

Movie Titles That Begin With "A"

A.C.O.D * About A Boy * About Last Night * About Schmidt * Absence of Malice * The Accountant * Across The Universe * Ad Astra * Adam * Adaptation * The Adjustment Bureau * Admission * Adrift * Adventureland * Afghan Star * Agnes Brown * A.I.-Artificial Intelligence * Ain't Them Bodies Saints * Akeelah And The Bee * Alamo * Albert Nobbs * Alexander * Alexander and the...Very Bad Day * Alfie * Ali * Alice In Wonderland * All Is Lost * All Is True * All Saints * All the Bright Places * All The King's Men * All the Money in the World * All the Old Knives * All the Pretty Horses * All The Real Girls * Allied * Almost Famous * Along Came A Spider * Alpha * Altman * The Amateurs * Amazing Grace(2006) * Amazing Grace(2019) * Amelia * Amelie * The American * American Dreamz * American Factory * An American Gangster * American Gun * American Hustle * American Rhapsody * American Sniper * American Splendor * American Underdog * American Wedding * American Yakuza * America's Sweethearts * Amores Perros * Amour * Amreeka * Amy * Analyze That * Anchorman * Anchorman 2 * Angels & Demons * Anonymous * Another Round * Another Year * Anything Else * Angela's Ashes * Anger Management * The Anniversary Party * Any Given Sunday * Antwone Fisher * The Apartment * Apocalypto * Apollo 11 * Apollo 10½ * Appaloosa * Arbitrage * Argo * Arranged * Arrival * Art School Confidential * The Art of Self-Defense * The Artist * Ask Dr. Ruth * The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford * Assault on Precinct 13 * The Assistant * At Eternity's Gate * Atomic Blonde * Atonement * The Attack * Audrey * August: Osage County 2013&2021 * August Rush * Australia * Avatar * The Avengers * The Aviator * Away From Her * Away We Go

A.C.O.D. This is an offbeat comedy that received mixed reviews from professional critics. Some hated it. Some loved it. One critic with a negative reaction and a creative flair simply wrote **N.O.** Barbara and I side with those who had a more positive reaction. First you should know that **A.C.O.D.** is an acronym for "**Adult Children Of Divorce.**" Adam Scott, outstanding in the leading role, learns that as a child, he was an unknown participant in a study about children of divorce. His belief that he is now a well-adjusted adult is examined with comedic results. Surrounded by brilliant actors like Richard Jenkins, Catherine O'Hara, Jane Lynch, and Amy Poehler makes for a delightful hour and a half movie. A modest little independent film is made much larger with their presence. At least Barbara and I think so. **GRADE B**

ABOUT A BOY: This is what Roger Ebert had to say about Hugh Grant: "*We have all the action heroes and Method script-chewers we need right now, but the Cary Grant department is understaffed, and Hugh Grant shows here that he is more than a star, he is a resource.*" He is, without doubt, the most charming actor working today! His charm is much in evidence in this film which is based on the book by Nick Hornby, the writer responsible for another great movie, *High Fidelity*. Grant is Will, a self-indulgent lay-about who lives off the royalties from a Christmas song his father wrote. His life is lived in units of time: the time he gets his hair cut, the time he watches TV, the time he eats, and the time he exercises. (His exercise consists of shooting pool.) Because his relationships with women rarely last more than a few months, he is constantly searching for new girlfriends. He even invents a son so that he can join a single parents' group. Through one of the women in that group, he meets Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), a troubled 12-year-old who is caring for his clinically depressed mother, Fiona (Toni Collette). Amazingly, he and Marcus develop a relationship, and Will is surprised to find that he cares for the boy. And there you have the core of this heart-warming story. Do not fear, though, that this is a vapid tearjerker. It's not. It is an unpredictable, witty, intelligent script that never resorts to cliches. Plus, the acting is flawless. Hoult is a real boy, and not a pretty child actor-type. Toni Collette is wonderful as Marcus's depressed hippie mother, and Rachel Weisz is lovely as Rachel, a woman who causes Will to re-evaluate his life. You'll enjoy this one. A resounding B+. **GRADE B+**

ABOUT LAST NIGHT: (2014) In 1974, Chicago's Organic Theatre presented a play written by a then unknown Chicago playwright named David Mamet. The play was called *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and it established Mamet as a playwright to watch. The play was, according to one critic, "filled with profanity and regional jargon that reflects the working-class language of Chicago." In 1986, it was made into a movie with Demi Moore and Rob Lowe. The title had to be changed because many newspapers refused to advertise a movie with the original title. It was called *About Last Night*. In the 2014 version, the cast is African-American, but the story line hasn't changed significantly. However, there is a lot more sex, a lot more talking about sex, and a lot more profanity in this new version. Demi Moore and Rob Lowe provided the love story in 1986, and Joy Bryant (TV's *Parenthood*) and Michael Ealy do the honors in 2014. Their best friends, (Elisabeth Perkins and Jim Belushi in 1986) are played now by Regina Hall and funnyman Kevin Hart. However, perhaps to appeal to today's young people, the relationship between these best friends has changed drastically. They still fight, but they also hump constantly and graphically. And they scream at each other incessantly. To our aging perceptions, the change is not amusing and does nothing to add to the story. And we Chicagoans didn't care much for the Los Angeles setting, either. While Bryant and Ealy are appealing as Danny and Debbie, we prefer the 1986 version. **GRADE C**

ABOUT SCHMIDT: Jack Nicholson is superb as Warren Schmidt, a recently retired man who feels alienated from his life. His job has been taken over by a young twerp, his wife of 43 has died suddenly, and his daughter is going to marry a nincompoop. He decides to drive his new RV to Denver and persuade Jeannie that she is making a big mistake. He is even more convinced that the marriage is doomed when he meets Randall's family. Kathy Bates richly deserves her Golden Globe nomination for the charm and energy she brings to Roberta, Randall's mother. Hope Davis is one of our favorites and she brings humanity and vulnerability to her role as Jeannie. Dermot Mulroney's duck-footed walk and ponytail paint him as the quintessential jerk, but there is a basic sweetness to his Randall that keeps his portrayal from being a caricature. Alexander Payne deserves credit for writing an excellent screenplay, and he is no slouch as a director, either. He previously directed both *Citizen Ruth* and *Election*. Payne needed voice-overs to tell us what Schmidt is thinking and he came up with a clever device. After watching a TV ad for a world childrens' charity, Schmidt "adopts" a 6-year-old Tanzanian named Ndugu. Encouraged to write to the boy, he spills out his thoughts in long confessional letters. We are so lucky to live in the age of Jack Nicholson. He is a treasure, and he totally submerges his personality to that of Schmidt's. The movie is both funny and touching, and the senior citizens in our audience laughed enthusiastically. We give this one an **GRADE A-**

ABSENCE OF MALICE 1981/2021 The movie is 40-years-old and still great. The years have not degraded the performances, the writing, or the message. Megan Carter (Sally Field) is a reporter duped into running an untrue story on Michael Gallagher (Paul

Newman). The prosecutor who is responsible for the leak (played by Bob Balaban) is convinced that Gallagher has information about the disappearance of a corrupt Union leader, and he concocted an investigation to pressure Gallagher into telling what he knows. Gallagher is innocent of any wrong-doing, and the story results in business difficulties for him and tragedy for his friend, Teresa (Melinda Dillon). Newman, Dillon and the writer were nominated for Oscars, and Gary and I think Sidney Pollack deserved a nomination for directing this outstanding film. The issue of the responsibility of the job of journalist is pivotal here, and it is even more crucial today. How to write the truth and not hurt people is the eternal question. To assuage the massive guilt of Megan Carter, her news desk editor tells her, "I know how to print what's true, and I know how to not hurt someone. I just don't know how to do them both at the same time and neither do you." Gallagher gets his revenge on everyone in the end. At least, we didn't have a scene of Newman, 20 years Field's senior, sailing off together, and for that I am grateful. In the movie, they were briefly involved, and in the words of Carter herself, "that is not true, but it is accurate." **GRADE A**

THE ACCOUNTANT: (2016) Asperger's syndrome is not new to the movies. *Rainman* and *Adam* come immediately to mind. But, *The Accountant* raises autism to a lethal level. Ben Affleck is Christian Wolf, a brilliant accountant who has another set of very specific skills. When he was young he was clearly different—exceptional at mathematics, but sorely lacking in "people skills." His father, an Army man, was an advocate of tough love. He taught the autistic boy and his younger brother, who seemed relatively normal, to defend themselves in rather extreme ways. The grown-up accountant works for a series of questionable clients, all the while perfecting his "special skills." When Wolf is hired by the owner of a company specializing in innovative robotics for the handicapped, he discovers not only the missing money, but something more dangerous. Someone is trying to kill the young woman in the accounting department who first noticed the discrepancy in the books. Wolf decides to protect her. Anna Kendrick is the object of Wolf's protection, protection that results in a massive amount of gunplay and fisticuffs. Some critics found the idea of an autistic assassin offensive. At the very least, it is a preposterous story, but Affleck is so good that it makes for the kind of movie that critics dismiss, but audiences like. It's violent, but somehow it's all quite fun. J.K. Simons, Jon Bernthal, Jeffrey Tambor, and Jean Smart round out the cast in a movie Gary and I enjoyed. **GRADE B**

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE: If you love the Beatles and liked the movie, *Hair*, you'll enjoy this musical trip back to the 1960s. What a time it was. A time of war and protesters, of sex, drugs, and rock and roll; a time of violence, and yet, a time of hope that the world could change. It was a time of tangerine trees and marmalade skies, brought to vibrant cinematic life in this film that one critic called a "musical fantasia." Some creatively imagined and beautifully photographed scenes play like psychedelic drug trips. Director Julie Taymore tells two stories: The story of the Sixties when we believed that all we needed was love, and appropriately, a love story. A young Liverpool dock worker, Jude (Jim Sturgess), travels to America to find his birth father, and finds a best friend, Max (Joe Anderson), and a girlfriend, Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood). In Greenwich Village the three find a home in a communal apartment with Sadie as their landlord and resident earth mother. Sadie is a rock singer, and a terrific one. (She is played by Dana Fuchs, who was Janis Joplin the in Off Broadway show, *Love Janis*.) Thirty-three Beatles songs have been re-recorded and sung by the actors. Sturgess is charming both as an actor and as a singer, and Anderson and Wood acquit themselves nicely. Bono plays Dr. Robert, a Ken Kesey-type character, and Joe Cocker sings one song appearing as three different people—a bum, a pimp, and a Hippie. He's marvelous as all three! How can you not like a movie that has Joe Cocker in it? We feel a bit like Stephen Holden of the New York Times who says that around the midpoint, *Across The Universe* captured his heart. even though he admits that the film is "unadulterated white, middle-class baby boomer nostalgia." It captured our hearts, too. **GRADE B+**

AD ASTRA: (2019) We didn't know what to make of this space movie, although any movie that spends most of the time on Brad Pitt's face is usually my kind of movie. Apparently, other audiences felt the same, because while the critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* gave the film 83%, audiences were much less enthusiastic, giving it only 43%. Brad Pitts performance is universally applauded, and that, in our opinion, is justified. The title translates as "To The Stars," and that is what the film is all about. Astronaut Roy McBride (Brad Pitt) travels to the outer edges of the solar system to find his missing father and eliminate the source of a new type of energy surge that threatens the survival of Earth. It is this very surge that damaged a space antenna that Roy was repairing, sending him spinning to earth at the beginning of *Ad Astra*. McBride's father, astronaut H. Clifford McBride (Tommy Lee Jones) disappeared from a mission to Neptune when Roy was only a boy. Now, Roy's superior officers believe that not only is Clifford McBride still alive, but that his mission--the Lima Project--is responsible for the surge storms and that the Lima project needs to be destroyed. So, you have a father/son story combined with space walks, space modules and lots and lots of space gobbledygook. Gary questioned the science; I questioned whether the father/son story was enough to keep me involved. In the end, it was not, although I was intrigued by the vision of life in the future when space travel has become commonplace. Reader Art S. had a different take on the movie, which you can read in *Readers Views*. Other friends have told me they enjoyed the movie. We suggest you see it for yourself. For us, Brad Pitts notwithstanding, it was a C movie. **GRADE C**

ADAM: If you see a trailer or read a review before seeing *Adam*, you will know that the title character has a condition called Asperger syndrome. Although this is not immediately revealed in the film, having the information will in no way interfere with your enjoyment of this charming and well made movie. English-born Hugh Dancy plays Adam, who has no difficulty understanding the complexities of cosmology, but is terrified by the complexities of social interaction. Banter, humor, and body language are, to him, as difficult to understand as quantum physics is to most of us. As you might expect in a heart warming movie, boy meets girl. The girl is brilliantly played by Rose Byrne (You may recognize her from TV's *Damages*). To the film's credit, we can understand why an attractive girl can be drawn to a painfully shy and socially inept man. Playing Adam's parents Peter Gallagher and Amy Irving add texture to an already beautiful story. Barbara and I both think this is a gem of a summer movie and give it high marks. **GRADE A-**

ADAPTATION: Barbara and I both went to this film with high hopes and possibly inflated expectations. There was a lot we liked about the film: Nicolas Cage, Chris Cooper, Meryl Streep, and one of the most creative screenplays we have seen this year, to mention but a few. Nicolas Cage brilliantly plays Charlie Kaufman, a tortured writer, as well as Charlies twin brother, Donald. I can't speak for Barbara,

but I was totally charmed by the first three quarters of the movie. Then, not so gradually, the film lost its charm for me. The creativity I loved twisted the plot into paths I didn't love. Had I been a powerful producer, I would have sent the script back for a rewrite at that point. Then the last few minutes of the film returned to the charming creativity of the beginning. My evaluation of the film slipped from an A to a B, but I am hoping one of our loyal readers will convince me I am wrong. In his review, Roger Ebert wrote, "To watch the film is to be actively involved in the challenge of its creation." From press releases we are lead to believe that the screenplay is based on reality, but the boundary between reality and creative representations of it are what makes this film good. Now, convince me that it is great. (I agree with Gary that the first part of the movie is delightful, but I didn't like the "thriller" part of it either. It's a B for me, too.) **GRADE B**

THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU: This romantic science fiction story has at its core the conflict between free will and a sort of predestination. Are we totally free to make our own choices, or are we manipulated by some higher power? Matt Damon is David Norris, a rising political star who, on the brink of losing his first Senatorial election, meets a young woman by chance. Or is it chance? Two months later they meet on a bus, again, perhaps by chance. As Norris realizes he's falling in love with Elise (Emily Blunt), mysterious men appear—men who want to keep them apart. Apparently, their first meeting was according to some sort of "plan," but the second was pure chance. Their being together violates the "plan" and the Adjustment Bureau must step in to make sure they never see each other again. Field agents John Slattery and his partner, Anthony Mackie, both wearing a fedoras (the hats prove to be significant), do their best to convince Norris that it is his own best interest to give up the woman he loves. The punishment for not doing so is severe. Will he? That is the rest of the story. At one point a higher-up, Terrance Stamp, is called in to handle the situation. He is called "the Hammer," and you can imagine what that means. Is the chairman of the Adjustment Bureau God? Are the field agents angels? I'll leave that determination to you. Damon and Blunt have great chemistry and I enjoyed both the romance and the science fiction story. I especially liked Slattery and Mackie. Gary always has difficulty accepting the science fiction elements in a movie, even when he enjoys the rest of the story. He can't go higher and B- for *The Adjustment Bureau*, but I liked it enough to give it a B+.
GRADE B+/B-

ADMISSION: (2013) We really wanted to like this movie because it stars Tina Fey and Paul Rudd. Sadly, we didn't much care for it. Fey plays a Princeton admissions officer who is up for a promotion against an aggressive Gloria Ruben. When she meets a bright student from an alternative high school who wants to go to Princeton, she is not impressed. However, when she discovers that the student might be the son she gave up when she was in college, she wants him to be accepted--and, she is willing to go to great lengths to be sure he is accepted. We had no quarrel with the actors, but aside from the idea of using an admission officer as a central character, the movie seemed like a rehash of many other romantic comedies. And did I mention that it's not very funny? We don't demand belly laughs from a comedy, but we do want a movie to be interesting and to keep us engaged. Both of us were bored watching this one. Lilly Tomlin is Fey's single, unconventional mother but the mother-daughter conflict didn't ring true. Gary thought that Paul Weitz, who did a terrific job in 2004 with *About a Boy*, must have phoned in his direction on *Admission*. The pace was painfully slow, and, except for one or two instances, creativity was not in evidence. What a waste of two of our favorite actors. **GRADE C-**

ADRIFT: (2018) This is a thrilling true-life adventure based on events that took place in 1983. Because it is a Hollywood movie, there is a love story involved. But actually that was part of the true story and it works well. Barbara finds it refreshing when female leads are not cast as worried wives and mothers waiting in the background, but are independently strong, capable and determined as Shailene Woodley is in this gripping film. The movie is a wonderful showcase for Woodley and she delivers admirably playing Tami who survived one of the most catastrophic hurricanes in recorded history, as well as 41 days adrift on a wrecked sailboat. Director Baltasar Kormakur also helmed *Everest* a well-received survival film, so he is qualified to handle this movie. He wisely moves the action between the love story and the survival drama. Barb and I agree it is a film worth seeking. **GRADE B+**

ADVENTURE LAND: This is not what you would expect from the trailers, which present the film as a typical teen sex comedy. It is not what you would expect from Greg Mottola, who directed the recent *Superbad* and wrote and directed this film. While *Superbad* had, I'm told, some sweet moments it was also had a lot of raunchy moments. *Adventureland* is imbued with sweetness. It treats the young people, who are in their early twenties, with respect and tenderness. Even the parents are not caricatures. With the exception of a step-mother, the adults are shown as real, though perhaps flawed, people. Jesse Eisenberg is James whose college graduation coincides with his father's demotion and pay cut. He had been promised a trip to Europe as a graduation present, but instead must find a summer job to fund grad school in the Fall. Eisenberg may remind you of Michael Sera from *Juno*. Both tend to play smart, sweet young men who know they are not the coolest guy around. Eisenberg manages to create an extremely likeable character here, and I found myself wanting to know what happens to him after the end of the film. That doesn't happen very often. Taking a job at Adventureland, a local amusement park, James meets a variety of characters. Most importantly, he meets Em (Kristen Stewart) and falls in love. We have been fans of Stewart ever since we saw her in the independent film, *The Cake Eaters*. She is an impressive talent, and I suppose her new vampire movie, *Twilight*, will make her a star. We liked everyone in this film, especially Ryan Reynolds as the maintenance man and sex symbol of Adventureland (the amusement park). He could have been a stereotype, but he plays the part with a wry understanding that surprised and pleased us. Bill Hader and Kristin Wiig from SNL are very amusing as the park manager and his rather strange wife. Growing up isn't easy, but you will like and empathize with Jesse and his friends. The film is set in 1987 and the production takes great care in getting the details right. **GRADE B+**

AFGHAN STAR: (2009) In this remarkable documentary, we follow four young Afghan singers as they risk their lives to appear on *Afghan Star*, the most popular TV show in Afghanistan. Two men and two women make the final four, but when one of the women is voted off, she commits the terrible sin of dancing and uncovering her hair as she performs her farewell song. For that, some Afghans believe, she deserves to be killed. We highly recommend this documentary because it gives you a real look at the Afghan people, their attitudes and fears and their love of music. There is a brief video within the documentary of a street scene in 1980's Afghanistan. It is tragic how that sophisticated culture was turned back centuries by the Taliban. During the reign of the Taliban, Afghanistan was, as a young man says, "Like a house where no one was home." Kenneth Turin of the L.A. Times said, "*For this eye-opening film reveals that even systems as dubious as the 'Idol' format mean dramatically different things when transferred to radically dissimilar cultures. In the context of Afghanistan, the show's core idea becomes moving, dramatic and significant in ways it simply isn't in the West. In the*

process of letting us in on all that, "Afghan Star" also tells us considerably more about the current state of that country (where the only known pig is in a zoo and women in burkas rush to take cellphone photographs) than a more sober-minded film could manage."

GRADE A-

AGNES BROWNE: This film directed by and starring Anjelica Huston, is a simple story, simply told. Its running time is only 90 minutes, and in these days of three-hour films, it seemed quite short. Huston plays a recent widow with seven children. Providing for the children is difficult for Agnes, but this Irish film is no Angela's Ashes. This movie has more humor and a happy ending. It also has some predictable characters and situations. I liked seeing Angela's friendship with Marion (Marion O'Dwyer) the best. A French actor, Arno Chevrier is Pierre, Agnes' would-be boyfriend. The most stereotyped character is the neighborhood loan shark, Billy, portrayed by Ray Winstone. Roger Ebert described Winstone as, "An actor so good at being mean that two of England's best actors (Tim Roth and Gary Oldman) both cast him as an abusive father in their first movies. (Winstone was the father in Roth's *War Zone*, reviewed in the last issue.) Agnes Browne is a pleasant way to spend an hour and a half, but you might also enjoy it as a video rental. **GRADE: B-**

A.I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: It is almost impossible to categorize this very creative film. Is it a futuristic fairy tale--a version of Pinocchio in which a robot child yearns to be a "real boy?" Or is it a dark view of a future world where life-like robots, called Mechas are destroyed for the amusement of humans, or Orgas? Or is it a lyrical vision of a distant future populated by benevolent beings? Actually, it's all three stories and that bothers some critics. Parts of the story seem to be vintage Spielberg, while other parts are more reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick. The two directors had many discussions about this project: Kubrick planned to produce with Spielberg directing. Although Spielberg tried to blend their disparate visions, he was not totally successful. Haley Joel Osment is impressive as David, the robot-child and Jude Law is splendid as Gigolo Joe, a robot who boasts, "When a woman has had Joe, she doesn't want a real man." (Entertainment Weekly thought that David embodied Spielberg, but Joe was pure Kubrick--"An amoral animatron of the future.") We liked the first part, were disenchanted with the second part, and thought the third part was haunting. But, at 145 minutes, it is far too long. Many viewers have been disappointed in the film, calling it "awful." The critics have been kinder. Roger Ebert calls it "both wonderful and maddening;" the L.A. Times reviewer said it was "fascinating but cold;" and the N.Y. Times said, "It is the best fairy tale the most disturbing, complex and intellectually challenging boy's adventure story Mr. Spielberg has made." Gary thinks it deserves a B for creativity. It's true that many of AI's images have lingered in my mind, but I'm still having trouble giving it a grade. I will be anxious to hear from those of you who see this one. **GRADE B**

AIN'T THEM BODIES SAINTS: Digital movie cameras allow film directors to shoot with very low light levels. That can be effective for certain scenes, but David Lowery got carried away and shot the entire movie in low light. Even daytime scenes were dim as though the sun didn't shine brightly in Texas in the seventies. This is an "art" film, not only because of the dimly lit scenes, but because the actors talk with as little mouth movement as possible. You can hardly see it and often can't hear the sparse dialogue. That may be "art," but it isn't entertainment. Not for us, anyway. The movie tells the story of Bob (Casey Affleck) and Ruth (Rooney Mara), young lovers who go on a crime spree in the 1970s. Bob winds up in jail and Ruth, pregnant with his child, avoids incarceration. Four years later, Bob escapes from jail and his journey back to Ruth lasts for the rest of the movie. It is a long, slow journey. Ben Foster plays a local policeman who has developed an interest in Ruth and her little girl. Three strangers appear who want Bob dead, but we never know why. Perhaps we missed something. We probably should have skipped this one, but we have always enjoyed the performances of Affleck and Foster, so we took a chance. The acting is good in this movie, and the little girl playing Bob and Ruth's daughter is cute, but that's not enough to recommend it. Unless you enjoy "art." **GRADE C-**

AKEELAH AND THE BEE: The 2002 documentary *Spellbound* showed us the excitement and drama of spelling bee competition. Here we have a fictional speller and her journey to the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C. KeKe Palmer is Akeelah Anderson, a bright 11-year-old living in South L.A. She is afraid to show how smart she is because people will make fun of her and call her a "brainiac." She only enters her first spelling bee because it's better than a semester of detention. Palmer is a terrific actress. She should give Dakota Fanning some real competition. Angela Bassett is Akeelah's mother, a window who struggles to support her family. Laurence Fishburne is the professor who coaches Akeelah to prepare her for the National Bee. He also produced the film. We both thought that the Spelling Bee parts of the movie were excellent. However, the dramatic moments seem a bit manufactured to us. And while we applauded the way the movie ends, we both thought the final word in the championship round was far too easy. We are anxious to see the young KeKe Palmer in her next film. **GRADE B**

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
— Marianne Williamson*

THE ALAMO: If you are not convinced that war is a brutal, bloody, messy business, then you should consider *The Alamo* an education and spend 2 hours and 17 minutes of your precious time watching this film. If you are already convinced, we are sure you can find something more entertaining to do. The film is short on history, short on character, but long, very long, on gunfire and death. There are no heroes in this film with the possible exception of Billy Bob Thornton's portrayal of Davy (he prefers to be called David) Crockett. Sam Bowie (Jason Patrick) is dying of consumption and typhoid pneumonia so he is pretty much out of the fight. And Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid) never comes to the aid of the few soldiers and citizen militia barricaded inside the Alamo trying to repel the huge, well-trained army of Santa Ana. Gary was hoping for more history. I was hoping for something other than boredom. We were both disappointed. **GRADE C**

ALBERT NOBBS: (2011) In 1982 Glenn Close received rave reviews playing the title role in an Off-Broadway play titled *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*. She played a destitute, late 19th-century Dublin woman who, to survive, became a meek and obedient manservant in a hotel. After thirty years of effort, Close has finally reprised the role for the big screen. She co-wrote the screenplay, co-produced and starred in this gender-bending period piece that earned her a sixth Oscar nomination. The film also earned an Oscar nomination for Janet McTeer in best supporting role playing a swaggering house painter with a few secrets herself. Close is brilliant at bringing warmth, vulnerability, and fragility to a character that is so unlike other memorable roles she is known for. Remember her in *Fatal Attraction*? Or her TV role as Patty Hewes in *Damages*? Although this quiet film deals with cross-dressing, it seems to me that it isn't

really concerned with sex or even love. It is about finding a little happiness in a world and at a time that allowed very little of it for the working class. When Barbara and I left the theater, we were prepared to give the film a grade of "B" because we felt it wasn't as powerful as the actors. But after reflection, I think it is a film that will haunt my memory for a long time. **GRADE B/B+**

ALEXANDER: Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great, single-handedly changed the entire nature of the ancient world in little more than ten years. He created an empire that stretched across three continents and covered some two million square miles. Against overwhelming odds, he led his army to victories across the Persian territories of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt without incurring a single defeat. Alexander's ambition is matched by Oliver Stone's ambition in putting this epic tale on screen. But in the end Oliver Stone makes the same errors that Alexander made, taking too long to go too far and losing momentum in the effort. I liked this film more than Barbara and there were many things to like, but it just wasn't enough to hold me for nearly three hours. I thought Angelina Jolie was an inspired choice to play Alexander's mother. I like Colin Ferrell and for me he does a credible job playing Alexander. Val Kilmer and Anthony Hopkins play their roles well and the set designers deserve an award for their creation of Babylon. But in the end I can only grade this film **C+**

ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY: (2014) This is a family-friendly Disney film adaptation of an award winning 1972 children's book with the same title. Your expectation of seeing a string of embarrassments and frustrating developments would be justified. Eleven-year-old Alexander knew it was going to be another terrible day when he woke up with gum in his hair. He was right. Perfectly cast, Steve Carell and Jennifer Garner play his upbeat parents and the entire supporting cast helps move this often funny 1 hour and 20 minute comedy along at a quick pace. Even Dick Van Dyke shows up in a funny bit playing himself. The film will win no Academy Awards, but it is a pleasant movie especially if you take children with you. Barb and I enjoyed it even without the children. We have all had enough bad days to identify with an avalanche of calamities. But as Alexander wisely points out, "You gotta have the bad days so you can love the good days even more." **GRADE B**

ALFIE: Looking at close-ups of Jude Law on the big screen is not a bad way to spend an afternoon. This new version of *Alfie* got off to a slow start for us, but a terrific scene between Law and an older man brought the movie to life and we quite enjoyed it. Jude Law appears to have great fun playing a man who is commitment-phobic and possessed of a short attention span when it comes to relationships. He's a classic Don Juan, but he does seem to like women. The original Alfie in 1966 had great disdain for his "birds," referring to them sometimes as "it." At the end of the 1966 film, you didn't have much hope that Michael Caine's Alfie would ever change, but there is some hope for this 21st Century more likeable Alfie. Marisa Tomei, Nia Long, Jane Krakowski, and Sienna Miller are Alfie's conquests and Susan Sarandon is an older woman who gives Alfie a taste of his own medicine. The film was directed by Charles Shyer and written by Shyer and Elaine Pope. It is based on the play by Bill Naughton. **GRADE B**

ALI: Occasionally this Muhammed Ali biography does sting like a bee, but mostly it floats like a butterfly from one disjointed scene to another. I know the filmmakers were trying to show Ali's life in the ring, his private life, and his association with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. They also wanted to show how his conscientious objection to the Viet Nam war caused him to lose his championship and spend ten years in legal battles. They tried to do too much. Only the fight scenes seem whole and complete. I couldn't believe that I liked the prizefights best. Usually I avoid fight movies because of the fight scenes. The scenes with Howard Cosell also play well, but the other scenes seem either too short or too long. For example, the scenes of Ali running down the roads of Zaire to adoring crowds seemed endless. The scenes showing Ali's conflict with the government are so brief and disjointed that anyone unfamiliar with what was happening politically from 1964 to 1974 will have difficulty understanding what was going on. The short, disjointed scenes also made it difficult to keep track of all the characters in Ali's entourage. Will Smith gives a powerful and entertaining performance as Ali. He trained for months and it shows. (Although he sometimes looks slight in the ring compared to the huge actors who played Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman.) Jon Voigt looks and sounds remarkably like Howard Cosell and the scenes between them are funny. The movie could have used more of that light touch. Roger Ebert said that the film was "shot more in the tone of a eulogy than a celebration." We agree. The film just doesn't have the impact of the 1996 documentary *When We Were Kings*. We gave that film an A, but are divided between a C+ (B) and a B- (G) on this one. **GRADE B-/C+**

ALICE IN WONDERLAND: We saw Tim Burton's take on the classic fairy tale in 3D and the effects were wildly creative. His wonderland was alternately frightening and beautiful. Mia Wasikowska, who stunned us with her acting in TV's *In Treatment*, was perfect as a grown-up Alice falling down the rabbit hole for the second time. And Johnny Depp was a delightful Mad Hatter. He can make any character come to life. Anne Hathaway played the White Queen and Helena Bonham Carter, with a huge head and tiny bow lips, played the evil Red Queen. She was terrific. Crispin Glover, with exceedingly long legs and a jagged scar on his face, was the Knave of Hearts. Tweedledee and Tweedledum are envisioned as two cute little dough boys. Burton got some famous voices for Wonderland's animals: Stephen Fry was the voice for the Cheshire Cat, Michael Sheen voiced the white rabbit, Alan Rickman voice brought the wise blue caterpillar to life, and Timothy Spall voiced the bloodhound Bayard. This really isn't a children's story. I think most young kids would find it violent and frightening. Roger Ebert said it wasn't until he saw this 2010 version that he realized it has never been a children's story, and that "*Allice* plays better as an adult hallucination, which is how Burton rather brilliantly interprets it until a pointless third act flies off the rails." I agree with Ebert that the story is not enhanced by the boring action sequence at the end. Does every movie these days have to end with a battle? I found myself saying, "Just kill the damn Jabberwocky and get this over with." Up to that point I enjoyed the creativity. Gary doesn't feel he can grade the movie because fairy tales, no matter how creatively imagined, are for him a soporific. **GRADE B**

ALL IS LOST: This movie reminded me of a story a cousin of mine told about a harrowing trip in a sailboat between the Florida Coast and the island of Bimini. At least on that trip, Anne and Chauncey had each other. In *All Is Lost*, Robert Redford is alone. The movie's theme is the classic man-against-nature: A man battling the sea. As an acting exercise, it is a tour-de-force for Redford. At 77 years of age he still has it, and still looks good doing it. As a story, however, the movie's almost complete lack of dialogue makes it difficult to know or care about "our man," as he is described in the credits. We can admire his determination to survive, but we don't get involved in his struggle. While I was interested throughout, Gary was a bit bored. He thought the trailer was sufficient to tell the story. We can't fault the direction of J. C. Chandor, who is also the screen writer, but I think I'd rather read than watch the story. **GRADE B**

ALL IS TRUE: (2019) This creative film dramatizes the late-in-life William Shakespeare, the most famous author of all time. After the Globe Theatre burned down in 1613, Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, his birthplace. The movie is produced and directed by Shakespeare scholar Sir Kenneth Branagh, who also stars as the devastated and grieving William Shakespeare. You might not recognize Branagh because make-up spent hours each day and the result was spectacular. Judi Dench plays Shakespeare's illiterate wife. *All Is True* refers to the alternate title of **Henry VIII** which was being used in 1613 at London's Globe Theatre when it caught fire and burned down in mid-performance. The fire is documented and we know **Henry VIII** was the last play Shakespeare wrote, but there are few facts known about Shakespeare's personal life. So most of this movie is made up, but as one critic observed, "*If Shakespeare wasn't like this, he should have been.*" *It is a loving and sometimes humorous look at the Bard's final years. Haunted by the death of his only son Hamnet, he struggled to mend the broken relationships with his wife and daughters and to examine his own failings as husband and father.* Director Branagh and screenwriter Ben Elton do what the Bard himself did. Take a historical fact and weave it into a theatre piece that entertains and enlightens. I loved it, even more than Barbara. **GRADES A/B**

ALL SAINTS: (2017) Barb and I had reservations about a film advertised as "faith based." I often find such films heavy-handed. One reviewer stressed that the film stresses the humanity of its characters and the importance of community ties and does it in a manner that is never heavy-handed. We were also impressed with the high marks the movie received on Rotten Tomatoes: 93%. *All Saints* is based on the inspiring story of salesman-turned-pastor Michael Spurlock played by John **Corbett**. You will remember Corbett if you remember a popular T.V. show titled **Northern Exposure**. The pastor risks everything to save a tiny Tennessee church which was ordered to shut down by the Bishop. This film has two things going for it: (1) it is based on a true story, and (2) it had its heart in the right place. Unfortunately that is about all. The story is slow and disjointed and editing sometimes had us scratching our head. I'm afraid I will have to go with the 7% who did not view the film with favor. Barb is more forgiving and grades the film a bit higher. **GRADE C-/C**

ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES: (2020 on *Netflix*) Elle Fanning was a 3-year-old girl when we saw her in the movie *I Am Sam* in 2001. Then, she played the younger version of her sister, Dakota. Now, she is a 21-year-old woman who can convincingly play a teen, Violet. That is what she does in *All The Bright Places*. Violet's sister died in a car accident three months ago, but she is still grieving the loss of her "best friend." When the movie opens, we see Finch (Justice Smith) out for a run when he sees Violet standing on the railing of a bridge. He recognizes her as a classmate and decides to intervene. Finch is known in their high school as the "Freak," because has episodes of violence. Violet is one of the "in crowd," and she resists Finch's obvious charm, but when they are paired on a class project, she warms to him. Fanning and Smith have terrific chemistry and are wonderful in this surprisingly dark teen comedy. She tells Finch that her sister, Eleanor, did not like to read, but she had a favorite poet, and she often used a quote from one of his poems--"*We do not remember days, we remember moments.*" Finch has his own scars of the past and as they as they become closer and begin to share their stories, they discover that even the smallest places and moments can mean something. The film is based on the internationally bestselling novel by Jennifer Niven. The critics were lukewarm on this film and so were audiences. One critic on *Rotten Tomatoes* said that she thought the movie "glorified teen suicide." We don't agree with her but the sad ending of the movie, I suspect, turned some people off. All the critics, though, praised Fanning and Smith for their convincing portrait of young love, and we agree that without their skill, the movie would be too dark. **GRADE B+**

ALL THE KINGS MEN: Anytime you remake an Academy Award winning film, you risk the wrath of the professional critics. *All The King's Men* won the Academy Award in 1949 and the 2006 remake has generated pretty harsh criticism. So, with low expectations, Barbara and I went--largely because of the dynamite cast which includes Sean Penn, Jude Law, Kate Winslet, Mark Ruffalo, Anthony Hopkins, Patricia Clarkson, Kathy Baker and James Gandolfini. The New York Times says "Nothing in the picture works." We wouldn't be quite that negative. We would agree that the script and editing get low marks, but we felt the acting was outstanding. The story is based on Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1946 novel about the rise and fall of Willie Stark, a demagogic Louisiana governor. Though Willie, played by Sean Penn is fictional, it is obviously inspired by Huey Long. A story of how well meaning idealism can slide into political corruption should play well, but I'm afraid this one plays too much like a tedious soap opera. **GRADE C**

ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD: (2017) Inspired by a true story from the early 1970's, this is an engrossing film whether you remember the news story or not. The screenplay follows the kidnapping of 16-year-old John Paul Getty III and the desperate attempt by his devoted mother (Michelle Williams) to convince his billionaire grandfather (Christopher Plummer) to pay the ransom. Kevin Spacey was originally cast as the grandfather. However, after multiple sexual assault allegations were leveled against Spacey, the role was recast with Plummer. Scenes were reshot just a month prior to the film's release and Plummer is terrific in the role. Barbara and I loved the film and predict an Oscar nomination* for Plummer and possibly for Williams as well as the movie. *All the Money In The World* is a thriller about a kidnapping, but it could also be described as a study of the corrupting influence of wealth, a perfect 21st century morality tale. A story about an unscrupulous and egocentric billionaire couldn't possibly be timelier. The recognizable stars are Christopher Plummer, Michelle Williams, and Mark Wahlberg. Director and producer Ridley Scott based the film on a nonfiction book with the same title by John Pearson. We think it is an atmospheric thriller and one of the better films of the year. **GRADE A-** *Plummer did get a Golden Globe nomination for "Best Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture"

ALL THE OLD KNIVES: 2022 (included with Prime membership) This is a spy story, but it doesn't have any thrilling scenes. It is a tale of global espionage, moral dilemma and deadly betrayal but told by talking about the past. That's why the movie isn't getting much buzz, but that's exactly why some critics gave it high praise. We selected the movie to watch because our local critic, Bill Goodykoontz, gave it 4½ stars out of a possible 5. At first, we were unimpressed but the film eventually won me over. This is the setup: When the CIA discovers one of its agents leaked information that cost more than 100 people their lives eight years before, veteran operative Henry Pelham (Chris Pine) is assigned to root out the mole from among his former offcematates at the agency's Vienna station. His investigation takes him from Austria to California, where he is reunited with his one-time colleague and ex-lover Celia Harrison (Thandiwe Newton). One critic on Rotten Tomatoes said, "*If the pacing runs a tad meditative for today's standards for spy movies, well, then: all the better to luxuriate in Pine and Newton's seductive company.*" And their love story is captivating! We are treated to a lot of flashbacks to Vienna, but it's relatively easy to keep track. Both of them look older in the present scenes; both have different hairstyles, and Pine has a bit of gray in his. I liked the movie a bit better than Gary did. **GRADE B+/B**

ALL THE PRETTY HORSES: (2000 release seen on video) Based on the acclaimed novel by Cormac McCarthy, it is the story of two young men who, in 1949, travel to Mexico in search of the "old west." They hope to find a great ranch and work on it as cowboys. Matt Damon and Henry Thomas are the cowboys. Along the way they meet Blevins, a young runaway who proves to be trouble. Damon and Thomas find work on one of the largest ranches in Mexico and Damon falls in love with the rancher's beautiful daughter, Penelope Cruz. She also proves to be trouble. Ruben Blades plays the rancher. Eventually, the two young cowboys wind up in a Mexican Penitentiary. Gorgeous scenery and pretty horses and Matt Damon make for an entertaining movie. **THUMBS UP**

ALL THE REAL GIRLS: The people in this film festival favorite talk like real people, not like actors in a typical Hollywood movie. The love story is told in brief scenes: glimpses of real life--life in a small North Carolina mill town. It seems so real that it has the look of a documentary. These people's lives aren't remarkable, but we were captivated by them. Paul Schneider is Paul, the young man who has bedded almost every available girl in town, but is now in love with Noel. Noel has just graduated from boarding school, and she hasn't had much experience with men. Her brother, Tip, is Paul's best friend, and that causes some problems. After all, Tip knows all about Paul's womanizing and he doesn't much like the idea of Noel and Paul getting together. There's not much action--just one fight--and there are no car chases or explosions. There are just people, living their lives, falling in love, and growing old. Patricia Clarkson is memorable as Paul's mother. She supports herself by hiring out as a clown. It probably beats working at the local WallMart. Schneider co-wrote the script with Director David Gordon Green. They collaborated on a previous film, **George Washington** which also got rave reviews. I doubt that this movie will come to the standard theaters, but we recommend it. **GRADE B+**

ALLIED (2016): It's an old-fashioned romantic spy drama, as it should be for a WWII story. It is also a showcase for Brad Pitt and Marion Cotillard. Both were excellent in their roles, but the screenplay could have used one more rewrite in my humble opinion. **Allied** had some outstanding scenes, but I wish there had been a few more. Also there was a pivotal moment setting up the climax that demanded Pitt do something I saw as illogical. It would be unkind of me to say more, for I don't want to be a spoiler. Pitt plays a U.S. intelligence officer and Cotillard plays a French Resistance fighter in Casablanca. The two, of course fall in love. The setting and the romance led to the advance publicity comparing **Allied** to one of the best WWII movies of all time, **Casablanca**. This may not have set well with some critics. *Tomatometer* gives **Allied** 61% based on 121 reviews. I don't see the likelihood of the film receiving many Academy Award nominations, but it really isn't a bad film, especially if you are a fan of either Pitt or Cotillard. Barb and I agree on this one. **GRADE B-**

ALMOST FAMOUS: We loved this movie, and we aren't the only ones who feel that way about it. Ebert started his review by saying, Oh, what a lovely film, and Michael Wilmington of the Chicago Tribune called it rapturously entertaining. It has an appealing story, interesting dialogue, music that brings back memories and likeable characters. The director is Cameron Crowe who gave us *Say Anything*, and *Jerry McGuire*. Here he tells a somewhat fictionalized version of his own adolescence. Crowe was a teen-aged rock critic and he fondly remembers the early Seventies. His alter ego in the film is William Miller. Miller is a fifteen-year-old high school senior (he started school early and skipped a grade) when he meets Lester Bangs, a legendary critic and the editor of *Cream*. Bangs is beautifully played by Philip Seymour Hoffman. (Our local critic thinks that there should be a part for this amazingly versatile actor in every movie made!) Miller is an aspiring rock critic and articles he has written for the local paper are seen by the editors of *Rolling Stone*. They hire him, sight unseen, to write an article about an almost famous rock band called "Stillwater." He travels with the band, comes to know the performers, falls in love with a groupie, and comes of age all to the background of rock music. Kate Hudson, Goldie Hawn's daughter, is Penny Lane, the aforementioned groupie and she shines in this role. She has the vulnerable appeal and comic timing of her mother coupled with acting skill remarkable in one so young. The central character in the band is Russell Hammond, its lead guitarist, and Billy Crudup is letter perfect in the role. What a talent he is! His film debut was in *Sleepers*, and he has also appeared in *Everyone Says I Love You*, *Inventing the Abbotts*, *Without Limits*, and *Jesus' Son*. Frances McDormand, who plays Miller's eccentric, intense, loving mother is, once again, simply wonderful. We could see this film again tomorrow! **GRADE: A**

ALONG CAME A SPIDER: This web has a couple of big plot holes but still manages to capture a viewer's attention. In fact, for the first half of the movie, Gary was ready to give it an A. However, an unexpected plot turn created implausibility in what had been a tight and convincing thriller and Gary's evaluation plummeted to a C. Fortunately, the climax was good enough to bring the grade back up to a B. The best thing in the movie is Morgan Freeman's sincere and convincing portrayal of Detective Alex Cross. There is such honesty and goodness in his face. Monica Potter is intriguing as a Secret Service Special Agent who partners with Cross to solve a kidnapping. She is lovely to look at and yet can be tough when toughness is needed. Penelope Ann Miller and Michael Moriarty play the parents of Megan, the kidnapped youngster. Mika Booren, who appeared in **The Patriot**, is notable as the brave and clever kidnap victim. **GRADE B**

ALPHA: (2018) **Alpha** is a visually stunning movie that focuses on the origins of man's best friend. It is a basic "boy and his dog" survival movie, except this time the dog is a wolf and the story takes place twenty thousand years ago. In a summer blockbuster season, it is refreshing to find a film without superheroes and car crashes. In the prehistoric past a small tribe of hunter-gatherers are preparing for a hunt to survive the coming winter. In a rite of passage a young man is taken on his first hunt in which a herd of buffalo is driven off a cliff. One of the buffalo attacks and the boy is thrown off the cliff landing on a ledge so far below that rescue is impossible. The tribe must abandon him. The rest of the movie is a survival story in which a symbiotic relationship develops between the young man and a wolf. It is a feel-good story, but a healthy amount of suspension of disbelief will help your enjoyment of the film. This will be especially true when noticing the perfectly-stitched fur-lined clothing. It might be best to think of the film as an entertaining fable. **GRADE B**

ALTMAN (2013 seen on Prime Video): The documentary looks at the life and works of film-maker Robert Altman. Two of the loyal **Movie Views** readers recommended this film to us and we thank them for it. I fondly remember going to the Oriental Theatre in downtown Chicago to see **Mash** in 1970. It was revelatory and quite wonderful, and it changed forever what I thought a good movie could be. Altman was the first to use overlapping dialogue, something that other directors have incorporated in their films. The documentary is a fairly standard biography, beginning in Altman's TV days and continuing on through his distinguished career. The

critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* were not kind to the movie. I think their problem with the documentary is because it just wasn't as good as an Altman film. Anyone who loves movies, and Altman films in particular, will love it. *Mash* was his first unqualified hit and for which he was awarded Best Director by the Cannes Film Festival, BAFTA, and the New York Film Critics Circle. His direction for *Mash* was nominated for an Oscar, but he didn't win. However, in 2006, The Motion Picture Academy gave him an honorary award "For a career that has repeatedly reinvented the art form and inspired filmmakers and audiences alike." In 1971 he directed and wrote the screenplay for *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, in which he imagines what life on the frontier might be like. Gary numbers that film among his favorites. The documentary made us want to see again our favorite Altman movies. He said in the documentary that he was so proud that none of his films were alike, but he came to believe they were all chapters in the same book. We will not see his like again. **GRADE A**

THE AMATEURS: (2005 seen on video. It was originally titled *The Moguls*) We really enjoyed this film about some townspeople who decide to make a porno film. The actors had such fun making this one that you can't help but enjoy it along with them. Jeff Bridges is always terrific, and he is aided here by some of our best actors. William Fichtner was particularly funny as a down and out loser who just wanted to "watch," so of course he's named Executive Producer. The porno film the friends make doesn't exactly turn out the way they anticipated, but it all turns out well in the end. We definitely recommend this one. Lots of fun! **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

AMAZING GRACE: Sometimes a movie is so uplifting and so ennobling that you forgive all its faults. This is such a film. Years ago, Barbara and I walked by the crypt of William Wilberforce at Westminster Abbey in London. At the time our ignorance of British history made us unaware we were passing the remains of true greatness. Wilberforce devoted years of his life as a Member of Parliament leading the abolitionist fight to end slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire. The role of William Wilberforce is admirably played by Ioan Gruffudd, whose name I cannot pronounce and will have great difficulty remembering. I do remember the actor, though, in the title role of TV's "Horatio Hornblower." The best known of the supporting cast is Albert Finney, who plays John Newton. Newton was the man who wrote the lyrics to the hymn "Amazing Grace." You may remember that Newton was a slave-ship captain who quit his job, repented, and became a clergyman and anti-slavery crusader. The movie touches on the horrors of slavery, but it doesn't rub it in your face. It focuses more on the process by which deeply entrenched evil can be defeated by passion and perseverance. Professional critics rate this film in the "B" range. I was so deeply moved that I must give it an "A." **GRADE A**

AMAZING GRACE: (2019) For avid Aretha Franklin fans this is a must-see concert documentary filmed in Los Angeles at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in 1972. Franklin was just 29 when she recorded what would become the best-selling gospel album in history. Aretha, already a multiple Grammy-winning superstar, recorded the legendary gospel album "Amazing Grace," performing to an enthusiastic audience songs she sang in her childhood. Director Sydney Pollack was hired to film what was planned to be the next great music documentary, like *Woodstock* two years earlier. But due to a host of technical and other problems, the footage was shelved and the film never made, until now. Neither Franklin nor Pollack lived to see the wide release of the movie. Pollack died in 2008 and Franklin last year in 2018. That the film exists at all is something of a miracle. New technology is finally allowing projects thought impossible to finish to finally come to the big screen. Alan Elliott, the film's producer and savior, spent years and considerable sums of money to restore, digitize and assemble footage that Pollack shot. The film was shot in a church and features gospel music, but you don't need to be a churchgoer to appreciate and enjoy the stirring foot-stomping music coming from the instrumental musicians, the church chorus, and the unforgettable voice of Aretha Franklin. Barbara and I liked it, but gospel fans would grade it higher. **GRADE B**

AMELIA: This film about the famous aviatrix Amelia Earhart never really takes off. (Sorry. I couldn't resist.) The cinematography is lovely and Hilary Swank looks remarkably like Earhart, although she sounds more like Katherine Hepburn. Strange, since Amelia came from Kansas. Swank is very good, though, at portraying a woman who valued freedom above all else. The flying scenes save the film: They look beautiful, especially when Amelia is flying over Africa and Pakistan. Even though we know the ending, the flights do create some excitement, but the scenes in between are sterile, and sometimes puzzling. For example, we couldn't figure out why the director (Mira Nair) included a scene between Amelia's husband, George Putnam (Richard Gere) and a young female aviator. Was she trying to give us a negative impression of Putnam? And what became of that young woman? Few of the characters come to life, and even the love scenes fall flat. The action begins with Amelia leaving on her fatal attempt to circle the globe, and earlier events are shown in flashbacks. That technique can work well, but here it doesn't. Cherry Jones, famous for playing the President on TV's *24*, is cast as Eleanor Roosevelt—not very believably, I'm afraid. Christopher Eccleston does a good job as Fred Noonan, the navigator who accompanied Earhart on her last flight. Gary and I agree on a grade of C+ . **GRADE C+**

AMELIE: As we left the theater Gary said, "I can see how someone would be charmed by that movie, but I wasn't." I wasn't either, at least not completely charmed. Certainly Audrey Tautou has great appeal, with a gamin, vulnerable Audrey Hepburn quality. There were some delightful scenes, but on the whole, it failed to engage me. In fact, I had trouble keeping my eyes open during parts of the movie. I did think the opening was especially clever: We are treated to a series of scenes that show why Amelie is pathologically shy and unable to relate to other people. They are designed to help us understand why, even when she is attracted to a young man, she cannot bring herself to approach him in a straightforward manner. We are at odds with most of the critics who rave about this French fantasy. Perhaps we just weren't in the right mood. Or perhaps it tried too hard to be charming. Here is what our local critic had to say about the film: "Amelie is a film that will separate the Anglophiles from the Francophiles. It could even start a war. The movie is one of the most popular ever in France. . . The English reviewers, though, hated it with a loathing they reserve for Maurice Chevalier singing *Thank Heaven for Little Girls*. You draw your line and stand on your side of it. I guess we're somewhere in the middle. **GRADE C**

THE AMERICAN: We don't know much about Jack (George Clooney) except that he's very good with guns, lives a solitary life, and that there is danger in having friends: Danger for Jack and even more so for his friends. He's a hired assassin and is very good at his job. The film opens in Sweden where things have apparently gone wrong. Jack escapes to Italy and meets with his contact, played with appropriate ambiguity by Johan Leysen. Anton Corbijn directed this mysterious thriller and he is able to sustain tension throughout, mostly because of the charismatic intensity of his star, even though the Clooney charm is dialed way, way down. The tension is also created by the paucity of dialogue. The film is Pinteresque in that the most important things are not spoken: the pauses and the silences have more meaning than the words. Clooney and the other actors are very good at making the silences work. And the setting, in the small mountain villages of Italy, is perfect. All those narrow, winding streets and stairways also helped build the tension. There is

a long sequence of Jack building a weapon. Some might find it boring, but I thought it was fascinating. The three women in Jack's life are all gorgeous and add greatly to the beautiful scenery. I liked **The American** a bit more than Gary did. I say B+; Gary says B.
GRADE B+/B

AMERICAN FACTORY: (2019--*Netflix*) This movie is a thoughtful, but troubling documentary that gives an eye-opening look at a changing new world and a vanishing middle class. The film opens with the 2008 closing of a GM Auto plant in Ohio where 2,400 locals lost their jobs. It quickly moved forward to 2015 when a Chinese billionaire buys the shuttered plant to reopen as the American headquarters of his Fuyao Glass Industry Group, the world's largest manufacturer of automotive glass. Hundreds of locals are hired to work with hundreds of Chinese workers who are brought in to get the plant running. Economically depressed local residents were thrilled to have a job, even if they would be working for far less than they were paid by GM. As might be expected the honeymoon period was short lived and the clash of the two cultures became a problem. While most of the film is devoted to the events transpiring in Ohio, we also see how Fuyao runs its operations in China. **American Factory** scored an impressive 96% from critics on the *Tomatometer*. The Audience Score is a more modest 79%. Barbara and I found the film interesting and educational. **GRADE B**

AMERICAN DREAMZ: There are plenty of laughs in this movie that satirizes both American Idol and George W. Bush. Since satire by definition exaggerates and is partisan, some people will be offended by **American Dreamz**. We thought Dennis Quaid as Bush and Willem Dafoe as Cheney/Rove were funny, but then, we're Democrats. We also thought Hugh Grant was terrific as the Simon Cowellish producer and host of the TV show that is based on *American Idol*. Is there any actor better at playing a likeable jerk? The two final contestants on *American Dreamz* are Mandy Moore as a would-be star, and Bernard White, as a bumbling Arab terrorist trainee. When the visiting Arab is selected for the TV show, his handlers decide that he should become a martyr by blowing himself up as he shakes the President's hand. You see, the President's poll numbers are sinking, and it is decided that he should appear on the final show as a guest judge. The theory is that his appearance will enhance his populist image. Both Moore and White are especially effective in their roles. Marcia Gay Harden does Laura Bush, but is a bit wasted in the part. Chris Klein (**American Pie**) is Moore's boyfriend and Jennifer Coolidge (**Best In Show, Legally Blonde**) is her mother. We liked all the actors, but thought that some of the sequences seemed more like a Saturday Night Live sketch than a feature film. Also, we really didn't like the ending. We decided on a grade of B-.
GRADE B-

*Tagline: Imagine a country where the President never reads the newspaper,
where the government goes to war for all the wrong reasons,
and more people vote for a pop idol than their next President.*

AN AMERICAN GANGSTER: This film was a disappointment for us. We expected a well-acted compelling story. It was well-acted, but it was deficient in the compelling department. The story, based on truth, never really grabbed me, and there were times during the 2 hour and 37 minutes running time when my mind wandered. The film tells the story of Frank Lucas (Denzell Washington) a heroin kingpin from Manhattan, who is smuggling the drug into the country in the coffins of soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. At the same time, it tells the story of Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe), a cop who is a pariah on the force because he once turned in a million unmarked dollars that he found in the trunk of a car. This was at a time when three-quarters of the Drug Enforcement Agency was on the take. His fellow officers didn't trust him because he was too honest. Frank Lucas also has a strong moral code. While he doesn't stop short of murder, he always behaves like a gentleman. And he is good to his family. Denzell Washington is very effective as Lucas, and he is the main reason to see the film. Crowe's character was less interesting, and while I realize director Ridley Scott wanted to compare and contrast the two men on opposite sides of the law, I got bored with the cop's story. I think it would have been a better movie if it had been cut by at least 30 minutes. Chiwetel Ejiofor, so good in *Dirty Pretty Things*, plays one of Lucas's brothers, and Josh Brolin has great fun playing a corrupt cop. We particularly enjoyed seeing Ruby Dee as Lucas's mother. There are some intense moments, but not enough of them to make this the great film that we expected. **GRADE B**

AMERICAN GUN: (2005 release seen on video) The film consists of three fictional vignettes that all have to do with guns. They are about the effect that guns in the hands of others have on people's lives. Marcia Gay Hardin is the mother of a son who, three years earlier, shot and killed several high school students in a Columbine-like massacre. Chris Marquette (**Little Miss Sunshine & There Will Be Blood**) is her son, who struggles to deal with his depressed mother and the aftermath of the tragedy. Forest Whitaker is the Principal of an inner-city school in Chicago who deals daily with gun-related problems. In the third story, Donald Sutherland is the owner of a gun store. His granddaughter has a problem with guns, but after her friend is drugged and nearly raped at a party, she starts taking shooting lessons. This film isn't strident; it quietly and soberly raises some questions about the proliferation of hand guns in our country.
THUMBS UP

AMERICAN HUSTLE: This is a fictional film inspired by an FBI sting operation run in the late 1970's which had the code name "ABSCAM." ABSCAM was a stunning scandal that rocked the nation while leading to the conviction of a U.S. senator and six members of the House of Representatives, It also called into question the use of sting operations. The film makes no claim of historical accuracy. In fact, the opening frames tell us, with tongue in cheek, "SOME OF THIS ACTUALLY HAPPENED." So if this movie isn't a history lesson, what is it? It is excellent film making brought to life by Writer/Director David O. Russell and a large cast of brilliant actors many of whom are playing against type. Award winning Christian Bale shocked Hollywood when he lost a whopping 63 pounds to play an emaciated insomniac in the 2004 movie, **The Machinist**. Then he put the weight back on in the form of muscles to play superhero Bruce Wayne (Batman) in **The Dark Knight Rises**. Now, for this film, he adds 40 pounds to his normal 185 to play a likable con man with a comb over and a beer gut. He is not only a chameleon, but one of Hollywood's finest actors. Joining him in the con game is Amy Adams, a four time Oscar nominee, who has proven her versatility and acting prowess in many films. Bradley Cooper gives an outstanding performance as an FBI agent who coerces the colorful con game characters into the ABSCAM sting. These fine actors and a powerful supporting cast that included Robert De Niro, Jeremy Renner, Louis C.K., and Jack Huston are all in top form. But the actor who really blew Barbara and me away was 23-three-year-old Jennifer Lawrence who adds to her astonishing range playing a brassy housewife who could bring the whole sting operation crashing down. Even with two Oscar nominations and one win already under her young belt, it is hard to believe she won't be nominated for a Best Supporting Role Oscar for this fearless performance. It is nearly

impossible for me to put a label on this movie. Comedy? Drama? Romance? Thriller? Period Piece? All of the Above? Let's just say it is an actor's dream and a must see experience for film lovers. **GRADE B+**

AN AMERICAN RHAPSODY: (2001 release seen on video) This is a beautifully acted and well told story of a Hungarian couple, Peter (Tony Goldwin) and Margit (Nastassja Kinski), who, in 1950, flee from their oppressive communist country for the USA. They take their eldest daughter Maria, with them, but they are forced to leave behind their infant daughter Suzanne. They expect to be reunited in a few days, but things go wrong and Suzanne stays in Hungary. She is raised by loving foster parents until she is six years old. At that time, Peter and Margit are finally able to arrange for the American Red Cross to bring Suzanne to their new home in Los Angeles. Suzanne is naturally homesick for the people she thinks of as Mama and Papa and bewildered by the sudden changes in her life. At age 15, Suzanne (Scarlett Johansson), a typically rebellious teenager, travels back to Budapest to try and discover just who she is. Eva Gardos wrote and directed this movie which is based on her own experience. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

AMERICAN SNIPER: (2014) Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper this tension filled movie is based on the life of Chris Kyle, a U.S. Navy SEAL credited with being the most lethal sniper in American history. Barbara and I both have great respect for the acting prowess of Cooper. He has shown tremendous range in his career with *Silver Linings Playbook*, *American Hustle*, and now *American Sniper*. He is also currently starring on Broadway playing the grotesquely disfigured John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*. If this film falls short of greatness, it will not be the fault of Cooper who is fantastic playing Kyle. He is assisted with a terrific performance from Sienna Miller playing his wife. Eastwood tried to balance the war experiences with his struggles adapting to life as husband and father between tours. Kyle served through four harrowing tours of duty in Iraq and because of his effectiveness earned the nickname "The Legend." He also became a prime target of insurgents who put a generous price on his head. The film is 134 minutes of mostly intense war action. Kyle did a great service to his country. His courage and conviction saved many lives. War films are not my favorite, but as war films go, I think this one is excellent. **GRADE B+**

AMERICAN SPLENDOR: Harvey Pekar is a strange man. He worked all his life as a file clerk in a VA hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. He also wrote the popular comic book called American Splendor that is based on his life. Pekar felt that, before American Splendor, comic books told stories of extraordinary people--super heroes. He thought people would want to read about an ordinary man. And his life was, indeed, totally ordinary. At first, the movie seemed as boring as Pekar's life, but when Pekar's third wife entered the film, we began to get interested--perhaps because Hope Davis, a favorite of ours, played Joyce Brabner Pekar. The film is wildly creative, mixing a comic book look with realistic scenes, sometimes switching back and forth quickly. Pekar, himself, appears in some scenes. In the others, he is excellently portrayed by Paul Giamatti. For instance, when Pekar appears on the David Letterman show in the movie, we see the original interviews with the real Harvey Pekar. The comic books that Pekar wrote are really comic novels. He and his wife collaborated on one which was called Our Cancer Year. It details Pekar's bout with cancer and chemo, events that are also in the movie. I was impressed with the skill of the director, scene designers and cinematographer, and the acting is first rate. However, it is a strange movie about a strange man and will not be everyone's cup of tea. Gary can't give it more than a C+, although I would have to say B-. **GRADE B-/C+**

AMERICAN UNDERDOG: 2021 (As of now can only be watched in movie theaters) This film tells the inspirational true story of Kurt Warner who went through years of challenges and setbacks in his struggle to become an NFL player. It is a "feel good" story of triumph over adversity and it is also a story that if it were not true, you wouldn't believe. Critics liked the film while audiences loved it as evidenced by scores on the Tomatometer of 74% and 98% respectively. There are strong religious underpinnings in the story. One critic wrote, "the film is sanitized to the point of sterility." I have to admit that it was unusual seeing a 21st-century film dealing with professional sports and showcasing so many athletes using such squeaky-clean language. But that is Kurt Warner. Being around him brought out the best in people. The film follows his unlikely journey as an undrafted player who ascended to winning Super Bowl XXXIV. The movie stars Zachary Levi as Warner alongside Anna Paquin as his girlfriend and eventual wife, Brenda. Actually, a good deal of the film focuses on their relationship. But there is a lot of football to satisfy fans of the sport. Just when it looked like Warner's dreams would never be reached, he took a job as quarterback for the Iowa Barnstormers in Arena football. His success there led to his first contract with the St. Louis Rams. After taking over for the injured starting quarterback, he took the Rams to Super Bowl XXXIV where he would throw the most passing yards in Super Bowl history breaking Joe Montana's record. He would go on to two other Super Bowls and eventually become enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2017. Barbara and I both enjoyed the movie and think it is worth a trip to the theater, or perhaps it will be streamed later. **GRADE B**

AMERICAN WEDDING: I just heard that this movie grossed (and gross is definitely the operative word here) 100 Million Dollars! That is very sad. The only reason we went to see the film is because grandson Nathan, who saw the two previous films, really wanted to see it. He thought it was funny. I guess you have to have a thirteen-year-old mentality to enjoy this movie, because we did not. I will admit that Jason Biggs is appealing and Eugene Levy is good, but the humor is, well, gross. There are some nice sentimental touches, but it's hard for us to get past the humor. **GRADE D**

AMERICAN YAKUZA: (1993/2013) Things get a bit heavy-handed in this one, but it stars Viggo Mortensen and that's several points in its favor. Mortensen is an FBI agent who infiltrates the notorious Japanese yakuza and is forced to choose between old loyalties and his new bond of blood. There is a lot of blood and a lot of killing in this cross-cultural crime thriller. Many of the actors are Japanese stars, but you will recognize American actors Michael Nouri, Robert Forster and Nicky Katt. The movie was released on DVD when Mortensen had become a big name as the king of Middle Earth (*Lord of the Rings* series). One critic said that the actor had no need to be embarrassed by the DVD release of *American Yakuza*. "Far from coming back to haunt him, the film will leave viewers wondering why Mortensen's talents were not generally recognized a lot earlier." We have always been fans of the actor ever since we first saw him in *A Walk On the Moon* in 1999, so we were curious about this earlier film. We enjoyed it because of Mortensen but really can't recommend it to anyone who is not a fan. **GRADE B-**

AMERICA'S SWEETHEARTS: We were both hoping that this would be an "A" movie. Unfortunately, it isn't. Oh it's cute and funny, and the actors all acquit themselves admirably, but it lacks something. I think it's a good script and believable characters. John Cusack is one

of my favorite actors and he and Julia Roberts should have made a great couple--but they only made an OK couple. The comedy scenes are OK, but the moments that need real feeling are flat, consequently we can't quite buy the romance. Cusak and Catherine Zeta-Jones are Gwen and Eddie--two movie actors, married to each other, who are America's sweethearts. At least they were until Gwen took up with Hector, a Spanish hunk with an intentionally bad accent. Hank Azaria is amusing in this role. The breakup plunged Eddie into a nervous breakdown. The couple had made many successful movies together. (The clips of these films are funny, but only slightly worse than most movies Hollywood is turning out today.) When the last movie they made together is going to be released, they are persuaded by the studio publicity man--Billy Crystal--to reunite for the press junket. Most of the movie takes place on this junket, or "honkit" as Hector would say. Julia actually plays second banana here. She is Kiki, Gwen's sister and assistant. It is a thankless job. We learn that Kiki has always had a bit of a crush on Greg, and you can probably guess the rest. Zeta-Jones makes a funny self-obsessed diva. Perhaps Cusak is simply too intelligent an actor to be completely believable as one of America's sweethearts. It was great to see Alan Arkin as a wellness guru, and Christopher Walken as the very strange director of Gwen & Eddie's last feature. Stanley Tucci is terrific as the heartless studio head, and I suspect his portrayal is not that far from reality. The actors make this one worth seeing, but it is strictly a B movie--maybe even B-. On second thought, make that a C+ for me! **GRADE B-/C+**

AMORES PERROS: (2000 release seen on video) Interesting because it was directed by Alejandro Innarritu who also directed this year's (2003) **21 Grams**. Both films have a similar non-linear structure. In **Amores Perros**, three people's lives intersect at the scene of an automobile accident. We didn't have any trouble staying with it for its 154 minutes running time. **THUMBS UP**

AMOUR: (2012) This film is somewhat unusual in that it has been nominated for Oscars in both the Best Picture and the Best Foreign Language Film categories. Anne and Georges, retired music teachers, are in their twilight years. Anne has a stroke and later a second stroke. Her husband takes up the difficult task of caring for her through her deterioration at home. Barbara and I saw the trailer on several occasions and would not have chosen to see the film had it not received the Academy Awards nomination for Best Picture. It is a graphic portrayal of dying and death, but is not a film most would describe as enjoyable. Frankly we are puzzled at the nomination. We thought the movie was so slow moving that any emotional impact was blunted. The film makers managed to make a 2 hr. 7 min. film seem much longer. Given the critical acclaim, **Amour** may deserve multiple viewings, but it won't receive them from us. **GRADE C**

AMREEKA: As Roger Ebert said in his review, "Amreeka is a heartwarming film, not a political dirge." It does, however, illustrate the plight of immigrants from the Middle East in post 9/11 America. Muna and her son, Fadi, come to Amreeka (The Palestinian word for America) because life as a Palestinian living in the occupied territories has become too difficult. Her commute to work, which once took 15 minutes, now takes two hours because she has to navigate multiple check points and the Israeli wall. Once settled in a small Illinois town, Muna and Fadi experience the kinds of persecution and ostracism that writer/director Cherien Dabis says her family faced during the Persian Gulf war. (Dabis was born in Ohio shortly after her Palestinian-Jordanian parents immigrated here.) But Muna, charmingly played by Nisreen Four, is exceedingly optimistic and resilient. The actress is so likable that when she smiles you can't help but smile back. The story is told with warmth and realism and we will not soon forget this valiant mother and son. Yahoo users give this movie an average grade of B+ and so do we. **GRADE B+**

AMY: (2015) When Amy Winehouse was beginning to find some recognition an interviewer asked the jazz vocal artist, "How big do you think you're going to be." She replied, "I don't think I'm going to be at all famous. I don't think I could handle it, I would probably go mad." Tragically, she was right: she couldn't handle fame. Asif Kapadia, who is well-known for his 2010 documentary **Senna**, has created this movie by using archival footage of the singer, her parents and her friends. Kapadia says that he doesn't make documentaries, but makes films. It's true that there are no talking heads in this movie, although he does play interviews with Amy's family and friends over the images of the singer. It's the story of an ordinary girl with an extraordinary talent who rises to the top only to fall into spiraling bouts of drugs, alcohol and terrible depression. She once said, "Since I was 16, I've felt a black cloud hangs over me." Amy married the love of her life, Blake Fielder, but the marriage was fueled by crack cocaine and heroin. Neither Gary nor I were familiar with the songs that made Winehouse famous, and we were glad that subtitles provided the lyrics. One of the saddest lines in the movie occurs just after Amy has been through rehab and has won a Grammy. She says to a friend, "It's so boring without drugs." The compiling of bits and pieces of film footage into a coherent narrative is impressive, but we did have a problem: the critically acclaimed movie is over two hours long. We both felt the film would have had more power for us if it had been no more than 90 minutes. Ultimately, **Amy** is the story of a young woman traveling the road of self-destruction, and how the demands of celebrity pushed her down that road. It was sad, but, for us, not worth the trip. **GRADE C+**

ANALYZE THAT: Let me start my review by warning you of my bias. I loved the previous film: **Analyze This**. Barbara "liked" that film, but I "loved" it. I also love the comedy timing of Billy Crystal and almost all the work of Robert De Niro. And I have followed the career of Harold Ramos, director and co-author, since I saw and admired his humor when he was a young boy working as an actor at Second City in Chicago. On the other hand, I don't usually like sequels, especially comedy sequels. Now factor all that into my humble evaluation: I give the outtakes shown at the end of the film an "A." I laughed continuously for about 5 minutes. But the film only earns a "C+." The talented actors, including the supporting cast, are a pleasure to watch, but the plot seems contrived and lacks the sparkle of the first film. If you were lukewarm on **Analyze This**, then avoid **Analyze That**. If you missed **Analyze This**, then I recommend you rent it. (Barb says only C.) **GRADE C+/C**

ANCHORMAN: THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY: Barbara and I have seen four films in the past three days. She is writing the reviews on three of them, but asked me to write this one. First let me confess that Will Ferrell makes me laugh. I liked him on Saturday Night Live and I loved him in **ELF**. Ferrell will do absolutely anything with enthusiasm for a potential laugh. With that approach, he can fall a little short of funny at times. The first fifteen minutes of **Anchorman** was painfully unfunny. Set in 1970's San Diego, Ferrell plays a self-worshipping local TV news star. Christina Applegate plays a charming female trying to break into a male dominated industry. This could make an interesting and serious story. But make no mistake. This is an over-the-top severely stupid comedy. Now I have another confession. After the first painful minutes, I heard a chuckle erupt from my clinched lips. Then a full-fledged belly laugh. It was hit and miss, but there were a lot of pretty good scenes mixed among the misses. And Christina Applegate won me over completely. She played her role flawlessly. If you see this film you will see a lot of very familiar faces playing uncredited roles. Mentioning their names

would spoil some of the best fun in the movie. You will have to decide whether you want to take the bad with the good. We give this one a C+. **GRADE C+**

ANCHORMAN 2: THE LEGEND CONTINUES: Amidst all the ridiculousness, and believe me when I say that this movie is monumentally ridiculous, there is a serious indictment of TV news programs. Will Ferrell and Adam McKay have written a satire about the omnipresent 24-hour news channels and how they have replaced real news with a quest for ratings. They also include a funny bit about the mind-boggling graphics that compete for your attention. (That bit did get a chuckle from Gary.) In a telling line near the end of the movie, Ron Burgandy (Ferrell) departs from his teleprompter to tell the TV audience that news is supposed to tell people what the rich and powerful are doing in order to stop corruption. But, when the rich and powerful own the news channels, no "real" news gets covered. That's fairly serious stuff for a comedy that throws everything at you hoping some of it will make you laugh. I did get some genuine laughs mostly at the sheer audacity of the humor. I'm sorry to confess that the blind jokes made me laugh, and the final confrontation in the park was hilarious. Burgandy gets the old news team together to work for the first ever 24-hour news channel. Paul Rudd is Brian Fantana, the investigative reporter turned cat photographer. David Koechner is sportscaster Champ Kind, who now owns an eatery that serves fried bat masquerading as chicken. Steve Carell, who, as Brick Tamland established the bench mark for stupidity gets a girlfriend in this sequel in the person of Kristen Wiig. It is a contest to see which one can appear the dumber. Christina Applegate returns, and Bill Kurtis once again, supplies the narration. There are also tons of familiar faces, but, as Gary said in his review of the first movie, "mentioning their names would spoil some of the best fun in the movie." I laughed more than Gary did, so I grade the movie higher than he does. Gary says D, I say C+. (I think Gary may be getting crotchety in his dotage.) **GRADE C+/D**

ANGELS & DEMONS: We both enjoyed the first movie made from a novel by Dan Brown, **The Da Vinci Code** (2006), so we wanted to give this a look. It is based on an earlier book by Brown. While the movie makes a stab at an intellectual discussion of how science and religion can co-exist, it is first and foremost an adventure tale. Harvard Symbologist Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) is called to the Vatican to prevent the murder of four cardinals and the detonation of a bomb that will destroy Vatican City and most of Rome. The murderers purport to be Illuminati, a secret society that has long hated the Catholic Church because of the days when it persecuted Galileo and other scientists. All this is taking place while the cardinals are meeting to elect a new Pope, so the Vatican Square is full of people and TV cameras. Since the Illuminati, who did indeed exist, were scientists and not men of violence, a plot such as this seems unlikely. Plus, the science is also dubious. The bomb is supposed to contain anti matter, or the so-called "God Particle," stolen from the CERN Large Hadron Collider in Geneva. In truth, anti matter has been created, and nothing incendiary has happened, so the bomb would probably be a dud. But, while we watch Langdon race around Rome, following clues to the ancient Path of Illumination, we get caught up in the ticking time bomb, much like we do with TV's 24. Director Ron Howard keeps the action paced well and Hanks is very good at making the implausible seem plausible. Langdon is assisted in his quest by a sexy scientist (Ayelet Zurer) from CERN. Ewan McGregor is the former pope's adopted son and assistant, and Armin Mueller-Stahl and Stellan Skarsgard have significant roles. Gary thought it would never end, and can't grade it above C+. I did enjoy the chase, even though I couldn't buy the twist at the end, so I say B-. **GRADE B-/C**

ANONYMOUS: It's a good story: love, murder, royal bastards, political intrigue, sword fights, and even some incest thrown in for good measure. Sounds like something Shakespeare could have written doesn't it? It's the story Anonymous tells in an attempt to explain who really wrote those plays and poems that bear the Shakespeare name. Theories abound that the Shakespeare plays were not written by the "Bard of Avon," but instead by someone who wanted his authorship kept secret. Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, the Earl of Derby, the Earl of Rutland, the Earl of Southampton, the Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Raleigh and of course, Francis Bacon have all been proposed as the anonymous author. Most Shakespeare scholars and literary historians give these theories little credence, but that didn't stop screenwriter John Orloff from giving authorship credit to Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford. Anonymous is less about the plays themselves than it is about the political climate of the time and why someone would not claim credit for writing the plays. The attitudes toward the theatre during the Elizabethan age were ambivalent. The masses loved the plays, but the nobility feared they might have too much political influence. That is the setting for the movie. It is a sumptuous looking costume drama. The sets and costumes look exactly like a Hollywood version of the Elizabethan age. There probably isn't a lot about the film that is historically accurate, but what historical drama ever let accuracy get in the way of a good story. Vanessa Redgrave makes for a marvelous Queen Elizabeth and Joley Richardson, Redgrave's daughter, who plays the Queen at a younger age is also very good. Rhys Ifan is excellent as the older Earl of Oxford, while Jamie Campbell Bower is believable in the role of the young Earl. But therein lies some of the movie's problems. At first, the jumping back and forth in time was confusing and that made it rather difficult to get involved. There is almost too much going on. Three of the supporting roles deserve mention: Sebastian Armesto as Ben Johnson, Edward Hogg as Elizabeth's Secretary of State, William Cecil, and Rafe Spall as Wil Shakespeare. I think the movie deserves a B, but Gary can't go higher than B-. **GRADE B/B-**

ANOTHER ROUND: 2020/2021 (Prime Video, \$4.99 rental) This Danish film won the Oscar in the International Feature Film category. Mads Mikkelsen stars as Martin, a boring high school history teacher whose students fear they won't pass their history test because their teacher seems so disengaged. When a colleague spouts a theory that people do better when they have some alcohol in their system, an experiment is born. At first, the four teachers keep their blood alcohol level (BAC) at 0.05%, and they all do better with their students. Martin shines in the classroom and engages his students. He also rekindles some romance with Anika, his wife. But if they are so much more interesting with a little alcohol, would more liquor make them even more interesting? You can guess where that idea leads. Danes have the highest rates of "heavy, episodic" drinking of any country in the European Union, and the opening scene would indicate that drinking begins in high school. Thomas Vinterberg, the director and writer said that in its earliest incarnation, the film was "a celebration of alcohol, pure and simple." But in its final form, **Another Round** has acquired a more nuanced view, one that makes room for alcohol's dark side. (It still glorifies drinking, though, and that bothered me a bit.) Perhaps a subtitled film is difficult in the home setting because it's too easy to pause and that dilutes the impact of many films. But Gary doesn't think the frequent pauses hurt this film, which he grades a C. I am a Mikkelsen fan, though, so I would grade it higher. I still remember his 2012 movie, **The Hunt**, in which he again played a teacher whose life is ruined by a lie. (Vinterberg also directed that film.) Mikkelsen is marvelous in **Another Round**, and I would give the film a grade of B. **GRADE B/C**

ANOTHER YEAR: British writer/director Mike Leigh is known for making beautifully conceived films that tell stories of real people. (*Secrets and Lies, Happy Go Lucky, Vera Drake*) He is not afraid to let his camera linger on faces, and let us see into the hearts of his characters. For example, he opens this film with Imelda Stanton playing a deeply depressed woman who has come to the doctor because she cannot sleep. The camera is focused on her face, but the story it tells is not explored. The scene merely serves as an introduction to Gerri, as a counselor who is seeing a patient. *Another Year* tells the story of Gerri (Ruth Sheen) and Tom (Jim Broadbent), happily married for many years. Their year is told in four parts: Spring, with its hopefulness, Summer with its fulfillment, Autumn with its harvest, and Winter with its sadness. Each part opens with Tom and Gerri taking care of their garden allotment. We meet Mary (Lesley Manville), a work colleague of Gerri's and a longtime friend. Mary is a lonely divorcee who draws comfort from her friendship with the happy couple. Manville is remarkable in the role. As the camera lingers on her we feel such sympathy for her that it is sometimes difficult to watch the emotions play across her face. Later we meet another old friend, Ken. He, too, is lonely and Gerri and Tom seem to be his only friends. The year also holds happiness, especially when Gerri and Tom meet their son's charming girlfriend. This movie was a delight from start to finish, although with its limited release I doubt many will see it in the theatre. It will, however, make a lovely rental when it comes out on DVD. **GRADE A-**

ANYTHING ELSE: This movie is pure Woody Allen, but fortunately this time he has the sense to cast a young man as the romantic hero. Jason Biggs is Jerry Falk, an aspiring comedy writer who is having trouble with his girlfriend, Amanda (Christina Ricci). He also has issue with his analyst who refuses to give him any advice, and with his agent, Harvey (Danny DeVito). Allen is David Dobel, a teacher who is also an aspiring comedy writer. The two men become friends and spend much of the film walking and talking about life and Jerry's problems. This provides an opportunity for Allen to get in a lot of funny lines and to give us some beautiful glimpses of New York. The scenes in Central Park are particularly lovely. Ricci is very good as the commitment-phobic Amanda and Stockard Channing does a very amusing turn as Amanda's mother, Paula. If you like Woody Allen you will get a kick out of this film. The cast is uniformly excellent. Gary liked this one well enough to give it a B+, but I'd have to say B. **GRADE B+/B**

ANGELA'S ASHES: When people use the phrase, "Put it where the sun don't shine," I now know that they mean "Put it in Limerick, Ireland." Surely the sun never shines there. At least, it never shines in this film. I felt waterlogged when I left the theater. Rain, poverty, dead babies, starvation, and more rain: that about sums it up. Emily Watson is valiant as Frank McCort's mother and Robert Carlyle (The Full Monty) is as sympathetic as possible considering he plays a father who drank most of the dole money and left his family to a diet of tea and bread. The film is faithful to the book and the characters of McCort's prize-winning novel of the same title, and it certainly draws a vivid picture of McCort's childhood. But if you have a choice, I'd suggest you read the novel and skip the movie. **GRADE: C+**

ANGER MANAGEMENT: When this film is good, it is very very good. And when it is bad, it makes me angry that it isn't better. The trailer was one of the funniest I had seen in a long while. The premise is promising so I was looking forward to seeing Adam Sandler and Jack Nicholson make wonderful comedy together. Sandler plays a mild mannered man who is sentenced to anger management therapy after an unlikely incident on a plane. Jack Nicholson plays an unorthodox therapist, which gives him ample opportunity to chew a little scenery. I didn't notice that he wasted a single opportunity, but I find Nicholson easy to forgive. The cast is filled out by Marisa Tomei, Woody Harrelson, and the ubiquitous John C. Reilly. If you hate Adam Sandler, you probably will (and probably should) avoid this film. I had high expectations until I started reading the mixed reviews. Then I feared the worst. Barbara and I found ourselves laughing frequently enough throughout this film to give it **GRADE B-**

THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY: Gary thought this movie about people and relationships was a refreshing change from movies about special effects. He had low expectations for the film, because our local reviewer hated the movie, so Gary was pleasantly surprised. I had high expectations, and didn't like the movie quite as much as I expected to. However, we could both agree on a grade of B. Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alan Cumming wrote and directed the movie, and they play the couple who is celebrating a six-year Anniversary. Leigh is Sally, a thirty-something actress and Cumming is Joe, a novelist who is about to direct his first picture. Most of the guests at the party are people from the movie industry, and several classic types are present: The older leading man who is no longer in demand (Kevin Kline); The actress who left the business to be a wife and mother (Phoebe Cates); The director who badly needs a hit (John C. Reilly); the hot young actress who tells Leigh, "I've loved you ever since I was a child!" (Gwyneth Paltrow); and the actress who recently had a baby and is struggling to lose weight (Jane Adams). Jennifer Beals plays Joe's best friend. Naturally, Sally hates her. One non-industry couple has been invited--Sally and Joe's next door neighbors with whom they are at war over a barking dog. Although it sounds as though the dialogue was improvised, Leigh and Cumming vehemently deny this. That's good script-writing! The movie was shot with a digital camera, and there is a grainy appearance to it. Faces are unfiltered, so all flaws are exposed. (Roger Ebert says, "Critics who say it looks as good as film are like friends who claim you don't look a day older.") As an Anniversary present, Paltrow brings Ecstasy for everyone. The drug makes real emotions surface and we learn a great deal about the characters. Most of it is not very pleasant. THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY is a great example of ensemble acting--something that has been sorely lacking in Hollywood films. We applaud it for that. **GRADE B.**

ANY GIVEN SUNDAY: If I had to name my favorite football movie, It would be North Dallas Forty, but this smartly made film by Oliver Stone would be a very close second. Stone's stylishly filmed football scenes, which are shot from a player's point of view, perfectly illuminate the brutality and the glory of the game, and the sound adds greatly to the effect. If you don't know much about football, the scenes won't help you understand it. But if, like me, you are a football fan, you will appreciate them. (I don't know why I like a sport that is so violent-it must be a character flaw.) Stone is never subtle. His vision of football players as gladiators is frequently emphasized, but never more so than a scene in which the Coach (Al Pacino) talks with his young hot-shot quarterback (Jamie Foxx) while scenes from the chariot race in Quo Vadis plays on a large screen TV in the background. Stone believes that football is many different things: For the players, it is the game-"pure and sane;" For the fans, it is the spectacle; For the owners, it is the money. Foxx is outstanding as the cocky young quarterback. Dennis Quaid's part as the aging former star quarterback is a nice counterpoint to Fox's role. Pacino is having a banner year. He is just as good here as he was in The Insider. His mentoring of the young quarterback is everything coaching should be. Cameron Diaz is the owner of the team and Ann Margaret plays her mother--a woman who dilutes her hatred of football with plenty of booze. Charlton Heston appears briefly as the football commissioner--a nice touch given Stone's use of Quo Vadis. Several

well-known ex-football greats also appear. Lawrence Taylor plays a defensive lineman (no surprise) whose every hit may be his last, Dick Butkus has a cameo as an opposing coach, and Jim Brown is effective as the defensive coordinator. James Woods and Matthew Modine are team doctors with opposite attitudes toward players' injuries. Stone's filming style has been criticized by some, but both Gary and I felt it was perfectly suited to the subject matter. I could see this one again, and I haven't felt that about any of the recent movies I've seen. **GRADE: A-**

ANTWONE FISHER: We congratulate Denzel Washington for doing such a good job directing his first film. The story is based on the biography of the real Antwone Fisher, and the screenplay was written by Fisher himself. Antwone was an intelligent young sailor with a severe anger management problem. Forced to see a Navy psychiatrist (Denzel Washington as Jerome Davenport), Fisher refused to open his mouth for several weeks. When he finally began to talk, out poured the story of his horrible childhood. Newcomer Derek Luke is compelling as Fisher and he has one of the all-time great smiles. The very pretty Joy Bryant provides Antwone's love interest and Salli Richardson is Berta, Davenport's wife. Watching Fisher deal with his past and search for his family is an emotional experience. The movie's sincerity will touch your heart. I know it did ours. Ebert called it both "heartbreaking" and "joyous." He got that right. There is a scene in the movie when the crew lines up along the ship's railing as it leaves port. My son was in the Navy and served on a carrier, and he tells me it is called "Manning the Rail," and is actually done when a ship enters a port, or "comes home." It is an impressive sight. **Grade B+**

THE APARTMENT 1960/2021 (A 3.99 rental on Amazon Prime) They don't make movies like that anymore, and it holds up remarkably well. (You don't even notice it is in black and white.) Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine—does it get any better? Billy Wilder wrote the script and it was sharp-witted, painfully honest and quite brilliant. In Rick's Real/Reel Life blog, Rick said, "**The Apartment** is Billy's best blend of the comedic and dramatic, as well as gracefully walking the fine line between risqué and raunchy." (I think the word "raunchy" might have had a different meaning in 1960.) The story is about a man (Lemmon) who tries to rise in his company by letting its executives use his apartment for illicit trysts. But, when he falls in love with an elevator operator (MacLaine), things get complicated. It is 1960, after all, and rolodexes and elevator operators were de rigueur. Young people probably don't remember Jack Lemmon and know Shirley MacLaine only as the mother of Elizabeth McGovern's character in **Downton Abbey**, but we remember them fondly for their many great roles through the years. It's no wonder that **The Apartment** won Best Picture in 1960 and that Billy Wilder won two Oscars, both for writing and directing the movie. I said to Gary as the movie was over, "The ending was perfect. I'm so glad we watched it." **GRADE A**

APOCALYPTO: Happy indigenous person is captured. He witnesses much horror. He escapes. That's pretty much the whole plot of Mel Gibson's latest film effort. Many of the scenes are impressive and the filmmaking is, I'll admit, extraordinary. One thing I'm certain of—the production employed a lot of extras! The movie is a graphic depiction of man's inhumanity to man, something which, I suspect, has been going on since man started walking upright and something which we are familiar with today. Violent, yes, but not quite as bad as we expected. Guess we were prepared for it. It is, however, full to the brim with testosterone! Rudy Youngblood is impressive as a man on the run. He is Jaguar Paw, a primitive superhero, shaking off wounds that might kill a lesser man. He is very charismatic, and we expect to see him in another role soon. We also learned a lot about life back in Mayan times. Here are some of the things we learned from *Apocalypso*: Eclipses in Mayan times took place in a matter of minutes; A man can outrun a jaguar even if badly injured; and, running very swiftly will heal a spear wound. Gibson uses an Ariel Durant quote at the beginning of the film. "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." Perhaps Gibson did the movie as a lesson for the modern world. **GRADE B**

APOLLO 11: (2019) The word "awesome" has recently been tragically overused to the point of irritation. But this film, which was timed to the upcoming 50th anniversary of the 1969 first manned lunar landing, rises to a level that truly deserves that overused adjective. **Apollo 11** culls through rarely seen large-format archival film footage and more than 11,000 hours of uncatalogued audio recordings to send audiences back in American history to one of humanity's greatest accomplishments. If you are old enough to remember watching Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins on TV, this film may transport you back to an experience defined by innocence and youthful curiosity. Barbara and I noticed the absence of talking heads, and only occasionally Walter Cronkite's mellifluous voice from his broadcasts. This must-see documentary reminds you what it feels to be truly awestruck. Critics were unanimous on *Rotten Tomatoes* with a 100% approval rating and we agree. **GRADE A**

APOLLO 10½: A SPACE AGE CHILDHOOD: 2022 (Netflix) We usually avoid animated movies, but the writer/director of this movie was Richard Linklater and we always enjoy his movies. We did like this coming-of-age movie partly because the animation was realistic. The setting for the movie was suburbs of Houston, Texas in the summer of 1969, when everything was about the astronauts landing on the moon, especially when your dad works at NASA. The movie is based on Linklater's own childhood growing up in Houston. You can almost imagine that the man narrating stories of his life as a 10-year-old boy, is Linklater himself, weaving tales of nostalgia with a fantastical account of a journey to the moon. My kids were growing up in the sixties, and I remembered many of the nostalgia bits. (There were even throwbacks to my childhood, playing "Statues" in particular.) Jack Black voiced the grown-up boy in this entertaining movie. Although the fantasy of the little Apollo didn't always work for me, and Gary thought the movie weakened toward the end, we enjoyed most of the **Space Age Childhood** story. **GRADE B-**

APPALOOSA: This is an old-fashioned Western about gunfighters: Good ones and bad ones. The good ones kill for the law, and that makes them feel less guilty; the bad ones kill for no reason and they don't seem to feel one bit guilty. Virgil Cole (Ed Harris), a lawman of few words, and his deputy, Everett Hitch (Viggo Mortenson), are hired by the New Mexico town of Appaloosa because it is being terrorized by a band of ruffians led by Randall Bragg (Jeremy Irons). Cole and Hitch have been partners for years, but the partnership is altered by the appearance of Allison French (Renée Zellweger), a piano-playing widow who catches Cole's eye. While this film won't be remembered as one of the great Westerns, it is a very enjoyable one, thanks to Harris and Mortenson. Harris has the steely look necessary to play Cole and Mortenson continues to impress us with his ability to be authentic in whatever character he chooses to play. The central characters in this film seemed real; neither all good nor all bad. The movie is based on a book by Robert B. Parker, and Ed Harris not only co-wrote the screenplay but also co-wrote one of the songs used in the background. Shortly after reading the original

novel, we purchased a metal sculpture of a sheriff, and a friend, who had also read the book, said, "Why, it's Virgil!" And Virgil it became. So we do have a soft spot for Virgil Cole and **Appaloosa**. **GRADE B**

ARBITRAGE: Any new film release featuring Richard Gere and Susan Sarandon gives Barbara and me sufficient motivation to invest a couple of afternoon hours in a darkened theater. Gere and Sarandon rarely disappoint. In fact I think Gere is one of the best actors in Hollywood never to have won an Oscar. Here he plays a New York hedge-fund magnate who is brilliant, charming, sophisticated, and almost entirely unsympathetic. As you might expect, Gere is perfect for the role. On the eve of his 60th birthday, we see Robert Miller (Gere) as a wildly successful business man with a beautiful wife (Sarandon) and devoted family. Screenplay writer and first time director Nicholas Jarecki then shows us that all is not perfect in Camelot. Miller leaves his birthday party early to hook up with his high maintenance mistress and we learn that his business is on the edge of a financial cliff. Miller's already complicated life gets more so with a tragic auto accident and tense attempts to fix things with deceptive cover-ups. Even the least knowledgeable among us know how effective that can be. It is not a great movie, but we think it is good vehicle for Gere and Sarandon and for the supporting cast, which included Tim Roth, helping the action along. As the title suggests, the film plunges us into a world of corporate fraud, but it spends equal time exploring the personal frailties of the powerful and wealthy. **GRADE B-**

ARGO: Ben Affleck vaulted into public consciousness after the 1997 release of award winning **Good Will Hunting** which he co-wrote with Matt Damon. Since then he has become a respected actor, director, writer, and producer. Argo is a heart-pounding thriller based on true events. Affleck played the leading role and also directed the film. If you were an adult in 1979, you probably remember the Iran hostage crisis in which 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days. While that crisis dominated the news an uncensored event was quietly taking place. Six Americans managed to slip away in the chaos and find refuge in the home of the Canadian ambassador. It is only a matter of time before the six are found, possibly tortured, and killed. A CIA "exfiltration" specialist named Tony Mendez (Affleck) comes up with a plan we would refuse to believe could succeed if history hadn't proved it did. In addition to being a gripping suspense filled drama, a great deal of humor that never seems forced is sprinkled throughout. Barbara and I loved the film and are sure it will receive critical acclaim and possibly a few awards. Alan Arkin, Bryan Cranston (**Breaking Bad**), and John Goodman are excellent in supporting roles. If you see the film, don't leave your seat until the cast credits are rolling. **GRADE A**

ARRANGED: (2007 release seen on video) This film centers around the friendship between an Orthodox Jewish woman and a Muslim woman who meet as first-year teachers at a public school in Brooklyn. Over the course of the year they learn that they share much in common — not least of which is that they are both going through the process of arranged marriages. This is an independent film and the production values are sometimes amateurish, but the acting is mostly good, especially the women playing the two friends. We thought the subject of traditional arranged marriage was interesting. Although we expect it doesn't always work out as well as it does in this movie, it does present a viable way to find a mate in today's complicated world. **THUMBS UP**

ARRIVAL: (2016) This is a cerebral sci-fi film that explores how a first contact with aliens might go. Spoiler Alert: Washington D.C and other cities are not destroyed by aliens and humans do not destroy the aliens. It is easy to identify the aliens in this film. They are the seven-legged creatures (heptapods) who communicate with odd tones and swirling symbols. The movie opens with the sudden and simultaneous appearance of 12 UFOs around the world in countries that include the United States, Russia, China and Pakistan. The people of the world and especially the military leaders are in a panic. The movie is based on a short story titled **Story of Your Life** by Ted Chiang. One of the reasons I liked this film is that it ends on a distinctly more idealistic and hopeful key than most movies in this genre. It focuses on the power of language and its importance in the way we perceive reality. The enormously talented Amy Adams stars as Dr. Louise Banks, an American language professor enlisted by the military to help communicate with the aliens. The movie also plays with time, space, and memory of both past and future. I am not playing with your mind, but the movie will. Barbara and I came home with slightly different interpretations. She convinced my linear mind that she was correct. Barbara's interpretation makes **Arrival** more complex and more interesting. If you see the movie, ask yourself, was there one baby or two? Ratings from 21,658 audience members gave the movie 99% and 147 critics gave it 96%. **GRADE A**

ART SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL: (2006 release seen on video) What makes a great artist famous? Is it talent? Vision? Personality? Chance? This film looks at some answers. Jerome (Max Minghella) enters Strathmore Academy hoping to become the greatest artist of the 21st Century. And he can draw. But he's quickly exposed to the posturings and pretensions of the art world and becomes disillusioned. His art teacher, Professor Sandiford (John Malkovich) doesn't help. It's a strange film: part comedy, part cynical caricature, and, rather oddly, part serial killer. Maybe we have strange taste, but we rather enjoyed it. **QUALIFIED THUMBS UP**

THE ART OF SELF-DEFENSE: (2019) Barbara and I agree that this is a well-made film, but it is also one of the most difficult movies to recommend I have ever reviewed. It is a dark comedy that's equal parts amusing and disturbing. Our local movie reviewer gave it four-and-a-half stars out of five, quite a favorable review. But it received mixed reviews on Rotten Tomatoes. One reviewer commented, "it is mannered and remote and throws a lot of punches but hardly ever connects". Audience scores (69%) were lower than Critic's scores (83%). Jesse Eisenberg, an actor who elevates almost any movie in which he appears plays the lead, Casey. Casey is a painfully shy and socially awkward accountant who seems uncomfortable in about any environment involving people. One night while walking home from a near-by store, he is attacked by a group of a motorcycle riding thugs who beat him unmercifully and leave him lying in the street. After physically recovering, a traumatized Casey is on the verge of buying a gun when he, on a whim, enters a karate dojo run by the super-macho Sensei. Posted on a wall is: "**Guns are for the weak.**" He signs up for karate classes, where he's taken under the wing of the alpha-male instructor. From this point **The Art of Self-Defense** takes a disquieting turn. Toxic masculinity and the culture which surrounds it unleash bizarre spurts of disturbing ultra-violence. Casey gains a newfound sense of confidence for the first time in his life but he also is swept into a sinister world of fraternity, brutality and hyper-masculinity carried to absurd extremes. There is considerable tongue-in-cheek humor throughout the movie and in the last few minutes the write/ director Riley Stearns makes what I thought was a weak attempt to mitigate the violence. **GRADE B-**

THE ARTIST: You may think a black and white film with virtually no spoken words released in 2011 sounds uninspired. And I would agree that it "sounds" uninspired. However, after seeing it, I realize it lacks neither inspiration nor originality. The originality lies not in

the story line which will sound very familiar. A famous film star descends the celebrity ladder soon after helping a young woman start her ascent to stardom. **A Star is Born** followed this plot in three Hollywood hits: 1937 starring Janet Gaynor and Fredric March, 1954 starring Judy Garland and James Mason, and 1976 starring Barbara Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. **The Artist** speaks the universal language of silence and does it with fluency. Barbara and I were both charmed by the two leads: Jean Dujardin and Berenice Bejo. Hollywood handsome Dujardin is a household name in France for his many roles in film comedies. Bejo is not as well known, but is poised for a leap to celebrity. The buzz in Hollywood is that both stars have a good shot at Academy Award nominations. The leads are assisted by a largely American supporting cast: John Goodman, James Cromwell, and Penelope Ann Miller. Not surprisingly, most critics are delighted with this bold film experiment that won audiences in Cannes. This film is a tribute to the silent era of film making. Writer/Director Michael Hazenavicius has a lot of moxie to make a silent movie just at a time when vampires, monsters, explosions, gross-out language, and depressing endings seem to have taken over the film industry. Be assured that if you chose to see this film, you will leave the theater with a smile on your face. **GRADE B+**

ASK DR. RUTH: (2019) This documentary chronicles the incredible life of Dr. Ruth Westheimer who became America's most famous sex therapist. With her diminutive frame (she is 4 feet and 7 inches tall), thick German accent, and uninhibited approach to sex therapy and education, Dr. Ruth transformed the conversation around sexuality. In the 1980s, she had a radio and a TV show, both of which were at the forefront of the sexual revolution. She was a favorite guest of late-night talk show hosts who she regularly embarrassed by saying "penis" or "vagina" on air. Her birth name was Karola Siegel. In 1939, at the age of ten, she was sent to Switzerland on a Kindertransport: a train filled with children, all of whom were sent by their parents to what they hoped was safety. The children were all placed in a Swiss orphanage to wait out the war. She likes to call herself a "Holocaust orphan." Filmmaker Ryan White shows us how Karola became Ruth, how she became a radio and TV star, and how, at 90, she shows no signs of slowing down. He effectively uses video footage, photos, animations and interviews with her children, grandchildren and friends. Wisely, however, White stays mostly in the present, and it is the indomitable spirit and energy of Dr. Ruth herself who stars. Gary and I encourage all our readers to seek out this moving story of a truly remarkable woman. **GRADE A**

THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD: (a 2007 release we saw on DVD) A somber tale of how the outlaw, Jesse James, came to be shot by Robert Ford. The story is told in a highly stylized but painfully slow way, and, though the performances of Brad Pitt as James and Casey Affleck as Ford are outstanding, I can see why critics were divided in their reviews. The film reminded Gary a bit of Bernard Altman's **McCabe and Mrs. Miller** (1971), but he didn't think it came close to the brilliance of that film. The running time is two hours and 45 minutes, and we felt that at least 45 of those minutes could easily have been eliminated. We did stay with it until the end, but unless you have a high tolerance for long, slow movies, we can't recommend it. **THUMBS DOWN**

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13: (2005 release) The plot is familiar: The good guys are barricaded in an isolated house/fort/police station. The bad guys—murderous locals/Indians/rogue cops--are trying to kill everyone inside. Of course, the bad guys outnumber the good guys. The fighting stops every once in a while so that the people inside can bond and we can learn something about the characters. John Wayne made many film with this plot—all those Rio movies--and Sam Peckinpah used the plot in 1971's **Straw Dogs**. In this remake of a 1976 film, the good guys are in a soon-to-be closed police station on New Years Eve. Two cops, Ethan Hawke and Brian Dennehy, along with the station secretary, Drea de Matteo, are the only people left in the Detroit station house. When a bus transporting prisoners breaks down in a blizzard (oh, yes, there's a blizzard going on) the prisoners are put into cells. Laurence Fishburne is Martin Bishop, a high level gangster. The other three are minor criminals. The assault comes from some very bad cops who can't let Bishop testify and must kill him and everyone else. For what this movie is, it's a pretty good one. Fishburne makes a terrific and scary bad guy, and Hawk is believable as a former undercover agent who has been traumatized by the death of two colleagues. The setting is dark and moody and the action keeps your attention throughout. The film was directed by Jean-Francois Richet. I'm not sure how a Detroit police station could be right next to a forest, or why old sewer tunnels have electric lights, but I guess you shouldn't look too closely at details in this kind of movie. Grandson Nathan says it's an A, but Gary and I give it a B. **GRADE B/A**

THE ASSISTANT: (2020) This is a story about the ways in which a powerful man can create an environment in which everyone understands the unwritten rules. The powerful boss in this story has created a toxic atmosphere that permeates every corner of the film. And yet, he is never named, or even seen. If the boss reminds you of a certain well-known producer with initials H. W., that's probably no coincidence. We see the story through the eyes of a secretary (Julia Garner) who works in a production office where the boss's habits have infected the entire place. Not surprisingly the film is written and directed by a woman: Kitty Green. She is an award-winning Australian filmmaker best known as a documentarian. Critics liked **The Assistant** far better than audiences as reflected in the 88% vs 22% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer. After sitting in the movie for 25 minutes, I commented to Barbara that it seemed like a slow moving opening. During the next 25 minutes they doubled down on the "slow moving". In virtually every scene little or nothing happened. After fighting to stay awake until the bitter end, Barbara summed it up with "*riveting it was not*". I said, "*like the film, your review is understated*". Sadly, I think I have had more fun writing the review than I had watching the movie. **GRADE C-/D+**

AT ETERNITY'S GATE: (2018) This unusual film examines the last two years of Vincent Van Gogh's life, from 1888 to his death at age 37 in 1890. It is a journey inside the world and mind of a Dutch painter who is among the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art. Despite being in his early 60s, Willem Dafoe plays the troubled painter, Vincent Van Gogh. He is perfect for the role. The movie was directed and co-written by Julian Schnabel, himself a well-known and successful painter as well as an award winning filmmaker. He focuses on Van Gogh's most prolific period in which the artist churned out more than 200 paintings in 15 months. He once created 75 paintings in just 80 days. Schnabel captures the artist's fascination with the natural world by trying to get the audience to experience the world as Van Gogh saw it. Today Vincent's paintings sell for millions, but during his lifetime his genius went unrecognized. One of his few friends was Paul Gauguin, brilliantly played by Oscar Isaac. In one of the more powerful scenes the troubled painter is confronted by a priest (Mads Mikkelsen) who considers Vincent's paintings primitive and ugly. The two get into a deep discussion about religion. Vincent's father was a pastor so he is well versed in the gospels. He points out that Jesus only became well known decades after his death. This is a difficult film to grade. The wobbling, sometime lurching camera will, no doubt, irritate some viewers. Barbara and I liked the film and give it high marks for creative filmmaking and Dafoe certainly deserves an **A** for his outstanding performance, but we also feel certain that not everyone will enjoy the sometimes slow moving action. **GRADE B+**

ATOMIC BLONDE: (2017) A summer action movie, this is a Cold War-era spy thriller starring African born Charlize Theron. Theron plays a ruthless British MI6 agent Lorraine Broughton who is dispatched from London to Berlin as the Wall is about to fall. If you are looking for an easy to follow yarn, you may want to look elsewhere. Charlize Theron is a badass female protagonist crunching bones and pulping faces who, as one publicity poster proclaims makes all other action heroes look like wimps!" (sorry Wonder Woman) Theron, trained as a dancer, has sheer grace when it comes to her ass-kicking capabilities and, of course, she is beautiful between kickings. She wanted this leading role so badly that she snapped up the option rights to the graphic novel called *The Coldest City* before it was published in 2012. It is easy to understand why. The film is a showcase for her considerable talents. The bad guys are an unimpressive lot, but they do make for solid punching bags. The movie received a respectable 74% favorable reviews from 137 critics on Rotten Tomatoes, but I have to agree with Barbara's insightful opinion given as we left the theater: "It was boring except when Theron was kicking Russian butt." **GRADE C+**

ATONEMENT: (2007) An imaginative young girl sees some things she misinterprets and that leads to a lie that changes three lives. The lie affects the happiness of her sister, Cecilia, the fate of Robbie, the housekeeper's son, and causes her to live her own life under the burden of overwhelming remorse. Briony is 13-year-old fledgling writer who spends much of her time tapping on the keys of a rickety typewriter. The opening of the film is lyrical with gossamer scenes of the English countryside surrounding a country Manor House. Director Joe Wright (*Pride & Prejudice*, 2004) moves the story back and forth through time. This is especially effective when we first see scenes through Briony's eyes and later see the scenes as they really happened. However, Gary thought that in the second half of the film, the fractured time line was a bit distracting. Keira Knightly is lithe and lovely as Cecilia, and James McAvoy (*The Last King of Scotland*, 2006) makes a charming hero and a sympathetic victim. Briony is played by three incredibly talented actresses: Saoirse Ronan is remarkable as the 13 year old. At 18 Romola Gairi is Briony, and in the final scene we see Vanessa Redgrave playing the now elderly Briony. I thought the opening scenes were beautiful, the WWII scenes, especially the one at Dunkirk, were harrowing, and the ending extremely touching. The film is based on a novel by Ian McEwan. It contrasts the peaceful existence of the early 30s with the horror of war. It is about love and loss and consequences. I thought it was excellent. Gary was a bit bored with the slow beginning, and although he thought the ending was strong, he wouldn't grade the film higher than a B. He thinks because of the glowing reviews he read prior to seeing the film, his expectations may have been too high. I, however, would give the film an A. We both think it is a film that will linger in our memories. **GRADE A/B**

THE ATTACK: (2012) I was fascinated by this subtitled political thriller that delves into religious and cultural factors behind Arab-Israeli enmity in the Middle East. Barbara recuses herself from judging this one. She had difficulty keeping her eyes open and every time they closed she missed a little more of the subtitled dialogue. There are no familiar names in the cast but I thought everyone was excellent. The screenplay is based on a bestselling novel by an Algerian author. Set in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, a brilliant Palestinian surgeon with a flawless reputation in a Tel Aviv hospital is staggered to learn that his wife of fifteen years was killed in and probably responsible for a suicide bombing that leaves nineteen dead, including many children. Convinced of her innocence, Amin abandons the relative security of his adopted homeland and enters the Palestinian territories in pursuit of the truth. It is a disturbing film about love, loss and tragedy. Because the film does not offer easy answers and refuses to take sides, it has received considerable criticism in the Middle East. Movie critics in the west have heaped generous praise. Few will see this film, but I found it moving and educational. **Grade A-**

AUDREY 2020/2021 (Streamed on Kanopy, which does not charge because the public library or university covers all associated costs, allowing you to watch for free with no ads. If you are a member of a participating public library, you can start watching by signing up with a valid public library card number and PIN/password.) Audrey Hepburn was both a film and fashion icon. She was ranked by the American Film Institute as the third-greatest female screen legend from the Golden Age of Hollywood, and was inducted into the International Best Dressed List Hall of Fame. After the movie *Roman Holiday* was released in 1953, she became the personification of a movie star for people all over the world. However, after 1967, she left Hollywood and did not make another film until 1976's *Robin and Marian*. It is unheard of for a star of that magnitude, at the height of her career, to take that much time off the screen. She had married actor Mel Ferrar in 1954, and they had a son, Sean, in 1960. She had waited so long to have children that she wanted to spend time with her family. She said that family was more important than fame. Of his mother, Sean told his daughter that the best kept secret was that she was sad. Remarkable that the woman so many people adored looked for love her whole life. The documentary covers her second marriage, and her stint as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF. Hepburn's first field mission for UNICEF was to Ethiopia in 1988. She visited an orphanage that housed 500 starving children, and said afterwards, "I have a broken heart." She worked tirelessly for UNICEF until her death from cancer in 1993. We have fond memories of the iconic movie star, but the documentary didn't provide any new insights. As Gary said, "The film should have gone deeper and been shorter." (Eliminating the ballet scenes would have been a start.) But, spending an afternoon with the beautiful Audrey Hepburn is an afternoon well spent. **GRADE B**

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY: Put this many top-notch actors in the same house and the result has to be worth watching. The movie is based on a play by Tracey Letts, and, although I've never seen it onstage, I can tell that it probably works better in that form. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the movie version. The wildly dysfunctional family depicted here does a lot of shouting, and that put off some of the critics. I didn't mind the high volume, but it was the quieter scenes that made the movie for me. The marvelous Margo Martindale is good in every scene, but when she quietly reveals a family secret to Julia Roberts, she is memorable. The other actor who stood out for me was Julianne Nicholson, who, as the family wallflower, has such dignity. Chris Cooper has always been a favorite of mine and he shines in two scenes: his funeral dinner prayer and his confrontation with his wife (Martindale). Of course Meryl Streep as the loud, drug addicted, and frequently coarse mother is good, but the best performance may indeed be that of Julia Roberts. When a sister accuses her of being a duplicate of her mother, she walks in the house and glances at herself in the mirror. It's just a moment in time, but I will not soon forget it. Juliette Lewis is the flighty youngest sister. She brings a date to her father's funeral, although she defends it because he (Dermot Mulrooney) is her fiancée. Abigail Breslin (*Little Miss Sunshine*), Ewan McGregor, Benedict Cumberbatch and Sam Shephard, in a brief scene, round out the Weston family. There isn't much fun in this family and the intense dysfunction can wear on a viewer, so I'm not surprised that reviews are mixed. Since I am one of three sisters, I expect the film was more significant for me than for Gary. We agreed on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

2021 We took another look at **August Osage County** on Netflix. The 2013 movie is based on a play by Tracey Letts. The Author says that he based the play on personal experience. He must have come from a very dysfunctional family, because the family in this movie is severely maladjusted. (Letts also wrote the screenplay) Gary said that the second viewing left him admiring the actors' brilliance so much that he would grade the movie higher than we did in 2013. However, I'll let the original movie review stand because I don't think I could do any better today.

AUGUST RUSH: (2007 release seen on video) It's sentimental and predictable, but I liked this modern musical version of *Oliver Twist*. It's about an orphan, Freddie Highmore, who happens to be a musical prodigy, and his search for his parents through music. In New York, Highmore meets a street musician called "Wizard" who controls a ragtag bunch of child street musicians, much like Fagin controlled a bunch of child pickpockets. A song from the film was nominated for an Oscar, and both of us enjoyed the music in the film. However, it was too sentimental and improbable for Gary and he can't recommend it, but for me it's a **THUMBS UP**

AUSTRALIA: This is an old-fashioned romantic epic in the traditional Hollywood mode. I expected something more creative from Baz Luhrman who directed 2001's stunning *Moulin Rouge!* Australia is beautifully shot and tells the story of a proper Englishwoman (Nicole Kidman) who inherits a sprawling cattle ranch in 1941. With the help of a handsome drover (Hugh Jackman), Kidman drives 1,500 head of cattle to the port town of Darwin. If that reminds you of epic westerns from yesteryear, it should. The plot is totally predictable, and it should be no surprise that there is a happy ending. I didn't realize, before seeing this film, that the day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, they dropped bombs on Darwin, Australia. The inhabitants were forced to evacuate the town. The war scenes and the cattle-driving scenes are quite spectacular, but for me, the real stars of the movie were the two Aboriginal actors: Brandon Walters who played Nullah, the young half-caste boy, and David Guilpili who plays the boy's grandfather, King George. We've seen Guilpili before most notably in **Rabbit Proof Fence** and **The Proposition**, but Walters is appearing in his very first film. The 11-year-old was hand-picked by Luhrman after a nationwide search. Luhrman picked well. The boy steals the movie. The magic and music of the Aboriginal people is the only unique aspect of this film, and it did capture my imagination. Kidman looks great in the 40s clothes and Jackman looks gorgeous with and without clothes, but it is Nullah and King George who kept me reasonably interested for the 2 hour and 35 minute running time. We also enjoyed seeing two familiar Australian actors, Brian Brown and Jack Thompson. However, the evil character was so completely evil as to not be real or believable. The cattle-driving scenes, combined with the war scenes, combined with the romance, make for a film that is far too long, but we enjoyed it enough to give it a **GRADE B-**

AVATAR: This greatly anticipated film by James Cameron does not disappoint. Set in the year 2154, it is a futuristic western set on the mythical planet of Pandora. It pits the U.S. military-industrial complex against the Na'vi, the very tall, very slender, and very blue indigenous population of Pandora. Your sympathies definitely lie with the "Indians." Pandora happens to be a rich source of a mineral Earth desperately needs. The biggest villain in the story is an ex-Marine mercenary. The hero, Jake Sulley (Sam Worthington) is a paraplegic ex-marine who acts as an avatar, a Na'vi lookalike grown organically and mind controlled by Sam. He remains wired up in a trance-like state while his Avatar lives. When the Avatar sleeps, Sam awakes. As an avatar, he can feel everything the Na'Vi feel, and he has all their physical capabilities, which are quite spectacular. As Jake begins to identify with the Na'vi, he finds himself in a desperate fight for his own survival and that of the people he has come to feel are his own. He also falls in love with Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) a blue-skinned giantess with golden eyes and a long, supple tail. It doesn't take long before you find the Na'vi quite beautiful.

Roger Ebert, who gave Avatar 4 stars, says "It has a flat-out Green and anti-war message. . . Pandora represents not even a remote threat to Earth, but we nevertheless send in ex-military mercenaries to attack and conquer them. . . You are free to find this an allegory about contemporary politics. Cameron obviously does." (Not all critics were enamored of the story: one called it *Dances with Blue Things*. I confess, it did remind me a bit of **Dances With Wolves**.)

I can't begin to describe the fantastic CGI special effects. They are wildly imaginative and creative from the robot warriors to the floating mountains and amazing plants and animals in the Pandora forest. You really must see it for yourself. Do see it! And be sure to see it in IMAX 3D. It will blow your mind. Gary says A-, I say A. **GRADE A/A-**

THE AVENGERS: (2012) This must be the exception that proves my rule: I really enjoyed this sci-fi-super-hero-action-adventure movie. It has the requisite scientific mumbo-jumbo about dark energy, gamma-rays and portals along with lots and lots of explosions, a few of them quite satisfying. Most importantly, it has clever repartee between a terrific cast of super-heroes. My favorite was Robert Downey, Jr. as the genius billionaire Tony Stark, AKA Ironman. My next favorite was The Hulk and I thought Mark Ruffalo was a great choice to play Bruce Banner, the gentle doctor with lethal anger issues. Together with Captain America (Chris Evans), Thor (Chris Hemsworth--quite the hunk!), the Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), and Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), the Avengers unite to help Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) save the Earth from an assault from outer space. It does, however, take quite a while for them to come together. Apparently, super-heroes don't always play well with others. (It was a bit mind-boggling to see Hawkeye battle huge CGI creatures with his bow and endless supply of arrows. It seems that ever since **The Hunger Games**, bows and arrows are making a comeback.) The evil genius behind the threat to Earth is Loki (Tom Hiddleston), Thor's brother, albeit an adopted brother. Hiddleston makes a marvelous villain. The Brit has been seen recently in **War Horse**, **Midnight in Paris** (as F. Scott Fitzgerald), and **The Deep Blue Sea**. He is scheduled to play Loki again in the recently announced **Thor 2: The Avengers** is a bit long at two and a half hours, and Gary found some of the action scenes to be soporific. However, he allowed that as sci-fi-action-adventure movies go, this was one of the best. Director and co-writer Joss Whedon deserves a lot of credit for the movie's success. The spectacular CGI combined with funny lines delivered by interesting characters makes for an entertaining movie. **GRADE B+**

THE AVIATOR: There were moments in this film that I thought were brilliant, but there were other moments that I felt lacked energy. Martin Scorsese tries to bring Howard Hughes to life by showing us the period when the eccentric millionaire was most productive; when he had his greatest successes and his greatest failures. Leonardo DiCaprio is quite wonderful as the daring aviator, both when he was a brilliant and charming playboy, and also when he was suffering from the obsessions and compulsions that eventually overtook his life. In a stunning plane crash sequence, Scorsese shows his considerable skills as a filmmaker. He also beautifully re-creates the Hollywood glamour of the 1930s and 40s. Cate Blanchett, who doesn't look a bit like Katherine Hepburn, does a wonderful job of portraying a woman who, according to this film, may have been the one true love of Hughes' life. Kate Beckinsale is less successful at

playing Ava Gardner—she needed more of an edge. John C. Reilly, Ian Holm, and Alec Baldwin all acquit themselves admirably. Alan Alda is especially impressive as a senator who tried to destroy Hughes' reputation. At 166 minutes, the film occasionally felt long, but in the end, I really didn't learn enough about Howard Hughes. The film made me want to learn more about this remarkable man. Perhaps the Hughes life story is simply too big for a movie. **GRADE B+**

AWAY FROM HER: Given the subject matter, this is a remarkable film. Julie Christie, who played Lara in **Dr. Zhivago** 42 years ago, now plays Fiona who is in the later stages of Alzheimer's. She was gorgeous then and she's gorgeous now. It is a brilliant but sad treatment of a topic that many find difficult to think about and even more difficult to watch. Fiona is determined not to burden her husband with her declining condition and insists on going to a nursing home especially for Alzheimer's patients. Her husband, Grant, flawlessly played by veteran Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent, reluctantly lets her go. Supporting roles are well played by Olympia Dukakis and Michael Murphy. Though the film is about the tragedy of Alzheimer's, it is also a beautiful romance. It also details the struggle everyone faces to deal with what life gives you. If this sounds like a "downer" you should avoid, you are probably right. If it sounds like a film you might enjoy, you are also probably right. Both Barbara and I thought the film was beautifully acted and incredibly moving. The director, actress Sarah Polley, has done several short films but this is her first full-length film. It is an extraordinary directing debut. **GRADE B+**

AWAY WE GO: What a lovely movie! And that's a surprise coming from director Sam Mendes who is better known for his dark views of marriage and family in **1999's American Beauty** and the recent **Revolutionary Road**. Of course, in **Away We Go**, Burt (John Krasinski) and Verona (Maya Rudolph), although completely committed to each other, are not actually married. They are, however, expecting a child and desperately want to be good parents. When they learn that Burt's parents are moving to Belgium and they will be left with no family or friends nearby, they go in search of a place to call home. As they visit friends and relatives in different parts of the country, we see several scenes of family life. None of the families is ideal, but the scenes are alternately hilarious and touching. The visits help Burt and Verona decide what kind of home they want to create, and we come away from the movie feeling that their baby will be very lucky to have them as parents. Krasinski, best known for TV's *The Office*, is terrific. Rudolph, well-known to *Saturday Night Live* fans, proves that she is a consummate actor as well as a skilled comedian. Catherine O'Hara and Jeff Daniels as Burt's parents, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Allison Janney, and the rest of the supporting cast are flawless. Roger Ebert had a perfect description of Burt and Verona in his review. They are, he wrote, two characters rarely seen in the movies: thirtysomething, educated, healthy, self-employed, gentle, thoughtful, whimsical, not neurotic and really truly in love. Gary commented how nice it was to see a couple in love at the beginning of a film, all through the film, and still in love at the end, with no manufactured crises and no Hollywood complications. That is why this hopeful film is so delightful and why we urge you to see it. **GRADE A-**