Oliver is not only dealing with the end of his father's life, but with his fear of commitment and the fact that at 38, he has never had a lasting relationship with a woman. The movie actually begins after Hal's death, but his story is told in flashbacks as Oliver remembers his father and mother and tries to make his relationship with Anna work. In the four short years of Hal's new and happy life as a gay man, we see Oliver and his father grow closer. Oliver is an illustrator and his drawings become a creative part of the story. He has also inherited his father's dog, Arthur, an adorable Jack Russell terrier who "understands up to 150 words, but doesn't speak." Occasionally Arthur's thoughts are expressed in subtitles, but fortunately this imaginative element is used sparingly. We liked both Plummer and McGregor and especially liked Mélanie Laurent. You might remember her as the movie theater owner in *Inglourious Basterds*. She is a delight. This is a quietly charming movie and we give it a solid B. **GRADE B**

BEHIND ENEMY LINES: According to our President, we are at war. What better time, then, to bring out a good old-fashioned war movie like the ones I saw as a kid. *BEHIND ENEMY LINES* is a standard pilot-down-in-enemy-territory-and-needs-to-be-rescued plot and we liked it. Who better than Gene Hackman to play Admiral Reigart, an uncomplicated man who puts himself "in harm's way" to rescue one of his "boys," despite orders to the contrary. And Owen Wilson proves he can be an action figure as well as a comedian. Wilson is Burnett, the pilot/navigator who survives ejecting at Mach 3 and then has to survive in war-torn Bosnia. The action scenes are exciting and the supporting cast admirable. The ending is no surprise, but the movie grabs your attention and never lets go. The story was inspired by the adventures of Air Force pilot Scott O'Grady, who was rescued after being shot down over Bosnia in 1995. Roger Ebert thought the film was far too unrealistic, and said that "Its hero is so reckless and its villains so incompetent that it's a showdown between a man begging to be shot, and an enemy that can't hit the side of a Bosnian barn." Admittedly, there some comic book aspects to the film--but who cares? The New York Times critic said the film "conveys a steady visceral charge from its opening moments to its predictably triumphal finale." That it does. **GRADE B**

(*When Hackman uttered those words, I thought I remembered an old war movie by that name. Sure enough, *In Harm's Way* is the title of Otto Preminger's 1965 epic rendition of the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. It stars John Wayne, Kirk Douglas, Patricia Neal, Henry Fonda, Paula Prentiss, Henry Fonda, Dana Andrews, Franchot Tone, and George Kennedy.)

BEING JULIA: Annette Bening is Julia Lambert, a beautiful and famous actress on the London stage. She is currently starring in a popular play, but she is approaching the age where she will soon be relegated to character parts, and that frightens her. When she meets a young American named Tom Fennel (Shaun Evans), she is intrigued by his adoration--intrigued enough to begin an affair with the young man. The indiscretion rejuvenates her. She is suddenly all sparkling and giggling, and looks at least ten years younger. There's nothing unique about the story, which is adapted from a novel by Somerset Maugham, but Bening's performance is quite something. Jeremy Irons is Julia's director and manager and, rather incidentally, her husband. They have, Irons says, "a terribly modern marriage." Juliet Stevenson is Julia's dresser, assistant and confidante and she is, as usual, fine in the role. Bruce Greenwood is Lord

Charles, another adoring fan of Julia's and Lucy Punch is Avive Crichton, a young actress who appears to be stealing Julia's thunder both on and off stage. Julia's triumph in the closing scene is delightful. We probably enjoyed this one more because of our theater background, but it is worth seeing just for the pleasure of Bening's joyous performance. The film is set in 1938, and the music is also delightful. **GRADE B**

BEING MARY TYLER MOORE: 2023 (Seen on MAX) Mary Tyler Moore is best known for her roles as Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966) and as Mary Richards on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), which helped define a new vision of American womanhood. We remember her skilled performance as the chilly Beth Jarrett in the film *Ordinary People* (1980), for which she was nominated for an Oscar. She helped women everywhere gain a sense of self, but she didn't like the word, "feminist," and never referred to herself as one. However, she had an indelible impact on generations of women who came after her. She was the first woman to wear pants as Laura Petrie, because, as she said, "My friends and I don't do housework in a dress and heels." As Mary Richards, she showed that a single woman could be happy and fulfilled in her career and with her friends. She was strong and determined to succeed, but after her success in television, she flopped in her first Broadway show as the star of a new musical version of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1966, but the show, titled *Holly Golightly*, was a flop that closed in previews before opening on Broadway. (Moore got a bit of her own back in 1980 when she received a Special Tony Award for her performance in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*) Her personal life was not without health problems and sadness: Moore was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 1969, and the death of her son in 1980 devastated her. An audience member upon viewing the documentary said, "She really paved the way for us young working women in the 70s." Although one critic, who gave the movie a positive review, said, "My one complaint is that the documentary occasionally drags and feels repetitive during its two-hour runtime." The movie is long for a documentary, but Gary and I are fans of Mary Tyler Moore and remember her as Laura Petrie and Mary Richards. If you, like us, remember her fondly, you will love this comprehensive and touching documentary. We did. **GRADE A**

(P.S. On May 8, 2002, Moore was present when cable network and the City of Minneapolis dedicated a statue in downtown Minneapolis of Mary Richards, her character in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. It depicts the iconic moment in the show's opening credits where Moore tosses her tam o'shanter in the air, in a freeze-frame at the end of the montage.)

BEING THE RICARDOS: 2021 (We streamed the movie from Prime Video) In 1952, Hollywood power couple Lucille Ball (Nicole Kidman) and Desi Arnaz (Javier Bardem) face a series of personal and professional crises that threaten their careers, their relationship and their groundbreaking sitcom *I Love Lucy*. The action takes place during one critical production week, first when there is a rumor that Ball might be a Communist (remember, this is during the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s.) The second crisis that week was an article in *Confidential* magazine painting Arnaz as a womanizer. (In real life, Arnaz had a penchant for philandering and drinking that eventually led to their divorce, but not until the *I Love Lucy* show ended its run in 1960.) In addition, Ball was pregnant with the couple's second child, and Arnaz was determined that Ball's pregnancy be written into the sitcom. (He got his way, and 44 million viewers tuned into the show to watch "Little Ricky" being born.) A few flashbacks provided context, but mostly the movie stayed with that critical week, taking the audience into the writers' room, onto the soundstage and behind closed doors with Ball and Arnaz. The movie provided a revealing glimpse of the couple's complex romantic and professional relationship. After a slow start, Aaron Sorkin's crisp dialogue and direction began to take hold, and we remained engrossed until the end. Nicole Kidman looked like Ball in the scenes from the sitcom. In other scenes, not so much, but she had Ball's sense of humor down pat. Bardem isn't as naturally handsome as Arnaz, but he had the kinetic energy of the Cuban bandleader, and he was authentic on the bongo drum. He also had a surprisingly good voice. Nina Arianda and J.K. Simmons were terrific as Vivian Vance and William Frawley. (Ethel and Fred, the Riccardo's friends on *I Love Lucy*.) We enjoyed the movie, but it didn't reach the caliber of an A for us. **GRADE B**

BELFAST: 2021 (Seen in a movie theatre) This is a love poem to the city of Kenneth Branagh's birth. When he was nine, his family escaped The Troubles by moving to Reading, Berkshire, but on his identity today he has said, "I feel Irish. I don't think you can take Belfast out of the boy." Branagh said on the Stephen Colbert show that the movie is about something that happened when he was nine. He went on to say, "We lived on one street where my family had many siblings and I had many cousins." The movie is the story of that one street and the people on it, mostly Protestant with a few Catholics sprinkled in. The summer of 1969 brought violence to the street. Rioters were smashing the windows of the Catholic houses. Forced to take sides, Branagh's father and mother decided to move away from everything they had known and loved. The director assembled a terrific cast and introduced Jude Hill, who was wonderful as Buddy, the young Branagh. In addition, his mother was played by Caitriona Balfe (*Outlander*) and his father by Jamie Dornan (the *Fifty Shades* trilogy). Both are Irish actors. Judi Dench and Ciarán Hinds played Buddy's grandmother and grandfather, and they were perfection. It was a momentous time in young Branagh's life and interesting to see "The Troubles" through the eyes of a nine-year-old. The film is shot in black and white, which seemed appropriate. Our local reviewer gave the movie 4½ stars (out of 5). Here is his closing paragraph: "But things change, and children grow up. Belfast catches Buddy at that magical time right before it happens. It's a heartfelt salute from Branagh to his hometown, and what he loved there." **GRADE B+**

BELLE: (2013) *Belle* is a gorgeous period piece that was inspired by a painting—an 18th century painting that depicted two young women, one black and one white, as equals. The painting is real and the story is based on fact. *Belle* is a study of 18th century England racism, classism and sexism, but it is also a love story with outstanding performances. Dido Elizabeth Belle was the illegitimate daughter of a British Admiral and a black slave. She was raised by her father's great uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Mansfield (Tom Wilkinson & Emily Watson). They raised her as a companion to their niece, Elizabeth, but came to love her as their own. Class meant everything in England, and Dido is understandably confused about her place in the world. When Dido's father dies and leaves her a fortune, her position in society raises her to the level that a titled family is willing to overlook her past and arrange a match with their second son—the son who stands to inherit nothing. Elizabeth, unfortunately, is penniless and must marry well. Ironic that women and slaves were both treated as property. The most interesting aspect of the movie concerns the Zong slave ship case which was in the courts at that time. Lord Mansfield is the Lord Chief Justice, and his decision on the Zong case is eagerly awaited by both sides. When Dido becomes interested in a young man who is an ardent abolitionist (Sam Reid), she begins to find her independence. In a star turn, Gugu Mbatha-Raw is radiant as Dido. She invests her character with intelligence and dignity. We are sure to see more of her. Wilkinson is one of the best British actors today, and he is terrific. Miranda Richardson has the unenviable role of a titled woman trying to do the best for her two sons. Her character is unlikeable, but Richardson is excellent. Judging by the preponderance of women in the

audience, *Belle* is perceived by most as a love story. We, however, were most impressed with the historical aspect. The Zong case was the first step that eventually led to the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. **GRADE A-**

BEN IS BACK: (2018) We have seen two movies this year that involve parents trying to save their drug-addicted sons. In *Beautiful Boy* it was a father (Steve Carell). This time it is his mother, movingly played by Julia Roberts, who is desperate to save Ben. In an emotional scene she takes her son to a cemetery asking, "Tell me where you want me to bury you." Both movies portray the anguish of parents who have tried everything to no avail, but are unwilling to give up. As one critic put it, "There is, after all, no stronger addiction than parenthood." Ben is home from rehab for Christmas, but his step-father (Courtney P. Vance) is not as happy as his mom is to have him home. The adults decide that Ben can stay for one day, but his mom will not let him out of her sight. Roberts is superb in her role as a mother who loves her son but feels helpless to free him from his addiction. Things get a bit melodramatic toward the end of the movie but the final scene is powerful. Gary and I have been impressed with Lucas Hedges ever since his Oscar-nominated supporting role in 2016's *Manchester By the Sea*. We agree with Michael Phillips of the *Chicago Tribune* who said in his review of this movie, "Nobody in American movies today can get at the beating heart of a conflicted, hurting post-adolescent the way Lucas Hedges can." In *Ben Is Back*, he is directed by his father, Peter Hedges, who also wrote the screenplay. I wouldn't be surprised if Hedges gets another Oscar nod for his starring role in *Ben Is Back*. **GRADE A-**

BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM: This is a delightful film that is about the clash of cultures and the struggle of a young person to free herself from her parent's control. But mostly it is about the joy of being good at something that you love doing. Jes, a young Indian girl living in London, loves playing soccer and she is very good at it. Her parents, however, are traditional and want her to get an education and a husband--not necessarily in that order. Jes meets a young woman who plays on a woman's soccer team and she is thrilled when the coach asks her to become a player. She must, however, hide her playing from her parents, and that causes problems. Parminder K. Nagra is charming in the role of Jes and Keira Knightley is a perfect playing partner as Jules/Juliette. We also liked Juliet Stevenson as Jules's mother. She doesn't approve of her daughter's obsession with sports, but the way in which she expresses her disapproval is quite amusing. This is a fairly traditional story, and we can anticipate that Jes's championship soccer match will conflict with her sister's wedding. The wedding celebration reminded me of *Moonsoon Wedding*. Those Indians really do love to party. Director Gurinder Chadha previously directed the film *What's Cooking* about four American ethnic families all preparing a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. We took a look at it, and, although it was interesting, it's not one we would recommend. *Bend It Like Beckham* is a much better film. **Grade B+**

BERNIE: *Bernie* is a charmer, both the film and the character. Based on a hard to believe true story, the film is shot like a documentary. And it works. Bernie Tiede, brilliantly played by Jack Black, was loved by nearly everyone in a small East Texas town where he was an assistant funeral director. Black is ably assisted by Shirley MacLaine, Matthew McConaughey and a bevy of colorful locals who come off as highly skilled actors. This is a film I think would be best appreciated if viewed without having read a review or seen a preview. So here I am writing a review that I hope you don't read but which will be powerful enough to make you feel compelled to seek out the movie. It is a one-of-a-kind film experience with twists and turns I refuse to get into. Suffice it to say that there are chuckles and belly laughs throughout, and it is even worth your time to hang around for the credits. I think you can tell that I loved the film, perhaps even a little more than Barbara. **GRADE A/A-**

THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL: (2012) Both Barbara and I were charmed by this warm hearted and witty British comedy. But as we left the theater, Barbara speculated that a certain level of maturity might be needed to fully appreciate its charm. For a variety reasons, seven British seniors set out for a "newly restored" retirement hotel in India. Lured by the beautiful photos in the brochure, they all believe they are headed for a luxurious stay in "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel." The hotel facilities are less than hoped for, but the stay will have a profound effect on each of their lives. The script may not be ground breaking, but it is elevated in the hands of a cadre of extraordinarily gifted screen legends. Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, Tom Wilkinson, and Bill Nighy are the names you are most likely to recognize, but there are many others you will appreciate. All are fantastic, but I was especially taken with Maggie Smith who is about my age. When in 1969 she played the title role in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, her character feared that "her prime had ebbed." Now, decades later, it seems that Maggie Smith is still avoiding the dreaded ebb. The youngest star in the cast is Dev Patel, who played the lead in the Oscar winning *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2009. That film walked away with 8 Academy Awards. Of course Judi Dench, Tom Wilkinson, and Bill Nighy never disappoint. The cast seems to be having a ball making this film and we think you will be richly rewarded if you choose to seek it out. **GRADE A**

BEST IN SHOW: We were looking forward to this film because we thought *Waiting For Guffman*, Christopher Guest's 1997 film, was hilarious. *Best In Show* did not disappoint us. It may be the funniest film we have seen this year. Guest has perfected his pseudo-documentary style in the three films he has written and directed. (This is *Spinal Tap* was his first.) His actors improvise from a bare-bones screenplay and the dialogue and monologues sound amazingly real. Guest wrote this film with Eugene Levy and both men also appear in the movie as dog owners. *Best In Show* is about a National dog show, and focuses on the owners and trainers of five dogs taking part in the show and on what goes on behind the scenes. In addition, we see two commentators--one is knowledgeable and experienced but the other one, played by Fred Willard, is completely clueless. His attempts at adding "color commentary" are particularly hilarious. Some of the same actors that Guest used in *Waiting For Guffman* are seen here: Parker Posey, Catherine O'Hara, Eugene Levy, and Fred Willard. If you liked *Guffman*, be sure to see this one. If you like this one and haven't seen *Guffman*, be sure to rent it. **GRADE: A-**

BEST OF ENEMIES: (2015) This historical, thought-provoking, and entertaining film takes us back to the summer of 1968 when the future of television news was dramatically and forever changed. Network ratings put ABC a distant last place to its competitors CBS and NBC. In a bold move they hired two well-known intellectuals who loathed each other. The conservative columnist William F. Buckley Jr. and liberal novelist Gore Vidal were scheduled for live debates on ABC each night of the Republican and Democratic political conventions. Their quick wits and explosive exchanges were unlike anything seen on TV at that time and ABC News ratings skyrocketed. It was the birth of TV News for entertainment as we know it today. One could argue that those all-heat, no-light exchanges that riveted viewers laid the foundation for today's 24-hour cable news world. Arguably, they had a longer lasting impact than the

Vietnam War protests outside the Convention Center that grabbed the headlines in every newspaper in the country. This is a “must-see” film for political junkies, historians, and fans of articulate expression of the English language. Barbara and I enjoyed it. You may too. **GRADE B+**

THE BEST OF ENEMIES: (2019 recorded from *Showtime TV*) Based on true events, this film tells the unlikely story of the racially-charged 1971 school desegregation in Durham, North Carolina. Critics were less than enthusiastic as reflected in a 53% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*. The Audience Score was a more favorable 75%. Even though it is based on a true story, many critics still view the film as a “sanitized history lesson.” Clearly, audiences approve of these “sanitized history lessons.” Thirty years ago *Driving Miss Daisy* won an Oscar for Best Picture and more recently *Green Book* and *The Help* won a total of four Oscars, collectively grossing over \$520 million worldwide. *The Best of Enemies* has two power house leads in Sam Rockwell who plays a KKK leader and Taraji P. Henson who plays an outspoken civil rights activist. Both have long successful careers in Hollywood. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is a 2017 movie that won Rockwell a Best Supporting Actor Oscar, and Henson won many awards for her starring role in *Hidden Figures*. The film centers on a two-week meeting, called a charrette, that is held in hopes of ending segregation of the schools of Durham. *The Best of Enemies* is admittedly predictable, but there are some powerful scenes and Barbara and I liked the film. **GRADE B** (The film is also available on *Amazon Video* but is not *Prime*.)

THE BEST OF YOUTH: (2003 release) This was originally an Italian TV miniseries. It is on two DVD discs and each one is three hours long. We kept asking ourselves why we were watching it, but something about it kept us engaged. It tells a sweeping story of two brothers beginning in the 1960s and ending in 2003. One brother becomes a psychiatrist, the other a policeman. It's a family saga that follows the political problems of Italy and the relationships between brothers and sisters and parents and children. More familiarity with Italian politics would have been helpful, but the relationship stuff is universal. The film came highly recommended by the critics. It was originally shown in theaters in two parts with separate admissions. Roger Ebert, who gave it four stars, saw both parts on the same day and said about its length: *No good movie is too long, just as no bad movie is short enough. I dropped outside of time and was carried along by the narrative flow; when the film was over, I had no particular desire to leave the theater, and would happily have stayed another three hours.* I'm not sure we would have lasted that long in the theatre: we saw it over two nights (from Netflix). A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* called it as *engrossing as a grand 19th-century novel.* *Entertainment Weekly* said it was the *best of cinema.* High praise, indeed, but we're not sure most people would stay with it for six hours. It is in Italian with easy-to-read English subtitles. If you're a sucker for foreign films, you might want to rent this one. **GRADE B**

BETTER DAYS 2019/2021 (A Prime rental at \$3.99): First of all, this movie does have subtitles, and sometimes you have to read them very quickly. At other times there is no dialogue for several minutes, and that is when the actors shine. Secondly, for those not used to Chinese faces, it was difficult to keep everyone straight, the men in particular. Everyone looks so young to me. Thirdly, the director keeps cutting back and forth in time and memories. This normally is not difficult for us, but in this Chinese movie it was. The subject is a universal one: Bullying in grammar and high schools has always been around, but it seems to have gotten worse and more prevalent in recent years. A young girl in 12th grade and ready to take her National College Entrance Exams, is being bullied by a trio of typical “mean girls.” She needs a protector and finds one in a young man living on the streets in a quasi-criminal existence. Their sweet, unconventional love story forms the basis of the movie, that is, until one of the mean girl's body turns up in a landslide caused by torrential rains. The movie quickly becomes a police procedural, and the young couple's decision has lasting and deeply felt effects. It is melodrama, but superbly performed melodrama, and that is probably why it got high marks from both critics and audiences on *Rotten Tomatoes*. While we appreciate the artistry of the two leads, Gary, based on his enjoyment, can't give the film higher than a C. I think if I had seen it a theatre, I would have been more affected by it. I say B. **GRADE B/C**

A BETTER LIFE: Fans of Arizona's new immigration bill will not be fans of this movie. It tells a sympathetic story of illegal immigration from the immigrant's point of view. Demián Bichir is terrific as Carlos Galindo, an undocumented Mexican immigrant and a single father struggling to provide for Luis, his teenage son. Forced to live in a poor neighborhood, Carlos worries about Luis's future. He works, not surprisingly, in lawn care, and when he gets the opportunity to buy the owner's truck along with the business, he decides to take the risk. If you watched the trailer for this film, you know that the truck is stolen and with it the dreams of a better life. While father and son work together to recover the truck, Luis begins to realize how much his father loves him and how hard he has worked to provide for him. Director Chris Weitz (*About A Boy*) has not made a strident political polemic, but instead a touching father-son story that may bring a tear to your eye while you see a side of Los Angeles rarely portrayed this realistically. If you watched TV's *Weeds* last year, you will recognize Bichir as Mary Louise Parker's drug kingpin husband. Bichir also played Fidel Castro in the two films about Che Guevara. We were very impressed with this talented actor's work in *A Better Life*. We also liked José Julián as Luis. He has only one previous movie credit, but we expect to see more of this young man. The movie brought back memories of another excellent story about illegal immigration, *Sin Nombre*, a gripping story of escape and survival. Both Gary and I give *A Better Life* an enthusiastic B+. **GRADE B+**

BEYOND THE LIGHTS: This is a Romantic Drama, or Melodrama, depending on your generosity. It received generally positive reviews from critics, but no raves. One less generous critic wrote, “If it were any cheesier, they could pour it on macaroni.” Barbara and I lean more toward the positive reviews. Though the film is unlikely to get any Academy Award nominations, it does have two enormously attractive and appealing leads with two bigger names in supporting roles. In the leads are Gugu Mbatha-Raw who got her big break starring in a 2013 film, *Belle*, and Nate Parker. Danny Glover and Minnie Driver are excellent in the supporting roles. *Beyond the Lights* is the story of Noni, a burgeoning young superstar in the music industry whose career has been driven by an ambitious and overbearing mother. Her exploding fame in an industry that exploits and objectifies women shows us the downside of celebrity. Noni meets Kaz (Parker) a young cop with political ambitions. At a critical point in her life, a romance begins that will give her the courage to break free from the darker side of the music industry and from her mother. It is a predictable story and perhaps too derivative, but it has enough going for it that we can recommend it, especially for our readers who love romantic themes. **GRADE C+**

BEYOND THE SEA: Kevin Spacey has been trying to make this movie for years. He is the producer, co-writer, and star of this story about Bobby Darin. Many critics had trouble with 50-year-old Spacey playing the young Bobby Darin. After all, Spacey is 7 years older

than Darrin was when he died. Spacey attempted to explain the age thing with a plot device that reminded me a bit of *All That Jazz*. However, it didn't work for me, and I was bothered by the sight of Spacey playing a 19 year-old. Gary was not bothered by it, and he gives the movie a higher evaluation than I do. We were both impressed with Spacey's singing. He sounds great, and he has Darin's stage presence down pat. Darin was both a songwriter and a performer who was able to electrify an audience. He was super cool! Sammy Davis was once asked if there was any performer he wouldn't want to follow on stage. His answer was, "Bobby Darin." **Beyond The Sea** introduces a new generation to the singer and details his life and his romance with Sandra Dee. Dee is played by Kate Bosworth. She definitely has the look of Sandra Dee and we thought she did a good job with the dramatic moments. I understand that Dee is extremely pleased with the film. Darin was the love of her life and although she divorced him, she never remarried. The movie has been responsible for a renewed interest in Bobby Darin and I have heard that his CDs are selling briskly. **GARY—GRADE B; BARB—GRADE B-**

BIG EYES: (2014) "Forget Abscam," wrote Philip Caufield in the NY Daily News, "this was the ultimate American hustle." He's talking about the story behind the new Tim Burton movie, *Big Eyes*. It's the story of those famous paintings depicting vulnerable waifs with enormous eyes that took the art world by storm in the sixties. It's also the story of who really painted the big eyed waifs, and the courtroom where the question was finally answered. When Margaret met Walter Keane, she was a single mother with a young daughter to support. She was also an artist whose paintings were always of children with huge eyes. She believed that eyes were the windows to the soul. Walter may or may not have been an actual artist, but he definitely was a master con artist. He knocked Margaret off her feet with his enthusiasm and larger-than-life personality. They married soon after. He did his best to promote his own and his wife's art, but people were more attracted to the waifs with the big eyes. Walter sensed there was money to be made. He convinced Margaret to hide the fact that she was the artist and claimed them as his own. "No one buys lady art," he told her, and she believed it. He made a fortune selling paintings, posters of paintings and postcards of the posters. The paintings had many fans, and many detractors. One of the greatest detractors was John Canaday, art critic for the New York Times. He is portrayed in the movie by Terrence Stamp. I was never a Keane fan, but I am a fan of Amy Adams who portrays Margaret Keane in *Big Eyes*. Adams spent a day talking with Margaret, now 87, in her San Francisco art gallery. She was determined to play Margaret truthfully, and she was successful. "I'm in awe of her ability and talent," Margaret told UPI of Amy Adams. "She portrayed exactly the way I was feeling. I don't know how she can do it without even saying a word ... just a gesture." Amy Adams is just that good. I can see why Burton hired Christopher Waltz to play Walter Keane, but for us, the "over-the-top" style that Waltz has didn't work. I saw the actor, not a real person. So, in spite of a Golden Globe nominated performance by Amy Adams, we can't give this movie an A. **GRADE B**

BIG FISH: Edward Bloom (Albert Finney) is a teller of tall tales. Everyone loves to hear his embellished versions of the truth--everyone except his son, Will (Billy Crudup). As a kid, Will was fascinated by his dad's stories, but as an adult, he feels that he has been lied to all his life, and that he never knew his father. When Will's mother, Sandra (Jessica Lange), calls to say that Edward is dying, Will goes home to see if he can find the truth in Edward's stories. We are treated to the tall tales told in flashback fantasy with Ewan McGregor playing the young Edward and Alison Lohman as the young Sandra. Edward's fantastic tales were about giants, witches, Siamese twins, a mysterious town, and a really big fish. Director Tim Burton brings the stories and the characters to vivid life for us and they are delightful to watch. Finney and Lange are wonderful, and the love relationship between Edward and Sandra is beautiful and moving. We also thought Ewan McGregor was the perfect choice to play young Bloom. He is a charming actor. Steve Buscemi, Danny DeVito, Helena Bonham Carter, and 7' 6" Matthew McGrory are all characters in Bloom's tales. This is a delightful feel-good movie and Gary loved it. He gives it a solid A. I enjoyed the movie, but would grade it a bit lower at B+. **GRADE A/B+**

THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM: (2019) This is a likable, educational and unexpectedly moving documentary that is at times inspiring. It is a beautiful film to watch, especially the before and after overhead shots of the farm. It earned a respectable 89% from critics on the Tomatometer and 95% from audiences. It was directed and co-authored by John Chester who co-stars with his wife Molly. Before this project he was a wildlife photographer and she was a chef and foodie blogger. After getting evicted from their tiny Santa Monica apartment because their newly acquired dog wouldn't stop barking, they decided to follow a dream. They bought a 200 acre farm at the foothills of Ventura County, California. Thus two idealists set out to work *with* nature, instead of against it. The farm turned into an ecosystem experiment. The film was nearly a decade in the making and boasts a cast of thousands (most of them non-human). The land they chose was utterly depleted of nutrients and was suffering from a brutal drought. Fortunately they found a "farm whisperer," Alan York who taught them about the value of biodiversity and how to restore the tired soil to health. Also the necessity of patience. Nature is not always easy. Birds eat your fruit, gophers eat your roots, snails eat your leaves, and coyotes eat your chickens while you search for solutions. Seeing this documentary may not make you want to quit your job and start shoveling manure, but it will make you think more seriously about biodiversity, sustainable food sources, and healthy ecosystems. Barbara and I agree it is a film worth seeing. **GRADE B**

THE BIG KAHUNA: I expect that many reviewers will criticize *The Big Kahuna* for not taking advantage of the film medium. It is a filmed play, but that's what we liked about it. As theater buffs, we have often noticed how "opening up" the action of a play destroys the story. (*Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *Luv* are prime examples.) All the action in this movie takes place in a hospitality suite at a convention in Witicha. Larry (Kevin Spacey) and Phil (Danny DeVito) are seasoned marketing reps, and Bob (Peter Facinelli) is a young, idealistic, newly-hired employee from the Research Department. He is there to provide the "brains," while Larry and Bob will take care of the marketing. The scenes that take place outside of the suite do not have any dialogue and are there to deepen our understanding of these men. Spacey thinks that this could be the story of one man at three stages of his life. It's an interesting idea. We thought the acting was outstanding and the dialogue both funny and meaningful. Spacey is at his sardonic best and DeVito is splendid. It says a lot that young Facinelli could hold his own with these two. **GRADE: A-**

BIG MIRACLE: (2012) This is a heart-warming movie with enough humor to keep you chuckling all the way to the emotional conclusion. The ending won't come as a shock if you glanced at the title of the film. And the story would sound totally absurd if it weren't inspired by a true story that was huge in late 1988. Three California Gray whales are trapped in rapidly forming ice in the Arctic Circle. John Krasinski (*The Office*) plays a small town news reporter who breaks the story that becomes National news. Drew Barrymore plays a Greenpeace worker who takes up the seemingly impossible cause of saving the unfortunate mammals. A terrific supporting cast lead

by Ted Danson helps move the story along. If you think this sounds like a Hallmark card, you would be right, but it is one of the better Hallmark cards. It is refreshing to occasionally see a squeaky-clean movie without a single explosion or scatological joke. Barbara and I enjoyed it and would recommend it as a family film that has something for everyone. **GRADE B**

THE BIG SICK: (2017) "Romantic comedies have a new standard to live up to." So wrote one critic and we are in enthusiastic agreement. This charming movie is based on Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon's true, cross-cultural love story. Nanjiani, who emigrated from Pakistan to Chicago with his family when he was a boy, plays himself in *The Big Sick*. Watchers of TV's *Silicon Valley* will recognize him. Emily is delightfully played by Zoe Kazan. A Sundance Film Festival hit, the film is directed by Michael Showalter. It tells how the comedian ignored the pressure from his parents for an arranged marriage, and fell in love with a non-Muslim woman. The fact that she happened to be in a medically-induced coma when he realized that he was in love with her, complicates things. This is not a typical Rom-com: The cultural clash is used as a genuine plot element and not as a punch line, and the emotions of love, family, and loss are very real. Not only are the two leads delightful, but the supporting cast is equally wonderful. Nanjiani's parents are superb, and Ray Romano and Holly Hunter are brilliant as Emily's parents. Within days of the film's premier, Amazon had bought its distribution rights for \$12 million, so we are definitely not alone in our enthusiasm. Gary and I can't say enough about this thoroughly entertaining movie. You'll just have to see it for yourselves. **GRADE A**

(Note: Emily V. Gordon, Nanjiani's wife, co-wrote the movie with her husband.)

THE BIG SHORT: I am not enthusiastic about the title, but I have to give kudos to the filmmakers for taking a complicated subject that sounds unfilmable (America's housing bubble & meltdown) and turning it into 130 minutes of pretty pure entertainment. How do you put zip into dry economic lessons? Well, handing some of the job off to Margot Robbie (*The Wolf of Wall Street*) in a hot tub bubble bath does help. It also helps to use creative filmmaking and pack it with a talented cast using top actors like Steve Carrel, Ryan Gosling, Marisa Tomei, Brad Pitt, and Christian Bale. That and an abundance of humor makes Economics far more interesting than I remember it being in college. The film is based on a bestselling book by Michael Lewis who also wrote the book that inspired the 2011 hit comedy, *Moneyball*. There is a lot of tension and shouting as greed drives the Wall Street wealthy to ever more unethical and arguably illegal schemes for increasing the flow of money from millions of trusting investors into the already filled pockets of a few schemers. It matters not that millions lose their homes, jobs, and retirement savings. When you hear credit default swaps, subprime lending, and rock solid investment, keep a firm grip on your wallet. The fascinating characters in the film are based on real people or composites of real people and I thought the actors playing them were flawless. *The Big Short* manages to entertain you while forcing you to focus on the dark underbelly of banking and Wall Street. It makes you laugh while your blood is reaching the boiling point. I guess that makes it an educational tragicomedy. The film received high marks from critics as well as audiences polled on the *Tomatometer*: 152 Critics 86%, 20,000 Audience 91%. Barbara and I liked it too, but we still couldn't tell you what a collateralized debt obligation (CDO) is and how it relates to a global financial crisis. The movie ends on an alarming note that points out how easily it could all happen again. As a retired educator, how could I not encourage you to see this film. **GRADE A-**

BIG TROUBLE: This movie is sort of a madcap crime comedy with a large cast of oddball characters. There's the hit man who's come to Miami on a job; There are two young boys playing a "Killer" game with water pistols. There are two Russian arms dealers who run a wildly unpopular bar. There is a homeless man who lives in a tree and looks a lot like Jesus; and there's a toad who spits, and a lot of goats. There's also a nuclear bomb in a suitcase and two terminally stupid thugs who steal it. (Because the bomb winds up on a plane, the movie's release was delayed after 9-11.) Oh, and I forgot to mention, Martha Stewart appears briefly. Barry Sonnenfeld (*Men In Black*) directed this film which is based on a novel by Dave Barry. Gary read the novel and thinks it makes a better movie than a book. This is one goofy movie, and it made us laugh a lot. Tim Allen and Rene Russo are the two sanest people in the film. Janeane Garofalo and Patrick Warburton (Puddy on *Seinfeld*) are two Miami cops, Dennis Farina is funny as the hit man, and Stanley Tucci is suitably obnoxious as his target. It's impossible to synthesize the plot, you just have to see it. And you still may not believe it! **GRADE: Barb-B;** Gary laughed more than I did, and he says **B+.** **GRADE B+/B**

THE BIG WHITE: (2005) This is a *Fargo* wannabe, and let me tell you, it's no *Fargo*. It's not even close. We got this movie from Netflix because it was a Robin Williams film we'd never seen. I learned later that it came and went very quickly, so it's no wonder we didn't see it. Williams had a great cast to help him. It included Holly Hunter, Woody Harrelson, Giovanni Ribisi, and Tim Blake Nelson. The setting was Alaska, and the scenery was spectacular. But the script was lame. Williams owned a travel agency which was in financial trouble. He tried to get payment on a life insurance policy on his brother who hadn't been heard from for five years. Unfortunately, Alaska law requires that a person be missing for seven years before he can be declared legally dead. When Williams finds a dead boy in a dumpster outside his office...you can probably imagine the plan he devises. There were occasional amusing moments, but not enough to save this one. **GRADE C-**

THE BIG YEAR: Depending on your tolerance level, this movie is either a bland comedy with a pleasant ending or a colossal bore about "competitive birding." In fairness, one could argue that the film is about three compulsive characters in search of happiness, but finding that there may be more important things in life than winning. Neither Barbara nor I are taken with bird watching and we would be quick to admit that real birders may find this film more exciting than we did. Three extremely talented comedic actors take the three leading roles: Steve Martin, Jack Black, and Owen Wilson. The supporting cast includes names you may recognize: Anjelica Huston, Brian Dennehy, JoBeth Williams, and Dianne Wiest. With a cast like that, we were hoping for better. If there are any birders out there who think I am being too hard on this film, Barbara would love to put your opinions in Readers' Views. **GRADE: C**

A BIGGER SPLASH: (2016) Marianne (Tilda Swinton) is a famous rock star recuperating from throat surgery on the volcanic island of Pantelleria with her partner Paul (Matthias Schoenaerts). They live an idyllic life, sunbathing in the nude and making love whenever they like. The doctor has ordered Marianne to not speak while her throat is healing, but it isn't a problem for them. However, the arrival of Harry (Ralph Fiennes) Marianne's former lover and record producer, upsets their calm life. Plus, Harry has brought a young Lolita, Penelope (Dakota Johnson), who may or may not be his daughter. Along with Harry come chaos and memories, and he is only too happy to remind them of the past. I'm not surprised that *A Bigger Splash* won prizes at the Venice Film Festival, for it is definitely a festival kind of movie. The critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* said that the movie "...takes four characters with strong needs, drops

them into a single location and invites us to watch what happens.” The critic found it compelling; Gary thought it rather tedious. He would agree with the *Las Vegas Weekly* critic who said that the movie was, “Often completely inscrutable, with characters behaving erratically and mysteriously.” I was intrigued, but not exactly captivated, by the interactions of Harry, Marianne and Paul. However a tragic event that happened about two-thirds of the way through the film heightened our interest in the outcome—an outcome that still left some troubling questions. Swinton, Fiennes, Schoenaerts and Johnson were all terrific. It was particularly interesting to watch Swinton communicate almost exclusively with gestures and her remarkable facial reactions. Ralph Fiennes deservedly gets the most praise from the professional critics. Gary has settled on a grade of C, but I think the movie will linger in my memory for a long time and believe it deserves a higher grade. **GRADE B/C**

BILLY ELLIOT: This is the story of a miner's son who wants to be a ballet dancer. Billy Elliot's father and older brother are coal miners out on strike and the idea of having a ballet dancer in the family doesn't sit well with them. Billy Elliot is another small film, but it deals with large dreams and ambition. We were lukewarm during the first half for two reasons: The accents were difficult to understand and Billy didn't look that good on the dance floor. However, the second half won us over. Jamie Bell makes a sympathetic Billy and Julie Walters is good as a worn-down ballet teacher. **GRADE: B+**

BIRDMAN (2014) This is the latest film from **21 Grams** and **Babel** director Alejandro González Iñárritu. It is a difficult movie to review, as indicated by generally glowing but occasionally disparaging reviews from professional critics. Is it brave, original and ingenious filmmaking, or does it try too hard to say too little? I can agree that it is, indeed, stylistically impressive. What the movie has to say about the conflict between celebrities and actors may not be original, but it spoke to us. The overwhelming message that I took away from the movie is the massive insecurity of those who find their true lives on the stage, or on a movie set, but are lost in their lives away from audiences and cameras. Michael Keaton, in an Oscar-worthy performance, is Riggan, a Hollywood actor who made three block-buster movies as the super hero “Birdman,” but declined to do a fourth. (Much like Keaton, himself, who made two movies as Batman, but declined to do a third.) In an effort to replace popularity with respect, Riggan is directing and acting in a play he has written—a play that is about to open on Broadway. Ed Norton is Mike, an acclaimed stage actor who can't hide his disdain for Riggan's celebrity. Naomi Watts is excellent as a cast member making her Broadway debut. The movie features some scenes from Riggan's play and it is a treat to see actors playing actors, playing actors. Emma Stone is notable as Riggan's daughter, just out of rehab and acting as director's assistant, and Zach Galifianakis, in an almost comedy-free role, is Riggan's lawyer. Amy Ryan plays his ex-wife, and Lindsay Duncan (**Le Weekend**) is the New York Time Critic upon whose review a Broadway play either thrives or bombs. I won't give away any of the plot or the visual surprises because I think you should experience the movie ignorant of expectations. After all, the subtitle of the movie is *The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*. But, if you do see it, please give us your explanation of the ending scene. Gary and I would appreciate your insights. **GRADE B+**

BIRDS OF PREY: AND THE FANTABULOUS EMANCIPATION OF ONE HARLEY QUINN: (2020) This movie has a long title and the film was suitably interminable. As much as I enjoy watching four women beat the crap out of an army of evil men, I did grow bored with the mayhem. Gary said that he would grade the movie an “S” for soporific. (I'm surprised he could sleep with all the noise.) Distraught after the break up with Joker, Harley Quinn and four unlikely friends vow to protect a young girl from Gotham's most narcissistic and violent villain, Roman Sionis. He likes to strip the faces off his enemies. I did think that Margo Robbie did a good job with her comic book character. She was capably backed up by Rosie Perez, Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Jurnee Smollett-Bell, although their stunt doubles probably deserve a lot of the credit. Ewan McGregor played the villainous Sionis with crazy glee. I wonder if it is internalized anger that makes these comic-book movies so popular. Or maybe it's the trailers they see--all of them loud and filled with car crashes and impossible stunts and bloody mayhem. We saw many trailers of movies we'll thankfully never see. But, in spite of those awesome women, I can't rate the film very highly. **GRADE C-**

THE BIRTH OF A NATION: (2016) First let's acknowledge the elephant in the room. Nate Parker, director, co-producer, co-writer, and star of this film, was accused of raping an 18-year-old-white girl when he was a student in college. He was acquitted, but twelve years later the girl who brought the charges committed suicide. Many infer from this and other details from the trial that he was guilty of the crime and chose to boycott the film. It remains to be seen what the impact of that controversy will have on the financial success of the film. If you know film history, you know there is a famous 1915 silent film by D.W. Griffith with the same title. The 1915 **The Birth of a Nation** is three hours of racist propaganda — starting with the Civil War and ending with the Ku Klux Klan riding in to save the South from black rule during the Reconstruction era. The 2016 film is not a remake. The 2016 film is a historical drama recounting a real-life slave revolt in 1831 that occurred in Virginia. The revolt was led by a literate slave preacher named Nat Turner. Turner was ordered by his owner to tour a number of local plantations, delivering sermons to the other slaves that would urge them to reject violence and any thought of rebellion. Turner was so appalled and sickened by the horrors he saw during his travels that he eventually orchestrated an uprising to fight back against the evils of slavery. The rebellion only lasted two days, but it was enough to find its way into most history books dealing with that turbulent period. It's a well-crafted independent film that reportedly was filmed in 27 days. It is amazing that it works as well as it does. **The Birth of a Nation** received a respectable 77% from critics on Rotten Tomatoes when it was widely released in theaters, but when it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, it received thunderous applause and standing ovations. It will not surprise me if the film underachieves at the box office. People are viewing so much acrimony in their real world that many will avoid it in theaters. Nat Turner's rebellion went down in history as a symbol of terrorism and violent retribution and some historians say it expedited the coming of the Civil War. One of the criticisms of the film was that it didn't have enough good racists. One of the critics countered this argument with the rhetorical question, “Were there any good Nazis?” I liked the movie a little better than Barbara. **GRADE B+/B**

BIRTHDAY GIRL: The best thing about this movie is its unpredictability. You're never sure where the story is going next. It begins when John (Ben Chaplin) uses an Internet matchmaking service to find a Russian bride. When Nadia (Nicole Kidman) arrives in London, John is dismayed to learn that she knows no English. Since he speaks no Russian, they have some difficulty communicating, at least during the day. At night, behind closed doors, they communicate quite well. One day, in halting English, Nadia tells John that it is her Birthday. That night, as John brings in a Birthday cake alight with candles, two Russian friends of Nadia's arrive at the front door. They have come for a visit. From that point on, John's quiet life undergoes dramatic changes. Chaplin is quietly understated as the

confused John, and Kidman proves once again that she is a fine actress as well as a true movie star. She gets your attention immediately and holds it throughout the film. This is not a great film, but we think you will enjoy it. **GRADE B-**

BISBEE 17: Barbara and I have lived in Arizona for thirty years and we have spent time in Bisbee, a quiet little mining town just 7 miles north of Mexico. Yet neither one of us was aware of the tragic events that unfolded there 101 years ago in 1917. This is not surprising since the events of what became known as the “*deportation*” were shrouded in silence for decades and even children in Bisbee schools were never told of the tragedy. The story is powerful and moving as well as educational and entertaining. It earned 97% from critics on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer. The events being depicted in the movie occurred July 12, 1917. WW I was being fought in Europe when a bitter labor dispute that pitted mining companies against their workers emerged in the copper-rich town of Bisbee. In a company town, the company makes the rules. A sheriff and his 2,000-strong posse rounded up over 1,200 striking miners as well as anyone who gave them verbal support. People were forced at gunpoint into railway cars and abandoned 200 miles away in a New Mexico desert. They were given a warning that anyone who returned to Bisbee would be killed. The people of Bisbee decided it was time to come to grips with the darkest day in the town’s history by staging a centennial reenactment of the events. Robert Greene, director, chose to put it on film. It’s fascinating to watch the people of Bisbee work out conflicting feelings about events that involved many of their ancestors. Few will see this remarkable film, but we agree it would be worth the effort. **GRADE A**

BIUTIFUL: If you like long subtitled foreign films with lots of gritty depressing realism, you will love this movie. But the compelling charismatic presence of this year’s Oscar nominated Javier Bardem kept Barbara and me not only in the theater, but sharply focused on the layers of misery that played out on the screen. Bardem plays Uxbal, a good hearted man who reminds me of an amateur juggler who is struggling to keep several more balls in the air than he is capable of handling. Living in a dingy, overcrowded section of Barcelona he struggles to care for his son and daughter as well as dealing with a volatile bipolar and alcoholic estranged wife. In a desperate effort to survive, he pays off cops, exploits Chinese sweatshop laborers as well as African black-market street salesmen. He also learns he is dying from prostate cancer and may have but a few months to live. And, trust me, none of this is played for humor. Many critics are very high on Alejandro González Iñárritu who directed this film and Barbara and I both loved his direction of *Babel*, a 2006 film. The movie will receive high marks from many critics and it has been nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film by the Academy this year. Still, based on our enjoyment, we cannot highly recommend it. If any of our readers see it, we would be delighted to hear your views. **GRADE C+**

BLACK BOOK (Zwartboek): This is a harrowing tale of courage during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands toward the end of WWII. It is inspired by real events. Rachel Stein (Carice van Houten) is a beautiful young Dutch Jew who is hiding from the Nazi’s. She and her family are offered safe passage to neutral territory by a Dutch resistance worker, but the Germans discover the group and Rachel is the only survivor. From her hiding place, she must watch the Germans rob the dead bodies. Rachel joins the Dutch resistance, dyes her hair blond, and takes a more Dutch-sounding name. In order to save some hostages, Rachel/Ellis agrees to seduce a Gestapo commander, Ludwig Müntze (Sebastian Koch, *The Lives of Others*). Surprisingly, the German officer turns out to be a gentleman. The same cannot be said of some of the resistance fighters. This film has everything: Nazi sadism, revenge, heroism, betrayal, and even a love story. The film was directed by Paul Verhoeven, who gave us *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*, so it’s no surprise that there is nudity, sexual explicitness, and a fair amount of violence. The film is rather long (145 minutes running time) and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the traitors from the heroes, but *Black Book* is a satisfying old-fashioned kind of adventure. Van Houten and Koch are outstanding as the ill-fated lovers. The film is in Dutch with English subtitles. **GRADE B+**

BLACK HAWK DOWN: In most war movies the battle scenes are confusing and often impossible for the viewer to tell what is happening. It is to director Ridley Scott’s credit that the battle scenes in *Black Hawk Down* are both compelling and comprehensible. I could understand what was happening and appreciate the logistics involved in a military raid such as this one. (You should be aware, thought, that the movie has a 143 minute running time, and the battle scenes take up almost two hours.) The movie attempts to accurately show an effort by the United Nations peacekeeping force to kidnap members of the inner circle of Gen. Muhammad Farah Aidid, the Somali warlord who used hunger as a weapon and literally starved over 300,000 people. The raid was planned to take about 30 minutes, but in fact lasted for hours. Two Black Hawk helicopters crashed in the center of Mogadishu, and since the U.S. rangers vow to “leave no man behind,” every effort is made to recover the wounded and the dead. The movie does not depend on stars but depicts the heroism of ordinary soldiers. However, there are some cast standouts. Tom Sizemore is especially memorable, and Josh Hartnett redeems himself somewhat after his lackluster performance in *Pearl Harbor*. Jeremy Piven and Ron Eldard are effective as helicopter pilots. But the actor who most captured my attention was Eric Bana as Hoot, a man who seems born to be a soldier. Some critics have accused the film of jingoism, but one person’s jingoism is another person’s patriotism. We liked it. **GRADE A**

BLACK PANTHER: (2018) After seeing *Thor: Ragnarok*, I decided never again to see another Marvel Comic movie. I am really glad I didn’t stick to that pledge. *Black Panther* delighted me. It has an arresting story, likeable characters and striking visuals. Plus, it has Chadwick Boseman as the hero and Michael B. Jordan as the sympathetic villain. Boseman is T’Challa, the newly crowned King of Wakanda, a mysteriously hidden and technologically advanced country somewhere in Africa. (Think the lost city of Atlantis as imagined by CGI experts.) Its powers, and they are considerable, come from a metal named Vibranium which Wakanda has kept secret from the rest of the world. It’s difficult not to sympathize with Erik Killmonger (Jordan) who wants to arm oppressed black people everywhere to take over the world, and when T’Challa finally defeated him, I was sorry to see him go. Lupita Nyong’o, who burst on the screen in *12 Years a Slave*, provides Boseman’s love interest. Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker and Martin Freeman as the token white CIA agent round out a superb supporting cast. I especially loved Wakanda’s fierce and gorgeously-outfitted female warriors. They definitely brought out the warrior feminist in me. Gary gives the movie a grade of B, which, he said, is extremely high for the genre. I give *Black Panther* an enthusiastic A, although it stuns to admit how much I liked a Marvel Comic movie. **GRADE A/B**

BLACK MASS: (2015) This is a moody but extremely violent film featuring Johnny Depp. Depp, widely acknowledged as one of the world’s biggest movie stars, plays Whitey Bulger, a notorious Boston gangster who was listed second on the *FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives List*. First place went to Osama bin Laden. This fact based film has received generally favorable reviews and high praise to Depp and his supporting cast. It focuses on the years leading to his time as a fugitive. Depp has now passed the half century mark with

a ton of well received movies in his resume, but surprisingly has never yet won the coveted golden statue affectionately called Oscar. Some critics seem to believe **Black Mass** gives him the meaty role that could accomplish that goal. Barbara and I were underwhelmed by the film and think he will be skipped over by the Academy voters again. Whitey Bulger was a prominent leader of the Irish mob in South Boston in the 1970's. He was approached by the FBI to collaborate on eliminating a common enemy: the Italian mob (mafia). The alliance allowed Bulger to literally commit murder without fear of prosecution. It also allowed him to consolidate power and become, arguably, the most powerful and ruthless gangster in Boston history. The FBI alliance was orchestrated by John Connolly, effectively played by Joel Edgerton who wrote and directed **The Gift**, a B+ movie we reviewed last month. I liked **Black Mass** a little better than Barb, but we were close. **GRADE B-/C+**

BLACK SEA: (2014) Submarine movies have a built-in tension. Just thinking of being in a claustrophobic sub with tons of water above me is enough to make me nervous. This movie is about a group of treasure hunters searching for a U-Boat full of gold rumored to be at the bottom of the Black Sea. When a salvage company fires Jude Law, a 30-year veteran at commanding subs, he is bitter and ready to believe the rumor. He assembles a group of misfit Brits and Russians and sets off in a battered old submarine. When Law, the Captain of the venture declares that all will share equally in the spoils, greed begins to raise its ugly head. It isn't long before the darker side of human nature surfaces. I went with Gary mostly because of Jude Law, and he did not disappoint. While this is not the best trapped-in-a-sub-at-the-bottom-of-the-ocean movie, it has a good performance by Law and an interesting group of actors. We agree on a grade of C+. **GRADE C+**

BLACK SNAKE MOAN: This is a powerful and moving film that received mixed reviews from the critics. Roger Ebert called it "...the oddest, most peculiar movie I've seen about sex and race and redemption in the Deep South." Rolling Stone called it "Offensive on multiple levels," and A.O. Scott (New York Times) thought that at its heart was "pure, buttery cornpone." I guess Gary and I like cornpone, because we really liked this movie. Lazarus (Samuel Jackson) is troubled because his wife ran off with his brother. Rae (Christini Ricci) is distraught because her boyfriend left for the Army. Lazarus is a former blues musician who hasn't picked up his guitar in years. Rae suffers from a lifetime of abuse and tries to relive her demons through promiscuity. When Lazarus finds Rae left for dead on the side of the road, he takes her home and cares for her, determined to cure both her physical and moral ills. The fact that he chains her to his radiator to keep her from running away gets big play in the advertisements, but it gives the wrong impression of this film. **Black Snake Moan** is more about redemption than it is about sex in spite of several sexually charged scenes. That Lazarus treats Rae with kindness and that the film ends on a note of hope may be why some critics dismiss it as "cornpone." Ricci is superb as Rae, and Jackson shows us that he as good a blues musician as he is an actor. Justin Timberlake is fine as Rae's boyfriend, and John Cothran, Jr. is especially effective as a sympathetic pastor. We saw this film in a nearly empty theater, and two audience members walked out halfway through, so I don't imagine it will be around for long. But we liked it! A lot! I say B+ and Gary says A-. **GRADE A-/B+**

BLACK SWAN: To paraphrase Gilbert & Sullivan, a ballerina's lot is not a happy one. It is especially so when you're a ballerina who is obsessed with being perfect, dominated by a controlling mother, and sexually repressed in the extreme. Natalie Portman looks every inch the ballerina as Nina, and her performance has been noted by many critics as being Oscar-worthy. (She has gotten a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress.) Since Portman studied ballet as a young woman, she is believable as a dancer with star potential. Barbara Hersey is the controlling mamma, desperate to keep her "sweet girl" under her maternal wing, even to the point of keeping Nina's bedroom full of frills and stuffed animals. We know from the beginning that Nina has problems and that she may be psychotic, but when she is awarded the lead role in her company's opening production of Swan Lake, the pressure and stress build to the breaking point. Director Darren Aronovsky keeps us guessing as to what is really happening and what are Nina's hallucinations and her visualized repressed desires. It all becomes darker and more frantic as we descend with Nina into paranoid fantasies. Nina becomes convinced that Lilly (Mila Kunis), a talented and very sexy member of the company, will do anything to take the role of Swan Queen away from her. In Swan Lake, the conflict between the White Swan and the Black Swan is at the heart of the narrative and so it is in the movie: the conflict between the outward Nina and the repressed Nina inside is the story's heart. Vincent Cassell is very good as the leader of the Company. The photography focused frequently on the dancer's feet and legs and impressed me with how athletic and difficult ballet can be, and how difficult it must be for a dedicated ballerina to have anything approaching a normal life. Gary admired the filmmaking but wasn't drawn into the story emotionally. It had more of an emotional impact on me therefore I graded it a bit higher than he did. **GRADE B+/B**

BLACKBERRY: 2023 (Prime Video rental \$7) **BlackBerry** tells the story of Canadians Mike Lazaridis and Jim Balsillie, the two men that charted the course of the spectacular rise and catastrophic demise of the world's first smartphone. The story of the **BlackBerry** begins in 1984, 15 years before the first smartphone bearing that name was released. That was when Mike Lazaridis and Douglas Fregin founded Research In Motion (RIM), the parent company that would be renamed BlackBerry Limited. Once it was the darling of Wall Street, but with the success of the Android iOS platforms that caused a loss of market share from which BlackBerry couldn't recover. In 2013, Fairfax Financial Holdings had purchased BlackBerry for \$4.7 billion dollars. No longer with the firm were Balsillie who stepped down in 2012 after a problem with the SEC, and Lazaridis who left in 2013. The movie opens with Lazaridis and his childhood friend, Doug Fregin doing a presentation that they hope will interest investors in a combination phone, email, and pager in one hand-held device with a keyboard and screen. They failed because they were both techies, but the device interested Jim Balsillie, who told them that their presentation was the worst he had ever seen but the device held promise. Lazaridis knew that they needed Balsillie's energy and business acumen, so over Doug's objections, they took him on board. I won't spoil the story for you, except to say that Lazaridis co-founded a company with childhood friend and **BlackBerry** co-founder Douglas Fregin, who sold his stock at a high point. Their friendship endured despite **BlackBerry's** ultimate failure. The *Rotten Tomatoes* website's Critics Consensus reads "*With intelligence as sharp as its humor, BlackBerry takes a terrifically entertaining look at the rise and fall of a generation-defining gadget.*" Gary and I agree with this consensus and recommend the documentary. **GRADE B+**

(Barb's Note: This wasn't mentioned in the movie, but I thought it was interesting.)

The name, BlackBerry, was chosen out of about 40 potential names, because of the resemblance of the keyboard's buttons to that of the white drupelets that dot the blackberry fruit.

BLACKFISH: (2013) On February 24, 2010, the orca Tilikum killed Dawn Brancheau, an experienced trainer, at SeaWorld Orlando. While SeaWorld officials stated that the orca had grabbed Brancheau by her ponytail and pulled her into the water drowning her, that claim is made suspect by the nature of her injuries and by eye witness accounts. SeaWorld insists that her death was a tragic aberration, in no way connected to its treatment of its whales. Theme parks would have us believe the animals are “doing what comes naturally,” but this documentary suggests that keeping whales in captivity turns them into people killers. Orcas are not known to harm people in the wild, but there have been a raft of cases where orcas in captivity have attacked humans, often the trainers who have come to love the animals and believe they have formed a relationship with them. Tilikum, the orca that killed Brancheau, was captured near Iceland and kept in a tank for a year. All he could do was “cruise slowly in circles or lie still on the surface.” It was the equivalent of solitary confinement for a human and probably the start of the whale’s psychosis. Eventually, Tilikum was sent to Orlando where, in 1991, the orca grabbed Keltie Byrne when she fell into his pool, resulting in her death by drowning. That should have been a warning, but SeaWorld ignored it. We may claim to love these splendid animals, but we allow them to be treated in appalling ways. We remove them from their home in the ocean and keep them in small enclosures that don’t allow them to move naturally. We ignore that fact that, in the wild, orca swim in close-knit family pods. Their society is matriarchal and males stay with their mothers all of their lives. In one moving example, we hear a trainer tell of the grief exhibited by a mother whale when her offspring is shipped to another theme park. John Crowe, a former whale hunter and diver, was moved to tears when he talked about trapping a pod of orcas and removing the young individuals for shipment to theme parks. If the goal of the documentary was to give us information that will convince us to deplore the practice of keeping these magnificent animals in captivity, it certainly accomplished that goal. **GRADE A-**

BLACKKLANSMAN: (2018) I’m not sure he was ever gone but if he was, director, producer, and writer, Spike Lee is back. *BlackKlansman* is a chilling uncomfortable but unforgettable fact-based black comedy about the KKK. It is set in the early 1970’s when the first African-American, Ron Stallworth, joined the Colorado Police Department. It was a role well played by the son of acclaimed actor Danzel Washington (John David Washington). As you might expect from filmmaker Spike Lee, he works hard to stir outrage against racism. He succeeds with a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction story and a disturbing reminder that racism is far from dead. He opens the movie with a long pull-back shot of Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara in “Gone With the Wind” picking her way through the Confederate wounded and follows it with clips from D.W. Griffith’s disgustingly racist 1915 classic *The Birth of a Nation* which helped revive the then dormant KKK. To emphasize a point he ends the film with newsreel clips from the violent “alt-right” rallies last year in Charlottesville, Va. Lee keeps the audience off balance with a humorous scene one minute followed by hate language that made me squirm followed with nail-biting tension. It may not be a movie for everybody. I think our current president will probably skip it, but Barbara and I think it is well made and worth seeing. **GRADE B+**

BLAZE: (2018) Ethan Hawke is already one of our finest actors, but this movie may add his name to the list of our most gifted directors. *Blaze* is an innovatively told biopic of a country music legend, Blaze Foley. Hawke does not follow the traditional lineal story line that we are used to in biography films. But the story does get told, blending music and story in an ingenious and totally satisfying way. Foley is not a familiar name, at least not to the average person. *Rolling Stone* calls Foley “A quintessential Americana artist before such a thing existed,” and goes on to list Merle Haggard, Lyle Lovett and John Prine as among those who recorded his songs. We are treated to some of his plaintive songs in the movie, the most famous of which is “If I Could Only Fly.” Merle Haggard recognized the song’s worth recording it as both a duet with Willie Nelson in 1987, and then later as the title track of his remarkable 2000 comeback album. Ben Dickey gives an extraordinary and heartfelt performance as the witty yet painfully insecure Foley, whose childhood bout with polio left him with a severe limp. Towns Van Zandt, a longtime friend and admirer of Foley, is beautifully played in the movie by Charlie Sexton. Sybil Rosen, the love of Foley’s life and the muse for his music, is charmingly played by Alia Shawkat from TV’s *Arrested Development*. Hawke co-wrote the screenplay with Rosen and based it on her memoir, *Living in the Woods in a Tree: Remembering Blaze Foley*. Gary and I won’t soon forget Foley and the director who lovingly brought him to the screen. **GRADE A**

BLADES OF GLORY: We decided that after all the serious films we’ve seen this month, we badly needed to see a silly comedy and thought this Wil Ferrell movie would fit the bill. We were right. It is a silly comedy, but then, nobody does silly better than Wil Ferrell. He will wear anything, or nothing, if he thinks it will get a laugh. The ridiculous skating outfits and skating routines aren’t the only laughs in this movie, though. There are also some very funny lines. Some of the best are throw-away lines, so you have to listen closely. The setup is this: Chazz (Ferrell) and Jimmy (Jon Heder) are rivals on the ice. When they tie for the gold medal at an Olympic event, they start pummeling each other on the winners’ podium and are banned for life from the men’s singles event. How Jimmy’s former coach (Craig T. Nelson) persuades them to enter the pair skating event takes up the first half of the story. The rest of the movie is centered around their training efforts and the efforts of their pair-skating rivals, the Van Waldenberg sister and brother team (Will Arnett & Amy Poehler), to derail their attempt to win the gold. We were delighted to see Jenna Fischer (from TV’s *The Office*) as the Van Waldenberg’s put-upon little sister and Jimmy’s love interest. William Fichtner is terrific as a wealthy man who adopts orphans in order to turn them into star athletes, and then un-adopts them when they disappoint him. It was also fun to see a lot of former skating stars appear as themselves. But the movie really does belong to Ferrell. I am amazed at the humanity and vulnerability he can bring to even the most bizarre character. You just have to like the guy. And we also liked his movie. **GRADE B**

BLENDED: (2014) One of the more predictable events following the release of a new Adam Sandler film is the avalanche of negative reviews. For some reason critics hate Sandler films. One of the kindest critical comments I could find was, “A lot less painful than anticipated.” Typical audiences, on the other hand, are more enthusiastic. I don’t always love Sandler films, but one of my favorite comedy/dramas in the last ten years was a Sandler film, *Spanglish*. In this latest film, Sandler teams with Drew Barrymore. *Blended* is the third pairing of Sandler and Barrymore in the romantic comedy genre. This one starts with a disastrous blind date so we know immediately how the story will end. As we left the theater I commented to Barbara that the film seemed like it had two directors, one for the comedy and one for the romance. The one going for laughs used the “desperately throw it at the wall and hope it sticks” method. For me the approach worked only about 5% of the time. The one working on the romance was more successful and we thought Sandler playing Jim and Barrymore playing Lauren worked well together. Jim and Lauren are both single parents with a total of five children between them. They were delightful. Much of the movie is set in Africa so the scenery is gorgeous. Because the comedy and the romance are so widely separated on the grading scale, we come out with an average grade. **GRADE C**

THE BLIND SIDE: In the first round of the NFL football draft last spring, the Baltimore Ravens drafted a 6'4", 309 pound tackle from the University of Mississippi named Michael Oher. The story of his life prior to college is the subject of this film. And what a story it is! Michael was born to a crack cocaine addict who was incapable of raising him. He spent time in various foster homes, attended eleven different schools, and spent frequent periods with no fixed address. Michael's life began to change when a football coach at a private Memphis high school convinced administrators to admit the sixteen-year-old as a student. His life changed drastically when Leigh Anne Tuohy, a Memphis socialite and a force of nature, took an interest in the very large, very introverted boy. She and her husband took him into their home and made him a member of their family. When this heart warming story is combined with football and Sandra Bullock in what may be her best role ever, you have a real winner. Bullock is outstanding at Leigh Anne. Even the real Leigh Anne approves. Tim McGraw is fine as Sean Tuohy, and Jae Head is terrific as S.J. Touhy, a pint-sized version of his mother. Oher is played by Quinton Aaron, who has appeared in a couple of features but hits the spotlight in this one. Kathy Bates has a small but memorable role as Oher's tutor. Heart-warming stories sometimes overdo the sentimental manipulation, but this story and the people in it ring true from start to finish. The critics are all over the place on this one. It's probably a B movie, but we enjoyed it so much we have to say A. Over the closing credits you can see photos of the real Oher and his adopted family. **GRADE A**

BLINDSPOTTING: (2018) "Powerful" seems too bland a word for the impact of this movie, but it's the first word that came into our minds after seeing it. If you can tolerate the frequent rap-like dialogue, you will see a unique movie that covers the dark topic of systemic racism, and the lighter topics of friendship and gentrification. Set in Oakland, California, it's the story of two life-long friends: the charismatic Collin (Daveed Diggs) and the volatile Miles (Rafael Casal). Collin is serving the last few days of his year-long probation. He is living in a half-way house and is desperate to avoid anything that will send him back to prison. Even when he sees a White cop gun down a young Black man, he wants nothing more than to make his half-way house curfew. I don't think a white person can possibly understand what it's like to be a young black man in one of America's cities. When a police cruiser pulls alongside Collin and shines its spotlight on him, we see a terrified man who is trying to appear harmless. The tension of the moment is palpable. When we learn of the fight for which Collin was jailed, we are appalled at the violence, and when Miles joins in, we can feel his every kick. When Collin's ex-girlfriend says that the erratic Miles will get Collin arrested or killed, we believe that it might be true. The confrontation between Collin and the murdering cop is one of the most powerful scenes that Gary and I have ever seen. Diggs and Casal wrote the story and the dialogue, and Carlos López Estrada has directed his first feature-length film with a creative hand. *Variety* said this about **Blindspotting**: "If there ever was a movie to open America's eyes it's this one." We agree. **GRADE A**

BLOOD DIAMOND: "Diamonds are a girl's best friend" might take on new meaning if you chose to see this action thriller directed by Edward Zwick. As might be expected from the director of "The Last Samurai," Zwick delivers a historically based action thriller filled with violence. Many innocents suffer and die but the violence is not gratuitous. Set in war-torn Sierra Leone in the 1990's, the film focuses on the greed triggered by the presence of diamonds. The story is driven by three powerful actors, Leonardo DiCaprio, Djimon Hounsou, and Jennifer Connelly. DiCaprio plays a South African mercenary, Connelly plays an American reporter, and Hounsou plays a South African taken from his family and forced to work the diamond fields. Although there is not so much as a screen kiss between Connelly and DiCaprio, the screen chemistry between them is more palpable than in lesser films where entangled body parts substitute for screen romance. The film's title refers to the illicit dealing in "conflict diamonds," or "blood diamonds" smuggled out of war-torn nations with profits that further the bloodshed. I went to this film hoping that the violence I glimpsed in the trailers would be justified by the social message. Barbara and I felt the film accomplished this. **GRADE B+**

BLOOD SIMPLE: (Re-release) We saw this film when it first came out in 1985. We thought then that it was a bizarre film, but we loved it. We feel the same way now. This was the first film of Joel and Ethan Coen's to receive wide release and it started their careers with a bang. The story is fairly simple: Julian's (Dan Hedaya) wife, Abby (Frances McDormand) gets involved with one of his employees, Ray (John Getz). Julian hires a private detective (M. Emmet Walsh) to kill Ray and Abbey. Standard crime plot, yes, but the events in this sordid crime story are unbelievable. And yet, the events all make perfect sense as the plot develops. Walsh is quite wonderful in this movie. There aren't as many laughs in this film as there were in Fargo, but you can see glimpses of the Coen brothers' quirky sense of humor. Joel Coen directed **Blood Simple** and he and his brother wrote the script. The B+ is Gary's. **GRADE: A-/B+**

We decided to each do a review of this controversial movie.

BLONDE: (Barb's review) 2022 (Netflix) It is the height of irony that in a film about the exploitation of Marilyn Monroe the filmmakers exploited her once again. I wondered, in this most depressing film, where was the drive and focus of Norma Jean to become such a beloved movie star? It seemed that Andrew Dominik (director & writer) covered all the bad things that happened in Monroe's life and then beat us over the head with it. I kept wondering how a woman would have brought the novel by Joyce Carol Oates to film? Of course Oates is a woman, but she characterized her novel as "a work of fiction." I was put off by a forced abortion scene that plays like pro-life propaganda, and I will never get over that scene with JFK. An audience member on Rotten Tomatoes said, "In real life, Marilyn was set to portray Jean Harlow in a biopic. But once she received the script, she was mortified by how Harlow was being portrayed. She turned it down saying to her agent, 'I hope they don't do that to me after I'm gone.' They did that to you Marilyn. I'm so sorry." I am sorry, too. Despite a dazzlingly brilliant performance by Ana de Armas, the film doesn't have much to recommend it. I wasn't infuriated by the movie, but I was depressed by 2 hours and 46 minutes of pain and agony. **GRADE C**

BLONDE: (Gary's Review) **Blonde** is a 2022 film written and directed by Andrew Dominik and based on the 2000 novel of the same name by Joyce Carol Oates. Oates does not claim the story is accurate, but is a fictionalized take on the life and career of American actress Marilyn Monroe, beautifully played by Ana de Armas. Be warned the film is nearly three hours long. Earning only 45% from critics on the Tomatometer, **Blonde** was controversial among critics and audiences alike. It is not an easy film to watch. By focusing almost entirely on how Marilyn was exploited by nearly everyone in her life, the movie paradoxically seems to exploit her further by reveling in sadness. The movie begins during Norma Jean's childhood, showing the emotional and physical abuse inflicted on her by her mentally unstable mother, Gladys. Gladys ends up in a mental asylum. From her volatile childhood as Norma Jeane, the movie moves through Marilyn's rise to stardom and romantic entanglements, then to her early death at 36. By the film's end, I was left with the uneasy question, "Are all men pigs?" Most of the movie seems to support that hypothesis. It is a hard film to grade. **GRADE C+/B-**

BLOOD WORK: We went to see *Blood Work* because we both enjoyed Michael Connelly's novel. We liked the movie because it concentrates on an intriguing investigation. We appreciated the painstaking detective work involved in solving a case. *Blood Work* also has a rather touching emotional element. Terry McCaleb (Clint Eastwood) is an FBI profiler who had a heart attack while chasing a killer. This is the opening scene, and the rest of the story takes place two years later after McCaleb has had a heart transplant and has retired from police work. Anjelica Huston is McCaleb's doctor and she cautions him to take it very easy, but when the sister of a murder victim comes to him for help, he feels compelled to investigate. Graciella Rivers (Wanda De Jesus) tells McCaleb that he received her sister's heart on the day that she died in a convenience store killing, and that convinces McCaleb that he has a responsibility to find his donor's killer. As the former profiler investigates, his relationship with Rivers begins to turn romantic. We particularly liked De Jesus--I don't remember ever seeing her before--and we were also quite taken with Tina Lifford who played a detective who had previously worked with McCaleb. Less successful was Paul Rodriguez, a LAPD detective who has long resented McCaleb's celebrity and is hostile to him. Their conflict is pure formula cliché, and the attempt to inject some humor into the mix failed utterly. In addition, we didn't care much for the ending. It is pretty standard stuff and not up to the rest of the movie. I have a suspicion that the novel's ending was tinkered with in the film, but can't remember it well enough to be sure. Jeff Daniels, who we haven't seen for quite a while, is Buddy Noone. Buddy gives McCaleb some help and does provide a few chuckles. Clint Eastwood directed. **GRADE B**

BLOW: In spite of the fact that this movie stars one of my favorite actors, I simply could not get involved in the story of George Jung, one of the first high-volume cocaine importers. The script is based on a book by Bruce Porter. Jung started out selling weed and thought it was such an easy way to make lots of money that he graduated to becoming a cocaine distributor working for the infamous Pablo Escobar. Living the high life, he married a beautiful Colombian girl (Penelope Cruz) and had a daughter on whom he doted. It's no news to us that the drug life is not a happy one. Betrayed by his partners and friends, Jung is spending his life behind bars. Franka Potente, from *Run, Lola, Run* is Jung's first girlfriend, and Ray Liotta and Rachel Griffiths appear as his parents. The film was directed by Ted Demme, and while some critics have compared it favorably to *Traffic*, I cannot. It doesn't even come close. Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper disagreed over this movie on their TV show. I agree with Ebert who said, "The failure (of the movie) is George Jung's. For all the glory of his success and the pathos of his failure, he never became a person interesting enough to make a movie about." Gary liked it better than I and give it one grade higher. **GRADE: C/B**

BLOW THE MAN DOWN: (2019 on Amazon Prime) The movie got 99% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, and this sentence made us want to watch it: "Clever, funny, and original, *Blow the Man Down* is a cinematic journey that's not to be missed." We should have been wary when we saw the audience reaction at 77%. We didn't once chuckle, because there was nothing funny about it. The Coen Brothers are adept at combining violence and humor, but the makers of *Blow the Man Down* are not. The story takes place in Easter Cove, a small fishing village on Maine's rocky coast. Grieving the loss of their mother and facing an uncertain future, Mary Beth & Priscilla Connolly cover up a gruesome run-in with a dangerous man. To conceal their crime, the sisters must go deeper into Easter Cove's underbelly and uncover the town matriarchs' darkest secrets. Again, not funny. There was a lot of singing, which, along with the music, didn't add anything to the story. In spite of a cast that included Margo Martindale, June Squibb and Annette O'Toole, we can't recommend this one. **GRADE C**

BLUE COLLAR COMEDY TOUR: Movie View readers Bill & Rita W., Scottsdale, AZ recommended this comedy concert film to us. They saw it and laughed a lot. So did we. If you like Jeff Foxworthy and his blue collar brand of comedy, you will enjoy this movie. The other performers are Ron White, Larry The Cable Guy and Bill Engvall. Engvall is the comedian who says that stupid people should wear a sign. Foxworthy, of course, is the "If you might be a redneck" guy. Each comedian does a set and inbetween, they visit some local spots such as a Victoria Secrets store, a spa, and a Spencers Gift store where Larry The Cable Guy buys a remote fart machine. At the end of the show, all four men come on stage and share stories. We thought this was the funniest part of the movie. *Blue Collar Comedy Tour* was filmed at the Dodge Theater in Phoenix. When I went to the Movie Review Query Engine to look at reviews, the only one listed was from the Arizona Republic. The film may not be in general release, but I suspect it will be available on video before long. We recommend it for anyone who likes to laugh. **GRADE B**

BLUE JASMINE: (2013) Wow! What a brilliant performance by Cate Blanchett! She is the centerpiece of Woody Allen's movie about a socialite whose fall from wealth and privilege has catapulted her into a nervous collapse—a breakdown from which she hasn't yet recovered. We were impressed with Blanchett in 1997's *Oscar and Lucinda*, and her subsequent performances have never disappointed. She is devastating as Jasmine in this movie, one of Allen's best. (One critic describes her work as "jaw-dropping. . . what we go to the movies hoping to see.") For the last forty years Allen has written and directed at least one film a year, and he still appears to be at the top of his game. *Blue Jasmine* is one of his more serious films. It is a character study of a woman whose entire life has been a lie but who clings to an ideal vision of what her life could be. When the financial empire of her husband (Alec Baldwin) is exposed as an elaborate Ponzi scheme, Jasmine is forced by her reduced circumstances to move to San Francisco where she can rely on the charity of her younger sister, Ginger. Sally Hawkins is divine as a woman who always felt inferior to her older, richer sister, but whose goodness shines through in what Jasmine considers an "inferior life." In a surprise but successful bit of casting, Andrew Dice Clay appears as Ginger's abusive ex-husband. Bobby Cannavale, always worth watching, is Ginger's current boyfriend. I almost didn't recognize Peter Sarsgaard as Dwight, Jasmine's chance to reclaim a life of privilege. Here he looks so completely different from the condemned man he played in this season of *The Killing*. I could go on and on about the cast, everyone is terrific. Apparently, Woody Allen calls only the very best, and when he calls, everyone says "yes." We look forward every year to the latest film by Allen. This year, we were elated. **GRADE A**

BLUE JEAN: 2022 (Prime rental \$7) Rosy McEwen plays Jean, a lesbian gym teacher in 1988 England, when the Maggie Thatcher government was passing the notorious Section 28 laws prohibiting the "promotion of homosexuality." Jean is a PE teacher, but none of the other teachers at her school know her secret. Jean has a girlfriend named Viv (Kerrie Hayes), with whom she participates enthusiastically in the gay bar scene, but she doesn't let Viv call her at school for fear of someone finding out. The arrival of a new student, Lois (Lucy Halliday), undoes Jean's scrupulously maintained double life to the point of collapse when she notices Lois at the gay bar. There are lots of warm portrayals of the gay sisterhood, but the overwhelming theme is the perils of leading a double life. I

liked Ty Burr's comment that the lighting and score sometimes make you think you're watching a monster movie. He goes on to say, "It's worth remembering that the monster is Maggie Thatcher." Gary questioned the writing--he thought the movie was not as good as it should be. We both thought McEwen was excellent, but at the end of the movie I wanted more from Jean. **GRADE B** from me, **B-** from Gary

BLUE VALENTINE: When we first meet Dean (Ryan Gosling) and Cindy (Michelle Williams) they have been married for ten years. Dean seems happy being a husband and father to their young daughter, and delighted that his job as a house painter lets him start the day with a beer. Cindy is an RN working in a medical practice. She does not seem happy. For her, at least, the bloom has definitely faded. We soon see scenes of the beginning of their relationship—the madly in love part, and learn of the complicated circumstances that led to the marriage. This is a non-linear movie that switches back and forth between the end and the beginning of a marriage, but, as Gary so aptly put it, skips over the important middle. It is clear that for Cindy, love has died and we are given clues as to why it happened, but it is not illustrated in the film. I decided that their problem was that Cindy grew up and Dean didn't. Gary felt their primary problem was their inability to communicate. Cindy was somewhat inarticulate and Dean overwhelmed her with talk whenever she tried to bring up a serious subject. But whatever caused love to end, we are given a beautiful picture of the beginning of love and the end of it. Gosling and Williams are superb. Writer/director Derek Cianfrance, like Mike Leigh, lets his camera linger on the actor's faces and both actors have faces that are up to the task. Cianfrance began making movies at age 13. His first three films won consecutive Goldfarb Awards, and one of them premiered at Sundance to much acclaim. He is a gifted filmmaker and we expect to see more from him. **GRADE B+/B**

BOBBY: (2006 seen on DVD) We were disappointed in this film. Emilio Estevez spent six years researching the events surrounding Robert Kennedy's assassination in the kitchen of L.A.'s Ambassador Hotel in 1968. He used archival footage of Kennedy, and in addition, introduced us to a lot of people who were supposedly there that day. Estevez put together an all-star cast including Anthony Hopkins, Harry Belafonte, W.H. Macy, Sharon Stone, Demi Moore, Lindsey Lohan, Helen Hunt, Heather Graham, Christian Slater, Lawrence Fishburne and Martin Sheen. But, we didn't find the characters or stories the least bit interesting. Only the archival footage of Kennedy and scenes from 1968 engaged us. Perhaps it played better in the theaters, but we can't recommend it as a rental. **THUMBS DOWN**

BOBBY JONES: STROKE OF GENIUS--Although most of the critics found this film uninspired, we think golfers will enjoy it. Without any theatrics and false conflicts, it tells the story of Bobby Jones, the greatest golfer who ever lived. Jim Caviezel, a non-golfer, does his best to imitate the extraordinarily graceful swing of Jones, the only golfer in history to record the "Grand Slam," winning the U.S. Amateur, U.S. Open, British Amateur and British Open championships in a single year, 1930. Jones was 28 years old at the time. Born into a life of privilege, he was also born with a spinal disorder (syringomyelia) which caused him great physical agony. The film reveals the man and the glorious, frustrating game of golf. There are some wonderful shots of the Old Course at St. Andrews. Just seeing the dawn coming up on a fairway made me want to rush out to a golf course! Malcolm McDowell as O.B. Keeler, an Atlanta newspaperman and Jones' friend, added a lot to the film. We also liked Jeremy Northam (*Gosford Park*) as the flamboyant Walter Hagen. Claire Forlani is appropriately supportive as Mr. Jones' wife. There isn't a lot of excitement in the film and it's true that Bobby comes off as a bit of a saint. The *NY Times* reviewer called it "...lethally dull..." and Rick Kogan of the *Chicago Tribune* said "...this film has nothing whatsoever to recommend it." I'm willing to bet that neither one of them ever played golf. I agree with John Patterson of *LA Weekly* who said " *Stroke of Genius* remains relaxed, leisurely and unforced, exactly the way a pleasant round of golf ought to be." Gary loved it! He gives it an A. I too enjoyed it and never for one moment got bored. I give it a good solid B. **GRADE A/B**

BODY HEAT: 1981 Prime rental (\$2.99) This was Kathleen Turner's first movie and she had a dynamite entrance into the movie, striding up the aisle at an open air band shell concert in a white dress slit up the side. We both remember that scene and that dress. The film launched Turner's career—*The New York Times* wrote in 2005 that, propelled by her "jaw-dropping movie debut in *Body Heat* ... she built a career on adventurousness and frank sexuality born of robust physicality." In keeping with our looking for iconic movies from the past, Gary and I happily rented the film. William Hurt was the unsuspecting lawyer to fall into Mattie's plan to kill her husband (Richard Crenna) and pin it on her lover. The only hitch in the plan was that she fell in love with Ned (Hurt). Or did she? The ending is ambiguous, and we like that. The heat, both literal and figurative, and the constant tinkling of those wind chimes made such an atmospheric mood that we remember it to this day. Just as we recalled a young Ted Danson dancing on the pier at night. Lawrence Kasden directed and wrote the screenplay. He drew inspiration from 1944's *Double Indemnity*, and is reported to have wanted this film to have "the intricate structure of a dream, the density of a good novel, and the texture of recognizable people in extraordinary circumstances." He succeeded. The music, composed by John Barry, added much to the atmosphere and was woven throughout the film. The movie was rated R in 1981, probably because of the nudity, although it was tame by today's standards. We loved it then and we love it now. My all-time favorite movie quote is from *Body Heat*-- Kathleen Turner to William Hurt--"You're not too smart, are you? I like that in a man." **GRADE A**

William Hurt – 1950-2022 (He died on March 13th, the day after we watched *Body Heat*.)

BODY OF WAR: (2007 seen on DVD) On April 4, 2004, his fifth day in Iraq, 23-year-old Army soldier Tomas Young was sent on a mission in an uncovered, unarmored five-ton truck. He was hit by two rounds from an AK-47, which severed his spinal cord and paralyzed him. After his release from Walter Reed Hospital, he became an active member of the Iraq Veterans Against the War. This documentary, written and directed by Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro, received only limited release. We agree with Roger Ebert who said in his review, *Body of War* again demonstrates that we Americans still have some bitter truths to face. Not only was 9/11 a day that will live in infamy, but our mistakes nearly every day since then have perpetuated and compounded the darkness. **THUMBS UP**

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY: (2018) What a way to spend New Years Eve! We went to a 6:30 p.m. showing and didn't get home until after 9:00. A movie after dark! How daring of us. We both greatly enjoyed the movie. We were not fans of the band, but their music in the film was infectious, especially at the Live Aid concert in 1985. I can understand why their 20 minutes on stage was called "the greatest live gig of all time." The movie does get a few small details wrong, but it gets the essence of Queen right. Rami Malek, of TV's *Mr. Robot* fame plays Freddie Mercury with a mouthful of teeth and absolutely nails it. Mercury actually did have four extra teeth in the back of his

mouth and that fueled a lifetime of insecurity. He didn't want to have them removed because he thought they were responsible for his unique sound. He had already been diagnosed with AIDS before the Live Aid concert, and while the band toured after that historic event, they stopped the tour on August 9, 1986. Their performance that day was the last time they were seen on the stage together. (Mercury died in 1991.) Mercury's AIDS diagnosis was particularly poignant for me, because my younger brother, Steve, died a few months after Queen's final concert of an AIDS-related illness. If you visit *History Vs. Hollywood* you will see that the casting of the band members was excellent. Although Malek doesn't look very like Mercury, the actor has all the patented Mercury moves and he is excellent in the role. This movie was the perfect way to usher in 2019. **GRADE B+**

BOILER ROOM: Giovanni Rabis is a young man who wants to make money in this testosterone festival of a movie. Rabis's Seth is a disappointment to his father, the judge. Little wonder, since he dropped out of school and made his living running an illegal gambling parlour. When Seth joins a brokerage firm, his father seems pleased. But J.T. Marlin is a most unusual brokerage firm. Located miles from Wall Street, it aggressively sells of stock in companies that exist only on paper. Ben Affleck is perfect as the sales trainer. "There is a sale made on every phone call you make. Either you sell the customer some stock, or he sells you on a reason not to buy." Seth is too bright not to catch on to J.T. Marlin's scheme, and his discovery plunges him into a moral dilemma. There are some nice scenes between Seth and his father, played by Ron Rifkin, and Vin Diesel is interesting as a successful broker. There is also a bit of a love story, but mostly it is the story of young men frantic to be millionaires. You can almost smell the testosterone! **GRADE: B**

BOMBSHELL: (2019) Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman, and Margot Robbie star in this film that chronicles the sexual harassment claims that led to the subsequent downfall of Fox News CEO, Roger Ailes. Theron plays Megyn Kelly and acts as the primary narrator of the film. Kidman plays Gretchen Carlson whose initial allegation against Ailes started the lawsuit that eventually led to Ailes's downfall. However, Robbie's character, Kayla, is not a real person, but is inspired by 20 real-life accounts. Using some archival news footage gives the movie authenticity and emphasizes how much the actors look like the real persons they are playing. That includes John Lithgow as Ailes, Alison Janney as Ailes's lawyer, Kevin Dorff as Bill O'Reilly and Richard Kind as Rudy Giuliani. The cast is star-studded and one of the pleasures of the movie is identifying the actors and marveling at how much they seemed like Fox News anchors and staffers. Theron and Robbie both received Golden Globe nominations, and The Screen Actors Guild has nominated the cast of *Bombshell* in the Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture category, and. In spite of a compelling and watchable cast, I can't rate the movie higher than a B. I agree with a critic who called the action "clunky" and I thought the story-telling was a bit disjointed. But, the movie is, indeed, watchable and entertaining. **GRADE B**

BOMBSHELL: THE HEDY LAMARR STORY: (2017) This sad but fascinating documentary was promoted as a bittersweet celebration and reclamation of Hedy Lamarr's journey from Hollywood legend to technology genius. On Tomatometer, the relatively few critics and audiences who saw the film resulted in scores of 96% and 94% respectively. Barbara and I agree. It is an entertaining, and at times heartbreaking and infuriating, film. Hedy Lamarr was a ravishingly beautiful Hollywood actress of the 1930s and 40s who starred alongside silver screen giants like Spencer Tracy, Jimmy Stewart and Clark Gable. Her image was the inspiration for Snow White and Cat Woman. But Lamarr was a brilliant woman who never had the chance to show her full potential. With a long history of misogyny, Hollywood was only interested in her looks. For decades the world was never aware that from this beautiful woman's brain came the idea for a groundbreaking communication system that eventually changed the course of history. She invented a wireless form of communication called "frequency hopping" that revolutionized mobile communications and would directly lead to the creation of secure communications for wireless phones, Bluetooth, GPS and WiFi. It was, perhaps, Lamarr herself who summed up her own apparent contradictions: *I'm just a simple complicated woman*. This is a film worth seeking out. **GRADE A-**

BONNEVILLE: If you put Jessica Lange, Kathy Bates and Joan Allen in a vintage Bonneville convertible and send them on a road trip, you really ought to have a better script. Lange plays a newly widowed second wife who must deliver her husband's ashes to his daughter so that she can bury him next to her mother. Bates and Allen go along for the ride. They seemed to be having fun. Wish I could say the same for us. Don't get me wrong, it has a few nice moments, and those three actresses are always interesting to watch. The addition of Tom Skerritt as a trucker they meet on the road is a good one. It's just that there are too many dull moments, and too many shots of Lange looking sad and pensive. It's as though they had enough script for a 60 minute movie and padded it with lackluster material to stretch it out to 104 minutes. They should have found some good writers instead. **GRADE C**

BON VOYAGE: (2003 Release--Subtitled) This French film is part comedy, part romance, part farce, and part thriller woven together in a skillful and entertaining way. We meet a beautiful and famous actress (Isabelle Adjani), a young writer who loves her (Gregori Derangere), a French Cabinet Minister (Gerard Depardieu), a physics professor who is trying to get to England with his supply of heavy water (needed to help create a nuclear chain reaction), and several German spies. The time is 1940, shortly before the Germans march into Paris, and it begins with a death. Is it murder? Or an accident? Only time will tell. There are several frantic chase scenes and some exciting moments, along with some political intrigue. All in all, a good time at the movies. **GRADE B+**

BOOK CLUB: (2018) Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen, and Mary Steenburgen star in this slightly tacky comedy of love and sex for the over-60 set. The movie received mixed reviews from critics and earned a modest 56% on Rotten Tomatoes' Tomatometer. It's great to see these four consummate pros working together, but unfortunately the screenplay did not measure up to the talents of the stars nor the supporting cast. Barbara and I were underwhelmed by the mediocre screenplay which seemed fascinated with adolescent humor and reworked old jokes, but I must quickly add that there was an abundance of hearty laughter from the mostly women in the packed theater. The four women play lifelong friends' whose lives are turned upside down when their book club tackles the infamous bestselling book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. But, really, *Fifty Shades* merely serves as an excuse to get these women into the same room once a month where they talk about their sex lives. To be truthful Barbara and I have read *about Fifty Shades*, but neither of us has actually read it. We were hoping for a screenplay that would occasionally challenge the four stars as well as the talented supporting cast which included Andy Garcia, Don Johnson, Richard Dreyfuss, and Craig T. Nelson. It didn't. **GRADE C**

THE BOOK OF ELI: In this post-apocalyptic grim-looking film, Denzell Washington is Eli, a man who has been walking through a devastated and dismal landscape for 30 years trying to reach the West. He carries with him the only existing copy of the Bible. He

protects it and it protects him. Even when he runs into a town run by the very evil Gary Oldman. Oldman wants "the book" because with it he feels he can control the masses. There are some satisfying fight scenes where Denzell dispatches numerous villains with his very big knife and several other weapons. He never seems to suffer an injury. Do you sense an allegory? Washington was magnetic enough to keep us watching until the end, but mostly out of curiosity. It wasn't our cup of tea. The religious message will no doubt please many people, but we found it heavy-handed. **GRADE C**

THE BOOK THIEF: This movie is based on a best-selling 2005 novel by the same title. The original novel is usually described as a "young adult" book, but it appealed to all ages and was listed on the *The New York Times* Best Seller list for over 230 weeks. It is always difficult to make a movie from a beloved novel, especially one that is set in Nazi Germany during WWII and features "Death" as a narrator. Narration can be troublesome in movies but here it seemed essential to the story. Some critics felt that the movie was over-plotted, but that is inevitable when a detailed novel is cut down fit movie time. Other critics thought it was too sentimental, always an element that critics decry but audiences enjoy. And we did enjoy *The Book Thief*, sentimentality and all. There are especially strong performances from Sophie Nelisse as Liesel, the title character, and Emily Watson as Liesel's foster mother who hides a soft core behind a gruff exterior. Geoffrey Rush is outstanding as Liesel's foster papa and gives the movie its heart. If you see the movie, you will notice that Barbara Auer, who plays the Burgermeister's wife, looks incredibly like Ingrid Bergman. I felt that the filmmakers purposely soft pedaled the Nazi violence, but that is understandable since *The Book Thief* is not a Holocaust film, but rather the story of a girl whose coming-of-age took place at an extremely difficult time. It was sometimes overly melodramatic, but we don't mind a bit of melodrama now and then. **GRADE B+**

THE BOOKSHOP: (2018) This is not a movie I can recommend to our readers even though I rather liked it. It is slow moving. Barbara felt it was painfully slow at times and many critics would agree with her. Set in a conservative small English village in the 1950's, a free-spirited widow risks everything to open a bookshop. But the story is less dependent on incidents than on mood and character. Nearly all the critics were kind to the leading actors who are loved on both sides of the Atlantic: Emily Mortimer, Bill Nighy, & Patricia Clarkson. They are all excellent actors and play their roles flawlessly. Mortimer plays the book loving entrepreneur. Nighy plays a recluse who, we are told, "adored books with the same passion that he detested his fellow man," and Clarkson plays the local grand dame who wants to take the bookstore away from Florence and turn it into an "arts center," I learned after seeing the movie that it is beautifully narrated by an unseen and un-credited British movie legend Julie Christie. **GRADE B-/C+**

BOOKSMART 2019 (Available on Hulu) This is an American coming-of-age buddy comedy directed by Olivia Wilde in her feature directorial debut. On the eve of their high-school graduation, two academic superstars and best friends realize they should have worked less and played more. Determined not to fall short of their peers, the girls try to cram four years of fun into one night. The movie received acclaim from critics receiving 96% on the Tomatometer based on 380 reviews. It's raunchy and kind of gross at times, and in no way did the high school milieu resemble either Barbara or my memories of high school, but we have to remember that was more than seven decades ago. I have to admit this movie just wasn't for us. The last quarter of the film was better than the first three-quarters, but the bar wasn't very high. **GRADE C**

Barb: I wanted to watch because Beanie Feldstein (Molly in *Booksmart*) had recently opened on Broadway playing Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, the part made famous by Barbra Streisand in 1968.

BORAT!: CULTURAL LEARNING OF AMERICA FOR MAKE BENEFIT GLORIOUS NATION OF KASAKHSTAN: This is a difficult movie to review. I think you'll have to see it for yourself. But be warned: It is loaded with crotch jokes and other unmentionable material, including a nude wrestling scene that is better left undescribed. **Borat!**

has gotten many favorable reviews--even A's--from almost all the critics listed on Yahoo Movies. I can't imagine why. Maybe they were grading on the length of the title. Granted, there are some funny things in it and both Gary and I chuckled quite a few times. But an A movie? I don't think so. Sacha Baron Cohen plays Borat, a newscaster in Kazakhstan who is dispatched to the United States to make a documentary. The plan is to spend his time in New York, but, watching TV one night in his hotel room, he tunes into *Baywatch* and falls madly in love with Pamela Anderson. Naturally he has to travel to California to "make meet with her." (And anything else he is able to do with her.) Cohen is a British comic best known until now for another of his pseudonymous identities, Ali G. In this film he reminded Gary of some of Andy Kaufman's characters. William Arnold of the Seattle Post Intelligencer gave *Borat* a C saying that the movie "cannot begin to match its delicious high concept. It's offensively funny in places but it can't sustain itself for a feature length running time and it's not nearly as clever or as fun as it should be." I'm with him. Gary agrees on a **GRADE C**

BORN IN CHINA (2017) John Krasinski (TV's *The Office*) narrates this journey into the wilds of China where a huge crew from Disney Studios focus their cameras on spectacular landscapes and extraordinary close-ups of animal activity. It is a 79 minute nature film, and if you are fond of nature films, it is a fun, way to learn about a part of the world most will likely never see. As is usually the case with Disney nature films, it anthropomorphizes animals and creates a story line to fit the most adorable shots from the thousands of photos taken. You may feel a little manipulated by Disney, but you will probably find at least a few charming scenes that make you say "aww!" The focus is on animal families unique to China — pandas, snow leopards, Chiru antelope and golden monkeys. It is a seasonal story covering the span of a year, beginning and ending in the spring. The stories of the animals opens with beautiful footage of red-crowned cranes, a sacred animal in China, deeply steeped in mythology and local beliefs about life and death. For Barbara and me, some of the most interesting and instructional scenes followed the animal family stories and showed footage of the film crews while you gained a glimpse how the film was made. **GRADE B**

(Note: Since we saw the movie in the first week it was released, DisneyNature donated part of our ticket price to the World Wildlife fund.)

BORN INTO BROTHELS: (2004 Release) Winner of last year's academy award for best documentary, this is a truly unique film. It is a documentary about children of prostitutes growing up in Calcutta's squalid red light district. The film focuses on the efforts of Ms. Brinski, an American photographer, to help seven of the children escape their environment. She hit on the brilliant idea of giving cameras to the children, teaching them how to take interesting photos, and asking them to use the cameras to record the world in which they lived. This may sound like exploitation, but if you see this extraordinary film you will appreciate the efforts of a truly compassionate

woman who is trying to make a difference in the lives of children who never before had a ghost of a chance. The red light district has existed for centuries in Calcutta and the culture seems to assure that it will continue. Ms. Brinski's efforts are only partially successful, but to make even a small difference is heart warming. The film is slow in starting, but by the end you will very glad you made the effort. **GRADE B+**

BORN YESTERDAY: 1950/2022 (Recorded from Turner Classic Movies) If ever a movie was made for these turbulent times, it's this one. *Born Yesterday* values knowledge and honesty over self-interest and corruption. Harry Brock (Broderick Crawford) has come to Washington DC to buy a congressman. He brought along his girlfriend, Billie Dawn (Judy Holliday) and his sleazy lawyer, Jim Devery (Howard St. John). The lawyer has been pressuring Harry to marry Billie because a wife cannot be forced to testify against her husband. Holliday is wonderful as a girl from the chorus who never has had a serious thought in her head. Recognizing that Billie's lack of social graces might be a liability in DC, Harry hires journalist Paul Verrall (William Holden) to smarten her up. That was a mistake. Billie is not stupid and she hasn't valued learning, but, under Paul's tutelage, she begins to think for herself. That's not good for Harry. Visiting the DC monuments inspires not only Billie but the audience as well, reminding us of the values the founders enshrined in the Declaration of Independence the Constitution, and the glory of a democratic country. It's a terrific movie and is as good today as it ever was. **GRADE A**

(Notice the gin game between Harry and Billie. It is a classic.)

BOSTON STRANGLER: 2023 (On Hulu) The movie is distinguished by having one of our favorite actors, Chris Cooper, in the cast. Cooper plays the editor of Boston Record American where both Loretta McLaughlin and Jean Cole worked during the 1960s. Loretta McLaughlin (Keira Knightly) becomes the first journalist to connect the Boston Strangler murders. As the mysterious killer claims more and more victims, Loretta attempts to continue her investigation alongside colleague and confidante Jean Cole (Carrie Coon). There was a feminist side story in the movie about how women reporters were usually relegated to the Style Section, but in 1992, McLaughlin was appointed as Editorial Page Editor for the Boston Globe, only the second woman to serve in this role. Dogged journalistic investigation does not make for an exciting movie, although Gary was riveted by the story. I, on the other hand, agree with Rotten Tomatoes critic's consensus: *Boston Strangler is nowhere near as gripping as it should be, but the worthy story and strong cast are often adequate compensation.* I can't deny the cast is strong. We have liked Knightly ever since we first saw her in *Bend It Like Beckham* in 2002. One critic said, "This has to be one of the worst looking movies I can remember." He objected to the palette which is made up of varying shades of brownish-greenish colors. It is a dark movie, but the subject matter is dark as well. It didn't bother us. There is still speculation about whether Albert DeSalvo is responsible for the *Boston Strangler* crimes, although the movie offers some answers. Gary gives the movie an enthusiastic A, but I settled for a B. **GRADE B/A**

BOTTLE SHOCK: The good news: The film is about the 1976 Paris Wine Competition that showcased a chardonnay from Chateau Montelena and cabernet sauvignon from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, both from the Napa Valley. The 1976 "Judgement of Paris" changed the world of wine forever, bringing California wines to the world stage. There are beautiful shots of vineyards and lots of wine drinking. Also, it features Alan Rickman as the man who organized the French/American competition. **The bad news:** Apparently fearing that a movie about the competition alone would be too esoteric for most movie goers, the writers concocted a story of father/son conflict and threw in a gorgeous young woman to provide some young love interest. The concocted story was lame. Rickman is wonderful at playing a stuffy Brit and we also liked Freddy Rodríguez as a talented young winemaker. But when it comes to Bill Pullman as the Montelena winemaker and Chris Pine as his son, we have to agree with the L.A. Times critic who said, "The characters are stiffly drawn and often just plain unlikable." Roger Ebert liked the film, but most of the critics have been lukewarm, and we can understand why. Because the film ends with the competition, we thought it left a pleasant aftertaste. I'm a wine lover, so I say B-; Gary is a teetotaler, so he says C+. **GRADE B-/C+**

BOUNCE: We enjoyed this romance starring Ben Affleck and Gwyneth Paltrow. It will never be a classic, but Affleck and Paltrow are both so skilled and so totally watchable, that it makes for a pleasant afternoon's entertainment. Affleck is Buddy, a super-yuppie Ad agency guy with a gorgeous beachside apartment in Los Angeles. Travelling back from Chicago to LA one night, he hits bad weather and cancelled flights. In the airport bar, he meets an attractive woman and plays the charm card with good results. He also meets a man trying to get home to his family in LA and gives the family man his first-class ticket so that he can spend the evening with his new conquest. The plane crashes, killing all on board. Buddy is plunged into a yearlong binge. After rehab, he seeks out the widow (Gwyneth Paltrow) because of a desire to make some sort of amends. He cannot bring himself to tell her the truth, and precipitates the crisis in their growing relationship. Affleck and Paltrow work very well together, and each has the chance to display deep-felt emotion. We thought the script was mediocre, but the acting was first rate. Johnny Galecki, who appeared on the TV comedy, *Roseanne*, is amusing as Affleck's gay assistant, a man with a healthy disrespect for his boss. The director, Don Roos, also gave us *The Opposite of Sex*, a much edgier film than *Bounce*. **GRADE B-**

THE BOURNE IDENTITY: This is a fairly standard CIA assassin thriller with exceptionally good performances from Matt Damon and Franka Potente. The screen play was based on Robert Ludlum's novel of the same name. As the action begins, we see an almost dead man hauled out of the ocean by the crew of a French fishing boat. The ship's doctor takes two bullets out of his back, and a microchip out of his hip. The chip contains the number of a Swiss banking account. When Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) comes to, he cannot remember anything about himself. He does, however, remember about seven languages and some awesome fighting skills. The rest of the story is how Bourne discovers who and what he is. We, however, know who and what he is, and we know that the C.I.A. is trying to kill him. After obtaining the contents of the Swiss safety deposit box, he pays a young woman named Marie (Franka Potente) to drive him to Paris. At one point, there is an exciting car chase through the streets of Paris, and Damon exhibits his martial arts skills many times throughout the film. This story doesn't rely on special effects, though. It is the story of a CIA assassin who has developed amnesia and a conscience. Chris Cooper and Brian Cox appear as CIA villains, and Julia Stiles has a small role. Franka Potente is the girl from *Run, Lola, Run*, without the flaming red hair she sported in that film. The uncomplicated story and the non-stop action kept us totally engaged. Seeing this movie is a great way to spend a hot Arizona summer afternoon. **GRADE: B**

THE BOURNE LEGACY: Tony Gilroy is very good at writing these *Bourne* movies but this is the first one he has directed. (He previously directed *Duplicity* and *Michael Clayton*.) The movie definitely opens the door to another sequel. One can only hope that Gilroy directs and can convince Matt Damon to join Jeremy Renner. I'd like to see that one! Renner takes over for Damon in this version. He is a genetically enhanced product of a government program that needs to be shut down. Shut down is, of course, a euphemism for killing everyone associated with the program. The evil government is personified nicely by Ed Norton and Stacy Keach. You can expect a lot of pseudo-science and CIA gobbledegook along with the thrilling action. Renner realizes what is happening and is desperate to acquire the meds that are necessary for his enhanced physical and mental abilities. In the process, he rescues a program doctor who is scheduled for elimination. Rachel Weisz is a good partner for Renner and the romantic attraction is subtle but minimized as the two flee from a government that wants to kill them. The opening sequences of Renner crossing forbidding snow-covered mountains is spectacular. There is a rooftop chase that is reminiscent of the chase in *The Bourne Ultimatum*. The motorcycle chase at the end of this one had its moments but I thought it went on a bit too long. Jason Bourne is frequently mentioned and we do see pictures of Matt Damon. Even Joan Allen from the first three *Bourne* movies makes a brief appearance, so all the players are alive and ready for their close ups. Gary says that movies in this genre are all about stimulating your adrenal glands, and while the action scenes accomplish that, the story strains believability every bit as much. He agrees that Renner is very good and the movie is well-made, but he can't give it more than a B-. I liked it more than he and give it a B+. **GRADE B+/B-**

THE BOURNE SUPREMACY: Who knew that the boyish-looking Matt Damon would make such a terrific and credible assassin! This second movie with Damon as Jason Bourne, the CIA killer with amnesia, is much like the first one--*The Bourne Identity*. In that film, Bourne's amnesia kept the facts of his life secret but left him all the skills of an assassin. At the end, he had escaped with Marie (Franka Potente) and hoped to live a quiet life. Alas, that was not to be. In *The Bourne Supremacy*, Jason and Maria are living quietly in India, but people are still trying to kill him. What's more, he is beginning to have brief flashbacks to his former life. The film has fistfights, lots of car chases--the last one borders on the ridiculous--and several frantic chases on foot. If it weren't for the outstanding cast, this movie would rate a C, but, with Damon and the wonderful Joan Allen in the role of a CIA chief, the movie rises above its standard plot. Brian Cox, as another CIA operative, is also terrific. Julia Stiles reappears here and she and Damon have a short but intense scene together. I particularly like the fact that Damon plays an assassin with a conscience--a killer you can sympathize with. In addition, the film is very stylishly made and full of strong visual images and fast action. The ending leaves you with the impression that Jason Bourne will not go gently into obscurity. After all, there is Ludlum's next book in the series, *The Bourne Ultimatum*. I look forward to it. **GRADE B**

THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM: Jason Bourne, John McClane, James Bond, Jack Bauer: I like them all. They are cool, tough, clever and literally invincible. They walk away from car crashes that would break every bone in an ordinary man's body, but all they have is a slight limp. This third, and perhaps final, episode in the Bourne saga is a lot of fun. No startling special effects, but some great foot chases, car chases and a whole raft of very skillful stunt people. Wherever Bourne (Matt Damon) goes--London, Madrid, Tangiers, New York--people try to kill him in creative ways, but outwits them all in equally creative ways. Director Paul Greengrass knows how to keep the action jumping, but, if he makes a 4th Bourne film, I hope he buys a steady cam. I am getting used to those jerky hand-held cameras, and they probably enhance some of the action scenes, but after a while I long for a steady shot. Once again, Joan Allen is terrific as a CIA boss who is sympathetic to Bourne's plight. The always exceptional David Strahtairn plays a bad guy here--a CIA chief who believes that anything he does is patriotic, even when it comes to eliminating his own agents. Although the beginning of the film is hard to follow, it does put us in Bourne's shoes--he can't figure things out either. Robert Ludlum only wrote three Bourne novels, but this film's dynamite ending leaves the door open for a 4th. On the *Daily Show*, Damon said that Greengrass thinks a 4th film, if it were made, should be titled *The Bourne Redundancy*. I think they should quit while they're ahead, but if they make a 4th, I'll definitely go see it. Those who thought that Matt Damon was too young and boyish to be believable as Jason Bourne in the first film will find that he has matured nicely into the role. Gary and I both liked the film and so did son John and daughter-in-law Wendy. We give the film a B+. **GRADE B+**

BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE: If you saw and hated Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*, nothing I can say will get you to Michaels newest documentary effort titled *Bowling for Columbine*. If you saw this overweight unkempt man on the street, it would not surprise you that he is a lifetime member of the NRA. I will reveal why he joined NRA at the end of this review. With a title like *Bowling for Columbine*, you would expect a film about guns. And it is--sort of. Moore wants to explore why we in the United States so often use those guns to kill each other. But Moore never lets a good piece of film get away just because it doesn't quite fit the logical sequence of a story. He uses what many would call a "shotgun approach." The thing is, I like his style and I like his shotgun approach and I usually like his message. The film is funny, informative, thought provoking, and poignant. More questions are asked than answered and he does a better job of poking fun at facile answers than at proposing plausible ones. I have no difficulty recommending this rabble-rousing film even to my right wing Republican conservatives. Barbara and I grade it a "B". Now for why Moore is a lifetime member of NRA. An interview in *Entertainment Weekly* reveals that he joined after the Columbine tragedy with the unrealistic intent of finding five million (NRA has four million members) people to join with him to unseat Charlton Heston as president and dismantle the organization. **Grade B.** . . (Note from Barbara: I thought Chris Rock had the best idea: If bullets cost \$5,000 it would certainly eliminate indiscriminate shooting. And, as he says, there would be no more "innocent bystanders.")

BOY (2010/2019) (We watched this movie on Kanopy, which you can access with a library card.) Set on the east coast of New Zealand in 1984, *Boy*, an 11-year-old child and devout Michael Jackson fan, gets a chance to know his absentee criminal father, who has returned to find a bag of money he buried years ago. He knows he buried it in a near-by field a number of steps from a post, but he can't remember which post and exactly how many steps. This coming-of-age movie was a darling at film festivals and won many awards. The kids act very naturally, but without subtitles, it would be hard to understand their New Zealand accent. It is sad when *Boy* realized that his father is a far cry from the heroic adventurer he's imagined the man to be. We liked this film by Taika Waititi, the director of *Jojo Rabbit*, a film which was nominated for a Golden Globe this year in the "Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy" category. **GRADE B**

BOY ERASED: (2018) This at times heartbreaking film is based on true events and a memoir by the same title. It is about a young man's struggle with his identity and the demands of his parents that he attend a conversion therapy program that promises to "cure" him

of his impure thoughts and any homosexual tendencies. Barbara and I liked the movie and especially the effective and authentic performance by Lucas Hedges playing Jared, a teenager in crisis. In 2016 Hedges received an Oscar nomination for another movie we loved, **Manchester by the Sea** and also he played a traumatized teen in **Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri**. Based on the reviews of one hundred twenty-seven critics the movie received 86% on Rotten Tomatoes. To the credit of Screenplay writer and director Joel Edgerton, he never reduces Jared's well intentioned parents to stereotyped backwards-thinking caricatures. The parents are effectively played by Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman. Despite the fact that Conversion Therapy has been discredited by virtually all major American medical, psychiatric, psychological and professional counseling organizations, it still remains controversial. It has been outlawed in only 14 States. Arizona, of course is not among them. **GRADE B+**

THE BOY IN STRIPED PAJAMAS: You may think all the stories about the Holocaust have been exhausted. This unique film would prove you wrong. It is the story of eight year-old Bruno, son of a Nazi officer in command of a concentration camp. Bruno, a lonely child, finds a friend through a barbed wire fence, and the path to a heartbreaking conclusion is set. Simultaneously fascinating and horrific, **The Boy in Striped Pajamas** shows man's inhumanity to man through the eyes of an innocent child. The two child actors are brilliant, but the only name in the cast you are likely to recognize is Vera Farmiga (**The Departed**). The film is directed by Mark Herman who also wrote the screenplay based on a best selling Irish novel by John Boyne. The Holocaust has produced a myriad of films and books, but **The Boy in Striped Pajamas** offers a unique perspective on the consequences of prejudice, hatred, and violence and both Barbara and I agree this is a film worth seeing. **GRADE A-**

THE BOY WHO HARNESSSED THE WIND: 2019 (Based on a heartwarming true story and available on Netflix.) This film is a 2019 British drama written, directed, and starring Oscar-nominated actor, Chiwetel Ejiofor, in his feature directorial debut. It is based on a 2009 memoir by the same title co-written by William Kamkwamba. Kamkwamba was a young schoolboy who came from a family of farmers who lived in a small village in Malawi, a landlocked country in Southeast Africa withered by drought and hunger. In the early part of this century, the 13-year-old boy was thrown out of the school he loved when his family could no longer afford the fees. He cuts a deal with his teacher to use the school's library where he learned about energy production. He learned how to build a windmill largely from parts found in the local junkyard. His invention saved an entire community from drought and famine. Kamkwamba's story is incredible, showing how despite all odds, the boy's determination drove him to find a solution that could be replicated by other communities. This is a promising debut for Ejiofor - and further proof of Netflix's willingness to invest in stories which other studios might deem less commercially viable. In telling his story, Ejiofor inspires viewers to follow their own dreams and use them for the greater good. The film is anchored by strong performances. Ejiofor was excellent playing the young boy's father as was Maxwell Simba playing the boy. Also of note was Aïssa Maïga playing William's mother, who is a woman determined to steer her family into the modern age, not wanting (no matter how desperate the situation) to simply pray for rain as their ancestors did, but to take charge of their own fates. Barbara and I loved the film. In spite of a slow start, it built to a powerful finish. **GRADE A**

BOYHOOD: (2014) Twelve years ago Richard Linklater had a plan. He wanted to follow a modern family consisting of parents who have split and their two children for 12 years—to show a boy growing up. But in order to realize his plan, he needed some luck. First, he had to convince Ethan Hawke and Patricia Arquette to sign on for all 12 years. They did with only a handshake and a lot of trust. Then, Linklater had to cast the two children. He used his own daughter, Lorelei, for the girl, and, with unbelievable luck, cast a 6-year-old Ellar Coltrane as the boy. Who knew that Coltrane would turn out to be such a naturalistic actor, perfectly suited to the acting styles of Hawke and Arquette. After casting, the director proceeded to shoot a scene each year for 12 years. He again got lucky. For example, during a shoot at Houston's Minute Maid Park the Astros stepped up: Jason Lane knocked a picturesque home run while the cameras were rolling. Every year, the story of Mason's boyhood continued. We see Mason fight with his sister, struggle through moving and changing schools, finding new friends and even a girlfriend, graduating from high school and leaving home for college. We also see Arquette's two disastrous marriages and Hawke's struggle to be a good father. All are seen through the boy's eyes. These intimate moments, each complete and perfect, were seamlessly woven together. Linklater worried that the story might not work on the big screen because there are no big moments or watershed life events. There are no shootings, car chases, kidnappings, etc. There is just life, told in the way a child would remember it. But it does work and it works beautifully. In spite of a running time of 165 minutes, our involvement with the characters never faltered. Linklater, who also gave us the **Before/Sunrise/Sunset/Midnight** trilogy, has created something remarkable and, I suspect, unforgettable. It may not appeal to everyone, but it certainly appealed to us. **GRADE A**

THE BOYS ARE BACK: Clive Owen is a sports writer in this tearjerker from Australia directed by Scott Hicks. When his wife dies, Joe (Owen) becomes the only parent for 8-year-old Artie, and is forced to deal with his grief, his job and everyday parenting problems. Joe suffers the frustrations that all parents experience, and over time he develops a parenting style exemplified by the slogan, "Just Say Yes." Although Artie seems to thrive with this philosophy, others are not so enthusiastic. Some accuse him of being both a lazy parent and a dangerous one. He has another son by his first wife, 16-year-old Harry who lives with his mother in England. Joe's life becomes more complicated when Harry comes for a visit. Artie and Harry bond, but Joe has trouble communicating with his older son and all does not go well. That laissez-faire style of parenting works better with 8-year olds than it does with 16-year-olds. We loved the Australian scenery and could sympathize with Joe's plight. It makes for a pleasant, occasionally touching movie, but not, we thought, a great one. Owen is fine and our local reviewer thought his portrayal of Joe's struggle was the greatest strength of the movie. The actors who play the two boys are both excellent. Inspired by a true story, the film isn't completely predictable and we appreciated that it didn't have a typical "Hollywood" ending. Gary thought it was worth a B-, but I'm a bit more sentimental when children are involved, so I'll say B. **GRADE B/B-**

THE BOYS IN THE BAND: (2020 on Netflix): This film is based on a play written by Mart Crowley, an American playwright who died earlier this year at age 84. He is best known for this ground breaking play which debuted off Broadway in 1968 and was made into a 1970 movie using mostly the cast of the stage play. I clearly remember being blown away by a then-shocking production of what would come to be known as the granddaddy of gay plays. The play is set in a New York apartment where a group of gay men are meeting for a birthday party. At the time, they would have been considered outcasts by many and criminals under laws then existing in many states. Now, fifty years later, the 2020 film version of **The Boys in the Band** is available on Netflix. But now, the play's text feels far less daring. A year after **The Boys in the Band** debuted on stage, the Stonewall riots would usher in the gay liberation movement and bring

some radical changes in people's attitudes toward homosexuality. So it is best to think of this 2020 film as a historical glimpse of attitudes in the late 60s. At a birthday party in 1968 New York, a surprise guest and a drunken game leave seven gay friends trying to deal with who they are and with considerable guilt, shame and self-hatred. The author, Crowley, was clearly inspired and influenced by Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Barbara and I were so powerfully influenced by the 1970 movie that our evaluation of this 2020 version suffers. **GRADE B**

***An interesting bit of trivia I found in my research.**

The title of the play/movie is a quote from an iconic Judy Garland movie: *A Star is Born* (1954):

"You're singing for yourself and the boys in the band,"

THE BOYS IN THE BOAT: 2023 (Seen in a movie theatre.) The movie is about Nine Americans and their epic quest for gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. (The ninth man is the coxswain and I never realized how important he or she is.) George Clooney, a traditionalist at heart, directed this old-fashioned movie, which didn't get much critical acclaim, but is a crowd-pleaser. It's reminiscent of *Chariots of Fire*, which won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1981. *The Boys in the Boat* won't win the Oscar today, because, as Owen Gleiberman said in his Variety review, "Who would have guessed that the Oscars would now be far too hip for a movie like this one?" (He liked the movie. He titled his review, "George Clooney Directs His Best Film in a While, a '30s Rowing Saga That's an Old-Fashioned Movie Daydream.") Joe Rantz (Callum Turner) is one of "the boys." His character has been on his own since he was 14, living in a tin-roof encampment in Seattle during the Depression. When he tries out for the college rowing team, it's strictly to make some cash; he's studying to be an engineer and is about to run out of tuition money. Joe establishes the fact that these "boys" were mostly from the working class, and they became a championship team because they had a moxie that wasn't there in the teams from Harvard and Yale — the traditional upper-crust crew teams who'd been rowing since they were kids. The coach, Al Ulbrickson (Joel Edgerton) tells the recruits "Eight-man crew is the most difficult team sport in the world," but if they are perfectly in sync they'll fuse into one machine. Along the way, Joe bonds with the assistant coach (Peter Guinness) who builds the hand-made boats. Then, there's the way coach Al has to maneuver politically with the college brass to let the superior junior varsity team compete in place of the varsity for it was the JV team that won the gold. It's a credit to the director that he maintains suspense through all the races. Jesse Owens appears briefly when the USA delegation is waiting for their place in the procession of nations He has one line but it's an important one. He says he is racing for the country! Gary and I thought the movie well-done, and the crowd-pleaser very much pleased us. **GRADE A**

THE BRAVE ONE: The "revenge theme" has been around a long while and brings to mind *Hamlet*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Death Wish* (all 5 *Death Wishes*) just to mention a few. In the hands of a talented director like Neil Jordan (*The Crying Game*) and two brilliant leads, Jodie Foster and Terrance Howard, the theme can stir the blood...or it can stir guilt as you cheer on a vigilante killer. Foster is so good in the role of radio-show host Erica Bain that it is hard to imagine anyone else in the role even though it was originally set to star Nicole Kidman. The first reel sets up ample motivation to turn Erica Bain into an avenger and turn the audience into sympathetic enablers. Although the following reels frequently strain credibility, Barbara and I both enjoyed the unfolding of the story and especially the dramatic interplay between Foster and Howard. The buzz in film magazines is that Foster stands an excellent chance of winning awards for her portrayal. Even though we may feel a little uneasy about it, Barbara and I liked the film and think it deserves an audience. **GRADE B+** (*Barb's 2 cents: I also liked Nicky Katt as Howard's detective partner. He provides some welcome humor and the two men work well together.*)

BREACH: If you like spy thrillers, as I do, and if you think Chris Cooper is one of the best actors in film today, as I do, then you should certainly put this film on your "must see" list. *Breach* is based on the true-life story of Robert Hanssen, an FBI agent turned Soviet spy who betrayed his country for complex reasons that may never be fully understood. This is the story of how Hanssen finally got caught after over twenty years of selling secrets to the Soviets. Cooper is outstanding as Hanssen. Barbara and I agree that it is rare to see a film in which there may be an award worthy performance so early in a new film season. Co-starring with Cooper is Ryan Phillippe, a handsome actor who at times seems low on affect, but who makes it all work for him in this role. He plays the role of Eric O'Neill, a cocky aspiring federal agent who is given what appears to be a creepy assignment: keeping tabs on a sexual deviant. Working as Hanssen's assistant, he begins to admire and respect the man and rebel against the assignment. Only then is O'Neill told the full extent of Hanssen's treachery. The cast is ably filled out by Laura Linney, Dennis Haysbert, Kathleen Quinlan, and Gary Cole. **GRADE B+**

THE BREAK-UP: This is definitely not your run-of-the-mill romantic comedy. Although the first scene is a meet-cute, the movie really begins with a break-up. I thought a director did a good job of introducing us to the couple by showing snapshots of their relationship over the opening credits. When the action starts, Gary (Vince Vaughn) and Brooke (Jennifer Aniston) are giving a family dinner party. It is a disaster, and the argument between the couple after their guests leave is painfully realistic. It's also quite funny. The movie chronicles their initial break-up and then follows their efforts to get back together. It's always fun to watch Vaughn do his things and Gary is very funny, but he would be impossible to live with. It's a wonder Brooke lasted as long as she did. The Boston Globe critic said Vaughn and Aniston bicker endlessly, and uninterestingly, and The Hollywood Reporter called it a major disappointment. We're easier on it than that, although Gary enjoyed it a bit more than I did. He says B, I say B-. **GRADE B/B-**

BRIDESMAIDS: Judd Apatow is famous for his raunchy comedies with a bit of "heart." This movie proves that the genre can be successful with women in the lead roles. Apatow gets production credits, but the script was written by Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo. Wiig, the funniest person on SNL, stars as a woman whose life isn't going well at the same time her best friend is getting married. Lillian (Maya Rudolph) asks Annie (Wiig) to be her maid of honor, but Annie winds up having to compete with Lillian's intimidating new friend, the rich and beautiful Helen (Rose Byrne). There's a bit of *The Hangover* when the Bridesmaids decide to go to Vegas for Lillian's bachelorette party, and there is the obligatory Apatow intestinal disturbance scene, but Wiig gives the movie such sincerity and heart, that it all works. Our local critic thought that the movie presents Wiig as a "bonafide comedy star." We agree. She is pretty and funny at the same time which is a rare combination. Melissa McCarthy is amusing as a bridesmaid who thinks fight club might be a fun bachelorette party. Her real life husband appears as her airplane seatmate. Jill Clayburgh, who passed away in November, appears in her last movie role as Annie's mother. The Irish actor, Chris O'Dowd is charming as a traffic cop who stops Annie for having no brake lights. It's great fun watching their relationship develop. The movie has plenty of laughs, but the "heart" definitely wins out. **Grade B+**

BRIDGE OF SPIES: (2015) This film has a lot going for it. Based on a true story from the height of the Post-World War II Cold War, this espionage thriller starring Tom Hanks, co-written by the Coen Brothers, and directed by Steven Spielberg, seems a likely candidate for recognition by the Academy. I still remember the part of the story that unfolded in daily newspapers in 1960 when a U.S. U-2 pilot was shot down over the Soviet Union. The name Francis Gary Powers, the U.S. pilot, was on the front pages for weeks. Our government was desperate to get Powers back and the movie focuses on a Brooklyn attorney, Jim Donovan, played by Hanks who was given the monumental task of negotiating a prisoner exchange. That part of the story was a closely guarded secret at the time and now completes a story that fascinated me over fifty years ago. One would expect a superlative performance from Tom Hanks, but a less well known actor, Mark Rylance, an award winning English actor, director, and playwright, turns in an equally impressive performance. He plays Rudolf Abel, a KGB spy who was convicted in 1958 and given less than a death sentence in the event he might be used as a bargaining chip later. It was a time of extreme suspicion between the United States and the Soviet Union. Occasionally Barbara and I enjoy a good old-fashioned big-screen movie without avant garde efforts. *Bridge of Spies* is a period piece and seemed to call for that approach. Plus Spielberg is a master story teller and we think this film is another of his masterpieces. The writing was brilliant and I was pleasantly surprised by how much subtle humor was effectively woven into the film to relieve tension. Familiar names in the supporting cast are Alan Alda and Amy Ryan. We think this is a film that will be regarded as one of the best of the year. **GRADE A**

BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA: I watched this 2007 Disney movie on cable the other night and I loved it. A wonderful story of the magical world that imagination can create. A lonely, artistic boy, Jesse, who is picked on at school, is befriended by Leslie, a new girl in school. Both of the kids are gifted and, after a shaky beginning, they become friends. Together they invent the magical kingdom of Terabithia. They also learn how to handle some of their real world problems. It is an unusually sensitive movie that will appeal both to youngsters and to oldsters. My thumb is **ENTHUSIASTICALLY UP**

BRIDGET JONES'S BABY: (2016) *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) is one of those movies that, if I'm scrolling through TV movie channels and I see it, I have to watch it. I had read and enjoyed the book and loved the movie. The critics were uniformly negative about the second *Bridget Jones* movie which came out in 2004, and we didn't care much for it either. But, since this one got better reviews, we decided to take a chance. We're glad we did because it was a pleasant and enjoyable two hours. Renée Zellweger was a bit thinner and quite a bit older Bridget in this 2016 movie, but she was still a likeable klutz. How nice it was to see Colin Firth reprising his role as Mr. Darcy. He's looking older (aren't we all) but he still appeals to me. Gemma Jones and Jim Broadbent are back as Bridget's parents, and her friends from the first movie also appear in this one. Patrick Dempsey--"McDreamy"--is a handsome and sexy addition. As you can tell from the title, Bridget is expecting. The complication is that she doesn't know which of the two men is the father. I'm glad that the writers didn't resort to a birthing scene, and that the two men behaved like adults most of the time. A surprise at the very end seemed to hold out the possibility of a fourth *Bridget Jones* movie. Emma Thompson, who played Bridget's obstetrician, is credited as one of the writers. She wrote herself some good lines, and I hope that, if there is a fourth movie, she continues as one of the writers. At first, Gary didn't think that it would rise to a B level, but ultimately, he agreed with me on the grade. **GRADE B**

BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY: What a surprise! They got it right! *BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY*, the movie, is almost as good as Helen Fielding's novel. And Renee Zellweger, our least favorite actress, is terrific as the title character. Her accent may not be letter-perfect, but her character is. She is funny, bright, vulnerable and generally adorable. We are going to have to rethink our evaluation of her as an actress. Watching Bridget struggle with men--mostly rotters, her weight--at least 10 lbs too much, and her smoking--can't seem to quit, is pure delight. We understand she gained over 20 lbs. to play Bridget and the extra weight adds greatly to her appeal. Hugh Grant is splendid as a charming cad and Colin Firth is perfect as a communicationally-challenged nice guy. Jim Broadbent (TOPSY TURVY) is Bridget's father and Gemma Jones plays her mother. Both are very funny. If you read and enjoyed the novel, I don't think you will be disappointed with the movie. If you didn't read the novel you may want to after seeing the movie. Be sure and stay for the closing credits. **GRADE A-**

BRIDGET JONES: THE EDGE OF REASON: Been there. Done that. It was a lot better the first time. Renée Zellweger, about 10 lbs. past cute, does her best to breathe some life into this pale sequel. She falls out of a plane into a pig sty, risks death on the ski slopes, and spends some time in a Bangkok jail. But she is a caricature of the awkward, overweight, socially inept heroine we feel in love with in the first movie. Colin Firth and Hugh Grant are as yummy as ever, but even their best scene--grappling in a fountain--is déjà vu all over again. I'm afraid we can't give this one more than a C. Roger Ebert liked the movie, but most critics didn't. Here's a quote from the New York Times: This one make the first movie look like a masterpiece. What was Renée Zellweger thinking? What, indeed? **GRADE C**

BRIDESHEAD REVISITED: Capt. Charles Ryder, stationed at Brideshead Castle during WWII, remembers his early visits to the estate in a series of flashbacks. During his first year at Oxford, Ryder was befriended by Lord Sebastian Flyte whose family lived at Brideshead. Ryder came from a much more humble background and he was enchanted by the life style of the rich and titled. Although it's clear that Sebastian thinks of Ryder as more than just a friend, Ryder is too captivated by Brideshead to protest. The Flytes live extravagantly in their magnificent estate, but they have problems. Most of the problems are caused by Sebastian's domineering and aggressively Catholic mother, Lady Marchmain, played with a cold and elegant manner by Emma Thompson. At first, Ryder is treated as an honored guest, but when Lady Marchmain discovers a mutual attraction between Ryder and her daughter, Julia, she turns on the young man. This movie reminds me of a Masterpiece Theatre production, but with a bigger budget. The TV series (1981) made a star out of Jeremy Irons as Charles Ryder, and Matthew Goode (*Match Point, The Lookout*) is impressive here in the same role. Sebastian is not an easy character to play: he's a delicate, effete, gay alcoholic who carries a teddy bear around with him. In the film, Ben Whishaw is effective as a playful, sad and tragic character. The acting is uniformly excellent, and Michael Gambon deserves special mention as Sebastian's absent father. However, the film moves at a stately pace and has a running time of 134 minutes. That may be more of flawed British nobility than some viewers can take. **GRADE B-**

BRIGHT STAR: Jane Campion had a difficult job: She had to make a vibrant love story about a frivolous young girl and a moody poet who is "half in love with easeful Death." Campion did craft some interesting characters and photographed them in gorgeous English countryside settings. Abby Cornish is radiant as Fanny Brawne, and Ben Whishaw is suitably moody as John Keats, but, in spite of critical praise, we doubt the story will appeal to a younger audience. After all, there's no sex involved, just a lot of yearning and kissing.

When Keats met and fell in love with Fanny in 1818, he wrote one of his famous sonnets to her titled *Bright Star*, hence the movie's title. Charles Brown was a great friend and supporter of the poet's, and he is engagingly played by Paul Schneider. Brown apparently felt that being in love with Fanny was not good for Keats, and, as the poet became ill with tuberculosis, he conspired to keep them apart. Keats did, however, spend one happy month living with the Brawne family under the constant care of his beloved Fanny. Gary said that he expected the movie to be boring and that it lived up to those expectations, although he did agree that it looked beautiful. We were both impressed with Cornish and expect she will not lack for parts after her portrayal of Fanny. I did find the story touching, so I grade it higher than Gary. **GRADE B/C+**

BRITTANY RUNS A MARATHON: (2019) Going to this movie, we feared that most of the funny lines were disclosed in the trailer. And, while most of the amusing bits were in the trailer, the movie skillfully mixes the funny with enough emotional complexity to create a story about a woman changing her life that is authentic. Jillian Bell (*22 Jump Street*) is Brittany and, in the words of the Chicago Tribune movie critic Michael Phillips, "The movie succeeds because Bell succeeds." The comedic actress proves that she can carry a movie with a serious subject. Bell is supported by a skilled cast, but it is her story. That's not quite true, because it is really Brittany O'Neill's story. She is a real person who decided to take charge of her health and trained for the New York marathon, shedding 60 pounds in the process. Her close friend and former roommate, writer/director Paul Downs Colaizzo, decided to write a movie about her experience. You can see the real Brittany running in the NY Marathon over the closing credits. **GRADE B**

BROADWAY: THE GOLDEN AGE, BY THE LEGENDS WHO WERE THERE: (2003 seen on video/DVD) If you are interested in theater and remember the Broadway of the 50s and 60s, you will love this wonderful film by Rick McKay. He interviewed 100 famous theater people from that Golden Era. The result is an entrancing film that should be must viewing for any theater history class. **THUMBS UP**

BROADWAY RISING: 2022 (Included with Prime) Directed by Emmy-nominated Amy Rice (*The Newsroom*), *Broadway Rising* is an inspiring documentary that chronicles the reopening of Broadway after the COVID-19 shutdown. Broadway shut down on March 12, 2020 and didn't reopen until September 14, 2021—18 months! Over 96,000 people lost their jobs when Broadway went dark all but decimating an entire ecosystem of businesses supporting the industry that was essential the city. From actors to artisans, directors to doormen, producers to prop masters, not one aspect of the business was left untouched. The documentary shines the spotlight on their stories of anxiety, doubt, and resilience, and ultimately to triumph on the long-awaited opening night. Rice did a good thing by concentrating on the backstage people who made the plays and musicals happen: the costume makers, the set designers, musicians, and even a stage doorman and an usher. One dancer, who has worked on Broadway for 20 years, questions whether he will go back. During the pandemic, he turned his creativity to flower arranging. He didn't go back, but many did including that beloved stage doorman, who lost his foot to Covid-19, with an artificial foot. Several died, including playwright Terrance McNally, but in the tradition of "the show must go on" many found creative outlets, waiting with anticipation for Broadway to turn the lights back on. Using interviews, behind the scenes videos, and other effects, Rice has produced an ode to Broadway. Gary and I were reminded of the friendships we made in our years of community theatre. Critics thought the documentary though comprehensive and occasionally touching, lacked drama. In a New York Times review, a critic said, "*It can't fail to trigger shudders of recognition as well as feelings of release, but the filmmaking lacks a certain drama.*" I agree that the film lacked the energy I was expecting. Gary loved it, but he thought the second half of the film could do with some cutting. **GRADE B/B+**

BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN: Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis (Heath Ledger) meet in 1963 when they are hired to herd sheep for the summer up on Brokeback Mountain. Over the lonely summer, they slowly become friends, and, ultimately, more than friends. Each thinks they will never see the other again. Ennis marries his girlfriend (Michelle Williams) and has two daughters. Jake, a rodeo cowboy, meets and married a pretty barrel racer (Ann Hathaway) and has a son. Four years later they see each other again, and the attraction between them is stronger than ever. Over the next twenty years, they meet several times a years to go fishing—at least that's what they tell their wives. *Brokeback Mountain* is a homosexual love story, told with great understanding and compassion. The two men are wonderful. Gyllenhaal and Ledge are heart breakingly believable in their roles, and they are supported by fine acting all around. Williams does a nice job as a wife who is afraid to face what she has learned about her husband. Worthy of mention are Linda Cardellini, who plays a woman Ennis dates after his divorce, and Kate Mara, as Ennis's older daughter. Director Ang Lee (*Sense and Sensibility*; *Hulk*) tells the story slowly, simply and subtlety. In this movie, more is said in the silences than in the dialogue. Much is left to the viewer's imagination. The film is based on a short story by Annie Proulx, and Larry McMurtry collaborated with Diana Ossana on the screenplay. Gary thought the film was excellent, but failed to get as emotionally caught up in the story as I did. He says B+; I say A. **GRADE A/B+**

BROKEDOWN PALACE: (1999 release seen on video) We liked this story of two young American girls who innocently get involved in a drug smuggling operation and wind up sentenced to 33 years in a Bangkok jail. With Claire Danes and Kate Bechinsale. **THUMBS UP**

BROKEN EMBRACES: (2009 release) This Spanish film is notable primarily for the performance of Penelope Cruz for which she got a Golden Globe nomination. When the movie opens we meet Harry Caine, a blind writer. We learn that Caine is a pseudonym and that his real name is Mateo Blanco and, before his blindness, he was a well-known movie director. He is cared for by his former assistant, Judit, and her son Diego. It is through a conversation between Caine and Diego that we learn the events that led up to the accident that robbed him of his sight. It is in flashbacks that we meet Ernesto, a wealthy and powerful man whose mistress is Lena (Cruz). Telling the story to Diego seems to free Caine from his feeling that Blanco, the director, died in the accident that blinded him and killed Lena. He becomes Mateo once again. Mateo and Lena's story of love, betrayal and revenge is rather predictable, but the actors are very good. It is interesting to see Lena as an aspiring actress trying on a variety of wigs. One, in particular, turns her into an Audrey Hepburn look-alike. Almodovar has given us many remarkable films. The first one we saw was *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in 1988. We also enjoyed *All About My Mother* (1999), which was the first time we saw Penelope Cruz, and *Talk To Her* (2003). Director/writer Pedro Almodovar is brilliant with the camera, and I share his liking for bright colors. *Broken Embraces* clearly demonstrates the director's passion for the movies. Roger Ebert gave the film four stars and I liked this sentence in his review: *To find*

that this passion comes to fruition in a blind man's editing room is to demonstrate that all films, and all of us, are blind until the pieces are put together. We liked this film, but we didn't love it. **GRADE B**

BROKEN FLOWERS: Don (Bill Murray) is a confirmed bachelor. His friends describe him as a Don Juan: His past history is studded with girlfriends. When he gets a letter from an unknown woman telling him that he has a grown son, he first thinks it must be some kind of hoax. His next-door neighbor and friend, Winston (Jeffrey Wright), who fancies himself an amateur internet detective, persuades him to visit his old girlfriends to find out if the son is real. The girlfriends are played by Sharon Stone, Francis Conroy, Jessica Lange, and Tilda Swinton, and they all acquit themselves admirably. We went to see this film with high expectations, and while we didn't "love" it, we did like it. Murray deserves a medal for minimalist acting: he does here what he did so well in *Lost In Translation*. No wonder an indie director like Jim Jarmusch wanted Murray to play Don. In his review, Ebert said: Jarmusch makes films about outsiders, but they're not loners, they're soloists. Bill Murray's character here is the ultimate Jarmusch soloist, in that he lacks even an instrument. His act is to walk onto the stage and not play. Murray is very good at "not playing." The best part of the film is the understated acting and the dialogue that seems so real that you can hardly believe it's scripted. However, that makes for some slow going at times. We see a lot of Don going to the airport, leaving the airport, and driving, driving, driving. The critics love this movie, and most Indie-film aficionados will be charmed by it, but average audiences may be less enthusiastic. **GRADE B**

THE BROKEN HEARTS CLUB: (2000 release seen on video) A good man is hard to find, and that truism applies to both women and men. The gay friends in *The Broken Hearts Club* seem to spend most of their time talking about men and looking for that special someone. Dennis (Timothy Olyphant) is worried because at 28 he feels the only thing he's good at is being gay. Patrick worries because in Los Angeles, gay men are all 10s looking for an 11, and he feels that on his best day he's not more than a 6. Jack (John Mahoney) is the only truly happy man, perhaps because he and his partner have been together for 30 years. This 2000 movie makes the gay life look a lot easier than it looked thirty years ago when *Boys In The Band* was released. Both movies stress the importance of friendship, but this movie has a lot more hope. Dean Cain also appears as a superficial hunky movie-star wannabe. He's quite good, as are all the other young men. We enjoyed it! **THUMBS UP**

BROOKLYN: (2015) Critics loved this film. It received an impressive 99% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer with 128 reviews reporting. It received only one negative review. The two best known actors in the film are Jim Broadbent and Julie Walters. They are excellent in supporting roles but the lead goes to Saoirse Ronan, a 21 year old who was nominated by the Academy for Best Supporting Actress when she was just 13. That film was *Atonement* in 2007. Barbara gave it an A grade and if interested you can read her review in the Archives section. The camera loves Ronan and this is a perfect vehicle for her, but I have no idea how to pronounce her first name. The film tells a touching immigrant story of a young Irish woman torn between two suitors on opposite sides of the Atlantic. So her choice is also a choice between Ireland and America. The story is set in early 1950 and the cinematography is terrific. So is the directing and acting. Barbara and I agree with the critics and think it is a film worth seeking out. **GRADE B+**

BROTHERS: (Danish Film, *Brødre*, 2004) This is a powerful film about two brothers: Michael, a family man and upstanding citizen who is a Major in the Danish Military, and Jannik, the black sheep of the family. The story begins on the day Jannik gets out of prison, and Michael leaves for a second tour of duty in Afghanistan. Shortly after arriving, Michael's helicopter crashes and Michael is reported killed in action. Michael wife, Sarah, is played by Connie Nielsen (*The Gladiator*) and she is very moving in her grief. Jannik is overcome by Michael's death, and he straightens himself out, at least enough to give some help to Sarah and her two young daughters. Very early on we learn that Michael has survived the crash and is being held prisoner by the Afghanistan insurgents. We see overlapping scenes between Michael in the prison camp and his family back in Denmark. Michael is eventually rescued, but not before his captors force him to commit a horrendous act to save his life. His horror and guilt change him so much that his own daughter, thrilled when he first returned home, is so afraid of him that she wishes he had stayed dead. Ulrich Thomsen is Michael and Nikolaj Lie Kaas is Jannik. Both are impressive. We fear Hollywood might have screwed up the same story with clichés and predictable outcomes. Nothing is predictable in this Danish film and all the emotions are truly and deeply felt. It is subtitled, but many scenes have little or no dialogue. These actors are skilled enough to tell the story with their bodies and faces. It is remarkable acting and filmmaking, and we hope you all will get a chance to see the film. **GRADE A-**

BROTHERS: (U.S. Film 2009) This is a powerful film about what happens to those who go to fight in foreign wars and to those who stay at home and wait. It is about two brothers: One is Sam Cahill, a marine Captain heading out for his third tour in Afghanistan; the other is Tommy, an ex-con. Sam Shepard, their father and a former Marine, is proud of his son, Sam (Toby McGuire), and deeply disappointed in Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal). When Sam is presumed dead, the family dynamic begins to change. Tommy starts taking responsibility for Grace, Sam's beautiful young wife (Natalie Portman) and her two young daughters, Tommy's nieces. We know almost immediately that Sam is not dead; that he has been captured by the Taliban. As we watch his family trying to deal with his death, we watch him experience horrors that will test his character to the utmost. He does eventually come home, but he comes home a tragically changed man. The acting is outstanding, and McGuire's frightening breakdown at the end of the film is worthy of an Oscar nod. In this splendid cast, special notice should be paid to the youngest actors, Bailee Madison and Taylor Geare. Both are terrific. Madison plays the older of the two girls and as an actor she is accomplished far beyond her 10 years of age. We were impressed with her ability to express the complicated emotions of a child who no longer recognizes or likes the father she used to adore. Jim Sheridan directed this film which is a remake of a 2004 Danish film. The film is more of a family melodrama than it is a film about war, and at least one critic felt that *The Messenger* (reviewed in last month's issue) is a better movie. I suspect, however, that *Brothers* will do better at the box office. We definitely feel it is a must-see movie. **GRADE A-**

THE BROTHERS BLOOM: Maybe it is the repressed larceny in me, but I have always been attracted to movies about "confidence games", "con artists," and "grifters." Over the past fifty or sixty years, there have been dozens of films focusing on this subject. Among my favorites are *The Music Man (1962)*, *The Producers (1968)*, *The Sting (1973)*, *House of Games (1987)*, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels (1988)*. I think Barbara feels the same way, so we may have gone to the theater with unrealistic expectations. We have high regards for the actors: Adrien Brody, Mark Ruffalo, and Rachel Weisz playing leads and Maximilian Schell in a supporting role. It wasn't the acting that disappointed us. In fact, we were delighted with the role of Penelope, a quirky gazillionaire played by Weisz. And

it certainly wasn't the beautiful settings or even the convoluted story. One must expect a convoluted story in this genre. I think it was the screenplay which was slow moving and too often just boring. There are moments of charm and humor, but by the end, too few. The film opens with promise when the two young brothers pull off their first caper. There is even a memorable scene with a one-legged cat propelling about on a roller skate. But the film can't seem to maintain the energy of the opening and mires in sluggishness. There is just enough cleverness to award this film and average grade. **GRADE C**

BRUNO: Gary's Review: Barbara and I were barely motivated to see this Sacha Baron Cohen follow-up to *Borat*. *Borat* was offensively funny in places but mostly just offensive and earned C's from both of us. For me, *Bruno* did not even make it to that lofty height. It is outrageous, which isn't always bad, but it takes offense to a new level and left me wondering where the humor went. Cohen plays Bruno, a flamboyant Austrian fashion journalist who lost his job and moves to Los Angeles to become the "biggest gay movie star since Arnold Schwarzenegger." This was one of the few gag lines that pulled a smile from me and it came pretty early in the film. Although I couldn't call it funny, there was an enlightening scene exposing the length mothers are willing to go to get their babies into a movie. To be fair, the critics have been kind to this film and Roger Ebert awarded it a grade of A-. Perhaps I have fallen over the cliff of old age because I feel I am being generous in giving *Bruno* a grade higher than D-. **GRADE D Barb's review:** Words fail me!!!
GRADE D

BUBBLE: (2005 Seen on video) Both Ebert and Roeper applauded this slow moving independent film directed by Steven Soderbergh as a "masterpiece." Barbara and I are not as high on the film as Ebert and Roeper, but we must acknowledge that it gets very high marks for creativity and realism. You will recognize no one in the film because it was cast with local people with little acting experience. Their own homes were used as sets and the movie was quickly made using HD video. **MILD THUMBS UP**

BUCK: (2011) This is a 1 ½ hour emotionally engaging documentary recommended by Holly V., a good friend and loyal **MOVIE VIEWS** reader. Buck Brennaman was the inspiration for the 1998 Robert Redford film *The Horse Whisperer*. He was also the lead equine consultant for that film. Buck is a horse trainer who travels the country nine grueling months a year giving clinics teaching new ways that humans and horses might work with one another. Buck rejects punishment and harsh treatment as a way of training horses. His own abusive childhood was a powerful teacher of the negative consequences from that approach. Working with horses his whole life has helped him understand that the way we work with animals reveals how we relate to fellow human beings. This is a 2011 film that was a winner of the Sundance Audience Award for Best Documentary. Barbara and I enjoyed it and think you will too, especially if you have a fondness for horses or an interest in psychology. **GRADE B**

THE BUCKET LIST: Predictably, the professional critics were harder on this film than the viewers. (C vs. B+) Two things bring the critics down hard on a film, (1) predictability, and (2) sentimentality. This film has those features. It is a feel-good movie about cancer, chemotherapy, skull surgery, and dying. Jack Nicholson's Edward Cole is rich; Morgan Freeman's Carter Chambers isn't; Both have been given six months to live. Under the direction of Rob Reiner, the two leads win over the audience with wit, repartee, charm, and a trip around the world seeking the things they missed in their lives—their bucket list. Get it? Things they want to do before they kick the bucket. O.K., it is a little corny, but I think it plays better than most of the critics acknowledge. Maybe we don't need a movie to remind us to live life to its fullest, but I have to admit that both Barbara and I enjoy Freeman and Nicholson on screen, even in a less than powerful script. That brings us to a grade of "B." **GRADE B (Barb's two cents:** *Nicholson is in danger of becoming a living caricature. In some recent films, he has relied on using his well-known facial expressions in lieu of actually acting. I suspect he may resort to that when faced with a weak script.*)

BULLITT: (1968--recorded from HBO TV) I don't remember ever seeing this movie, although I've seen many clips from it. It features the legendary Steve McQueen as San Francisco cop Frank Bullitt, and has one of the greatest car chase sequences of all time. It helped solidify the highland green '68 Mustang as one of the most classic movie cars in history. Bullitt is charged with protecting a witness in a mob trial, but from there things get complicated. Some of the dialogue sounds like the actors were too much influenced by *Dragnet* ("Just the facts, ma'am"), but the camera work, especially during the car chase sequence, is very good. Although Steve McQueen was credited with the driving' it was actually shared by McQueen and Bud Ekins, one of Hollywood's best stunt drivers. Two identical 1968 Mustang GT fastbacks were used in the film. One of the cars used was sold at auction for \$3.4 million, and in 2020 Ford reissued the Bullitt Mustang. It's difficult to grade a film that's over 50 years old. I'm sure Gary and I would have given it an A in 1968, but not that high in 2020. Steve McQueen and the Mustang are very cool, so we enjoyed watching the film for its historical interest.

BULLY: (2012) This documentary brings into focus a complex and perennial problem that is often soft peddled or ignored by school administrators and an apathetic public. *Bully* follows five kids and families over the course of a school year. The camera gives us a glimpse into the tragic lives of two families after their bullied children chose suicide as a final escape from the cruel daily assaults. Another mother awaits the fate of her 14-year-old daughter who took a more aggressive but illegal way of coping with her tormentors. The film received considerable national publicity when it was handcuffed with an R rating due to language and violence caught on film. It is the kind of language and violence victims of bullying face daily. After considerable public outcry and a few mitigating changes, the rating was finally given a PG-13 making it far more accessible to the young people who should see it. Understandably, *Bully* only scratches the surface of its topic. It spends the entire hour and a half running time on the victims and a couple of incompetent school administrators while avoiding any conversation with the perpetrators or the parents of the offending perpetrators. One of the more memorable scenes shows a school official more concerned with saving face than addressing the problem declaring that she had ridden the bus where some of the bullying was filmed and the kids were "as good as gold." Once again, the bullies get off the hook. Still, Barbara and I agree that this movie is an important beginning to addressing a problem that has been ignored far too long. **GRADE B**

BURLESQUE: Entertainment Weekly put this movie on their "must list," calling it a "guilty pleasure." It was a pleasure to see and hear Christina Aguilera sing and dance because she is a remarkable talent. And it was a pleasure to see Cher in a movie again. Although she could hardly move her mouth for all the filler she must have had injected, she managed to bring off her numbers with that old Cher style. The film is an amalgam of Chicago (the dancing is Fosse on overdrive), Gypsy (complete with a Mama Rose number by Cher) and Showgirls (with more than enough bumps and grinds). There's even a nod to Singing In The Rain with the crucial removal of a

sound plug. The woman who took our tickets today said that it was “risqué,” but we decided she didn’t see many movies. We saw nothing risqué about it. The musical numbers were entertaining but the love story was rather lame, although I think Aguilera’s love interest, Cam Gigandet, is a hunk! Primarily, we thought it was too long. Gary says that a maxim of theater is that you should leave them wanting more. We didn’t want any more. **GRADE B-**

THE BURIAL 2023 (Available for streaming on Prime Video) Inspired by true events, this film is an entertaining, thoughtful and at times humorous legal drama. It is a feel-good movie where the underdog wins. The cast is superb led by Jamie Foxx delivering a flat-out wonderful performance. Fox is an American actor, comedian, and singer who has won many awards for playing larger-than-life characters. He has played gunfighters, villains, cab drivers, NFL quarterbacks, homeless violinists, vice cops, death-row inmates, President of the United States and, of course, Ray Charles — all of which attest to his range and versatility. In *The Burial* Fox plays a charismatic, smooth-talking attorney, Willie E. Gary. He ends up representing funeral home owner Jeremiah O’Keefe, played by Academy Award winning Tommy Lee Jones. What starts as a contract dispute between a white small business owner and a white billionaire turn into much more, exposing corporate corruption and racial injustice. Critics liked the film evidenced by a 90% score from 90 reviews. I think fans of legal dramas will be especially pleased with this inspirational and triumphant true story. Barbara and I both liked the film. **GRADE B+**

BURIED: (DVD rental from Netflix) It was hard enough to watch this movie, I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been to make it. Ryan Reynolds is the only person we see for the entire 94 minutes. Reynolds play a U.S. contractor working in Iraq as a truck driver. After his convoy is attacked by insurgents, he wakes up buried alive inside a coffin. He has a cigarette light and a cell phone, and learns that he has two hours to convince the U.S. to pay a ransom for his freedom. Director Rodrigo Cortes said that decided to make this “impossible” movie because there was something about the technical challenge that appealed to him. It took only 17 days to make *Buried*, a film shot entirely inside the coffin. The filming took both a physical and emotional toll on Reynolds. He told Parade Magazine that he felt like he emerged from the box a different person than the one that went in. It is an intense performance and one that I don’t recommend if you are the slightest bit claustrophobic. If you do decide to rent the film, be prepared for a gripping and emotional experience. **GRADE B**

BURN AFTER READING: It is important to know up front that this is a Coen Brothers film. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen are known professionally as the Coen brothers. For over twenty years they have written and directed films ranging from screwball comedies (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Raising Arizona*) to serious and violent films (*No Country for Old Men*). One of their most successful films was *Fargo* which doesn’t fit comfortably in any genre. If Coen Brothers’ films aren’t your cup of tea, you had better avoid this one. Barbara and I, on the other hand, love Coen Brother films and may rate them even higher than other critics. *Burn After Reading* falls under the screwball comedy rubric. It is a zany spoof on spy films. It is peopled with idiots and spattered with bloodstains. To get into the plot would trivialize a film that relies on character development and a truly outstanding cast to work its magic. Joel Coen’s talented wife, Frances Mc Dormand, is joined by a cast of outstanding actors that include George Clooney, Brad Pitt, John Malkovich, Richard Jenkins, and Tilda Swinton. We left the theater thinking the film was perfectly cast. If you have delicate ears, the profanity might offend, but the sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle humor won us over and we are happy to recommend this R rated film with a **GRADE B+**

THE BURNING PLAIN: (2008) We watched this film because it was one of Jennifer Lawrence’s first feature films, and Charlize Theron, who produced the movie, speaks glowingly of the then 16-year-old actress. If it hadn’t been for Lawrence, Gary says he might have bailed out of this puzzling movie that moves erratically between time and place. There is little to help you sort out the relationships between people, at least for the first half of the movie. Theron is a sad, troubled woman who manages a seaside restaurant in Oregon; Kim Basinger is a sad wife and mother living in New Mexico who is having an affair. The two women are connected, but it takes a long time to figure out how. Lawrence is excellent as Basinger’s sad, troubled teenaged daughter. You’ll notice the repetition of “sad” and “troubled.” This movie is the antithesis of a comedy! Guillermo Arriaga wrote and directed *The Burning Plain*. He also wrote, but didn’t direct the more successful movies *Babel* and *21 Grams*.” They, too, moved among people and places, but with less confusion. Ultimately, we found the movie touching and the performances excellent. **GRADE C+**

BUTTERFLY: (1999 film originally titled *Butterfly Tongues*, but the DVD version is titled *Butterfly*) A sweetly told story of a young boy during his first year in school. The setting is Spain after the Republic was created in 1931 and leading up to the Civil War which began in 1936. His teacher, a caring man, introduces the boy to the wonders of nature in general and butterflies in particular. A loving bond is established between them. The boy’s father is the town’s tailor and his older brother is an aspiring saxophone player. The story is told in a lazy-summer-afternoon fashion but it is very well told. The ending is quite dramatic and very moving. **THUMBS UP**