

Movie Titles that begin with “W”

W * Wadja * Wait For Your Laugh * Waiting For Superman * Waitress * A Walk Among The Tombstones * Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story * A Walk in the Woods * A Walk On The Moon * Walk The Line * Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps * WALL-E * Wanderlust * War Horse * War Of The Worlds * The War Zone * Water * Water For Elephants (2011&2020) * The Way * The Way Back 2020/2011 * The Way He Looks * The Way Way Back * We Are Marshall * We Bought A Zoo * We Don't Live Here Anymore * We Need To Talk About Kevin * We Own The Night * We The Animals * We Were Soldiers * The Weatherman * Wedding Crashers * The Wedding Plan * Le Weekend * Welcome To The Rileys * West Side Story 2021 * The Whale * Whale Rider * What Happens Later * What Just Happened * What Lies Beneath * What Masie Knew * What Planet Are You From? * What the Constitution Means to Me * What the #&! Do We Know?! * What They Had * What Women Want * Whatever Works * What's Eating Gilbert Grape * When Did You Last See Your Father * When Harry Met Sally * Where the Crawdads Sing * Where the Heart Is * Where the Money Is * Where to Invade Next * Where'd You Go, Bernadette? * Where's My Roy Cohn? * While We're Young * Whip It * Whiplash * Whiskey Tango Foxtrot * The Whistleblower * White Oleander * The White Tiger * Whitney * Who Killed The Electric Car? * The Whole Nine Yards * Why We Fight * Wicked Little Letters * Widow of Saint-Pierre * Widows * The Wife * Wild * The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill * Wild Rose * Wild Tales * Wild Target * Wild West Comedy Show * The Wilde Wedding * Wildlife * Wimbledon * Win Win * Winchell * Wind River * The Windermere Children * Winter Solstice * Winter's Bone (2010 & 2020) * Wish I Was Here * Witch Hunt * Without Limits * The Wolf of Wall Street * The Wolfpack * Woman in the Fifth * Woman in Gold * The Woman King * The Women * Women Talking * The Women's Balcony * Wonder * The Wonder * Wonder Boys * Wonder Wheel * Wonder Woman * Wonder Woman 1984 * The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar & Wes Anderson's Short Films * Won't You Be My Neighbor * The Woodsman * The Words * Words and Pictures * The World According to Garp * World Trade Center * The World's Fastest Indian * The Wrestler * Wristcutters: A Love Story

W: Oliver Stone has given us a surprisingly even-handed look at George W. Bush and the path that led him to the Whitehouse. As such, it will probably not please his detractors or his apologists. Stone shows us Bush's early life as a happy-go-lucky frat boy, his numerous failed attempts to succeed at a job, and most importantly, his life-long struggle to measure up to his father's expectations. While Stone includes some incidents that point out W's inadequacies, he handles Bush's conversion to born-again Christianity quite sympathetically. Is *W* a good movie? Howard Hawks once gave this definition a good movie: "Three great scenes. No bad scenes." *W* doesn't have any bad scenes, but it doesn't have any great scenes either. It just had a lot of mediocre scenes, so I guess it qualifies as a mediocre movie. The best scene for me is the one in which Bush and his advisors discuss whether or not to invade Iraq. It clearly presents the neo-cons empire-building dream: Total U.S. presence throughout the Middle East so that, in the words of Richard Dreyfuss as Dick Cheney, "No one will ever f— with us again." The cast, however, is quite good, and some are outstanding. Josh Brolin is remarkable in his portrayal of GWB. He manages an uncanny resemblance to the President. Dreyfuss as Dick Cheney, and Scott Glenn as Donald Rumsfeld are both scary-good. Stone presents Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz as the true axis of evil. We also liked Jeffrey Wright's portrayal as Colin Powell. Condoleezza Rice (Thandie Newton) is dismissed as nothing more than a fawning acolyte at the alter of George W. Bush. James Cromwell is impressive as George Herbert Walker Bush, and Ellyn Burstyn is a believable Barbara Bush. Elizabeth Banks, who looks a bit like Laura Bush, is relegated to playing the supporting wife. Leaving the theater, Gary remarked that the film illustrates the danger of having a not-too-bright president in charge of the country. Because we admired the acting, we can give this otherwise mediocre film a grade of B-. **GRADE B-**

WADJDA: This is a 98 minute subtitled foreign film that has a lot going for it. It is the first feature film shot entirely in Saudi Arabia, a country where cinemas are banned. It is also the first feature film made by a female Saudi director, Haifaa Al Mansour. To grasp the significance of this, you should know that Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world where women are prohibited from driving a car. Wadjda is a spirited 10-year-old girl willing to fight unfair odds to own and ride a bicycle in a culture where bikes are considered a threat to a girls virtue, and therefore only for boys. She sees and falls in love with a beautiful green bicycle for sale. Wadjda pushes the boundaries as she exercises her entrepreneurial creativity in pursuit of her dreams. When her teachers put an end to her money raising efforts at school, she begins to lose hope. Then she hears about a large cash prize for a Koran recitation contest. It is a simple plot and the leads are terrific. It is a slow moving, but charming film that may not be for everyone, but Barbara and I liked it. **GRADE B**

WAIT FOR YOUR LAUGH: (2017) We remember Rose Marie from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* which began in 1961 and ran for 5 seasons. Rose Marie was Sally Rogers who, together with Morey Amsterdam, comprised Van Dyke's team that wrote for Carl Reiner's comedy show. The title of the documentary about her life came from Van Dyke, who remembers that she always told him to "wait for your laugh." We remember her from *Hollywood Squares* and her many guest appearances on TV shows, but she had an incredible career before 1961 that began when she was but four years old. As "Baby Rose Marie" she headlined in vaudeville and on the radio. When she performed in Chicago, Al Capone was a fan. He insisted she call him "Uncle Al." In 1947 she performed at the Flamingo Hotel for Bugsy Siegel back when Las Vegas was only a wide spot on the road. The documentary is loaded with clips of Rose Marie as she changed from a precocious child star to a lovely woman who was a consummate performer. In the late seventies, along with Rosemary Clooney, Margaret Whiting and Helen O'Connell, Rose Marie performed in *4 Girls 4*. The show broke house records from coast to coast in auditoriums, theaters in the round, tents and hotels. We're sorry we never saw that show. Frequent shots of the now 94-year-old, show that she hasn't lost her quick mind or her love of performing. She is eagerly awaiting her next job. Rose Marie's over 80 year career is highlighted in the documentary along with the love affair she had with her husband, Buddy Guy. If you like show business documentaries, or remember Rose Marie as fondly as Gary and I do, you will want to see *Wait For Your Laugh*. **GRADE B**

WAITING FOR SUPERMAN: Few would deny that America's public education system is troubled, if not in crisis. As retired teachers, Barbara and I were both anxious to see this gut-wrenching documentary which has been touted as a film that may be a strong candidate for an Academy Award. Regardless of how it fares at the Oscar Ceremony, it has wooed critics to an average grade of A-. Vacillating between alarming statistics and the personal stories of five promising kids who deserve better than our public schools which once were considered the best in the world, is now giving them. Just a few years ago our government declared that no child would be left behind, but even a cursory glance reveals that not only are they still behind, but the gap is growing at an alarming rate. Some of our

worst schools could be described as academic cesspools that have become "drop-out factories." Kids forced into those schools stand little chance of going to college or successfully competing in a complex world. But the film is not all doom and gloom. We are given a look at a few highly successful schools that may provide a model for a better approach. Easily the most charismatic figure in the film is education reform expert Geoffrey Canada. Watching him makes you almost believe he is the "Superman" we have been waiting for to fix our failed educational system. **GRADE: B+**

AFTERTHOUGHT: What kept *Waiting For Superman* from being an "A" film for me was the nagging thought that the film compared the best of the Charter Schools with the worst of the Public Schools. I realize that the worst of the Charter Schools have some serious failures and that the best of the Public Schools are still pretty successful. But I consider it an excellent film that should be seen.

WAITRESS: This movie is as delicious as the best pie you ever ate. Jenna (Keri Russell) makes magical pies for the pie diner in which she works, but her life is missing anything remotely magical. She is married to a controlling, abusive lout named Earl and she is unhappily pregnant. She is afraid that having a baby will make it impossible to ever get away from Earl. Her two fellow waitresses, Becky and Dawn, together with crabby Old Joe, who owns the diner and eats there every day, are her only friends. But then, she meets the new Ob-Gyn doctor in town, Dr Pomatter (Nathan Fillion), and finds so much more than just a friend. *Waitress* is a romantic comedy pie that is sweet and tart and irresistible, not unlike its heroine. Keri Russell, best remembered as Felicity from the TV show of the same name, is pitch perfect and totally delightful. Becky is wonderfully played by Cheryl Hines (TV's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), and the film's writer/director Adrienne Shelly is equally good as Dawn. Jeremy Sisto (TV's *Six Feet Under*) is suitably loutish as Earl, and Andy Griffith is suitably crabby as Old Joe. I guarantee that you'll walk away from this movie with a smile! A.O. Scott (New York Times) said that it isn't a feel-good movie, "it's just a movie that leaves you feeling good." Gary enjoyed *Waitress*, but not as much as I did. I think that, since he's never been a mother or a daughter, he didn't relate to the story as strongly as I did. For me, this is an A movie; Gary says B+. **GRADE A/B+**

The closing scene reminded Gary of a Charlie Chaplin movie, The Kid. I wonder if it was Adrienne Shelly's homage to the Little Tramp?

A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES (2014) Based on a Lawrence Sanders bestselling mystery novel, a *Walk among the Tombstones* stars Liam Neeson as Matthew Scudder. Matthew is a recovering alcoholic and ex-NYPD cop who now works as an unlicensed private investigator. He doesn't exactly sell his services and skills. What he does is favors for friends. Then they give him gifts for his favors. Barbara and I have been reading Lawrence Sanders' Matt Scudder detective novels (there are 17 of them) for almost three decades and have often wondered why Hollywood filmmakers haven't jumped on his sometimes compelling stories. Actually a 1986 film titled *8 Million Ways to Die* starring Jeff Bridges was based on one of his books, but little was recognizable other than the title.

A Walk among the Tombstones has drawn mixed reviews from critics ranging from "a stylish and smart thriller" to "over plotted and under explained." Barbara and I lean toward the high side of the range. We think Neeson is an excellent casting choice to play Scudder. He has had a distinguished career as a stage actor in London and on Broadway and he is highly regarded in Hollywood. The story doesn't break new ground in the Action/Adventure genre, but it is a riveting thriller with some unexpected twists. Scudder tries to track down two sociopathic sadistic killers before they kill again. Lines between right and wrong sometimes get a little blurred. Along the way we are introduced to an interesting street kid, T.J., who adds a heartwarming dimension to the story and who will probably appear again in future Scudder films if this one is successful. **GRADE B**

WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY: John C. Reilly is tremendously talented. He is the reason to see this bio-pic spoof directed by Jake Kasden and written by Kasden and Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up*). The basic plot line is this: Dewey Cox overcomes many obstacles to become a musical legend. It's obvious from the beginning that Dewey is a fictional character, and that's where the comparison—mentioned by many critics—with the films of Christopher Guest breaks down. Guest's movies are so subtle that in the case of his first film *This Is Spinal Tap*, many people came out of the film thinking that Spinal Tap was a real band. We realized after seeing *Walk Hard*, that we prefer the subtlety of a Guest spoof to the obvious satire of this film. Don't get me wrong. It does have plenty of laughs and the musical numbers are especially amusing. Reilly has the ability to sing in any style with believable skill. There are also some very funny cameos by actors playing Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr among others. Reilly is onscreen for most of the film's 96 minutes, aging from 14 to 71. Jenna Fischer is adorable as Darlene, the love of Dewey's life, with direct parallels to June Carter and Johnny Cash. There are a lot of direct parallels in this film and recognizing them is part of the fun. Plus, in one of the final scenes, you get a glimpse of the real Temptations. But, both of us thought the film seemed a lot longer than the 96 minutes running time. We decided on a grade of B-, but realize that others may like it more than we did. **GRADE B-**

A WALK IN THE WOODS: (2015) This pleasant comedy is based on Bill Bryson's 1998 book of the same title. The book recounts Bryson's attempt to hike the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail accompanied by a long-lost friend, Stephen Katz. Robert Redford has been attached to the property ever since he read the book, and hoped that the movie would reunite him with Paul Newman. However, when Newman became ill, Redford shelved the film. He doubted that he would do the film with anyone else. But, when he worked with Nick Nolte on *The Company You Keep*, he realized that Nolte was born to play the role of Katz. We are fans of Bill Bryson's travel books; they are both informative and very amusing. *In a Sunburned Country*, about Bryson's visit to Australia, is perhaps our favorite. We were both anxious to see the film version of *A Walk In The Woods*, having both read the book. We enjoyed the movie and enjoyed seeing Redford and Nolte, although Gary thought that Redford wasn't the best choice for Bryson because he lacked the writer's humor. Nolte, on the other hand, was perfect for Stephen Katz. Emma Thompson plays Bryson's wife, and Mary Steenburgen appears as a motel owner who has a mild—very mild—flirtation with Redford. Bryson was in his forties when he walked the Trail. It isn't quite the same story with two actors in their seventies. Nolte, who previously had a knee replacement, said in an interview (see **Extras**), "We walked a lot. I replaced my hip right afterwards." **GRADE B**

A WALK ON THE MOON: (1999 release seen on Video) This is an exceptionally good movie. Diane Lane and Liev Schreiber are parents of a teenage girl (Anna Paquin) and a young boy. They are spending the summer of 1969 at a family camp in upstate New York. As her daughter begins to mature, and gets her first boyfriend, Lane starts to feel that life has passed her by. Married at 17 to her very first boyfriend, she is envious of young people. Wanting to be somehow different, she begins an affair with a hippie blouse

salesman (Viggo Mortenson) who regularly visits the camp. 1969 was the summer of the moon landing and of Woodstock. Both events figure in the film. The relationships are touching and real, the dialogue is exceptional, and the actors are outstanding. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

WALK THE LINE: We saw this film with my sister and brother-in-law and all four of us felt the movie suffered from not using Johnny Cash's voice. Joaquin Phoenix did a fine job of representing the man in black, but we missed hearing the singer's voice. Plus, Phoenix's voice just wasn't good or distinctive enough to warrant the acclaim that Cash got. Reese Witherspoon was perky and appealing as June Carter Cash, but she doesn't sound at all like the singer. That, however, didn't bother us as much as much. **Walk The Line** is an entertaining biopic, but for us it didn't have the gravitas of **Ray**. The film about Ray Charles had broader canvas because it was written during the struggle for civil rights. And, we heard the real Ray Charles! Perhaps our expectations were too high and that increased our disappointment. In his review, Roger Ebert described the typical musical biopic: Hard times, obscurity, success, stardom, too much money, romantic adventures, drugs or booze, and then (if they survive) beating the addiction, finding love and reaching a more lasting stardom. That about says it. The difference, of course, is the music. In this case, the music didn't do it for us. We all agreed this was a solid B movie, but not the A film we were anticipating. **GRADE B**

WALL STREET: MONEY NEVER SLEEPS: In 1987 Oliver Stone, a sometimes brilliant film maker, co-wrote and directed **Wall Street** and introduced the film world to Gordon Gekko, who capsulated a Wall Street attitude: "greed is good." Twenty-three years and a financial meltdown later, with the help of Oliver Stone, Gordon Gekko is back. Michael Douglas plays Gekko, a role that earned him an Academy Award in the original film. And he hasn't lost his screen presence. Barbara and I both felt the screen came to life when Douglas was involved, but the film as a whole edged toward bland when he was off screen. There were other excellent actors in the film such as Shia LaBeouf, Josh Brolin, Frank Langella, Susan Sarandon, Carey Mulligan, and Eli Wallach, but it is very difficult to write an exciting script about the machinations of Wall Street finance. One would think the largest transfer of wealth from Main Street to Wall Street in U. S. history would provide better material. Of course, woven into the often unintelligible economics is a love story. And the film has a happy ending that Barbara said felt "tacked on." I liked the film somewhat better than Barbara. **GRADE: B-/C+**

WALL-E: This film is a triumph of the animator's art. WALL-E, the lead character, is a trash-compacting robot—the last one still working on earth. Within minutes, the audience falls in love with this dilapidated but adorable piece of machinery. We are totally engaged in watching him do his thing in a devastated city full of empty buildings and huge piles of compacted trash. WALL-E collects treasures from the trash, finds a cockroach buddy, and spends his downtime watching a video of **Hello Dolly**. He is a sweetly sentimental little robot. When a space ship deposits an egg-shaped robot named EVE, WALL-E is immediately smitten. We are told that the people of the earth left when the earth became uninhabitable. They live in luxury in a space station, and EVE has been sent from there to see if the Earth will sustain life. This first part of the film is enchanting, but, when the two robots leave for the space station, I felt some of the charm stayed behind. Mike LaSalle of the San Francisco Chronicle put it this way: *For as long as it stays on Earth, "WALL-E" is a great film, and on its way to being one of the masterpieces of the decade. But then it leaves Earth, and, once it does, it goes into pedestrian territory.* Oh, there's still plenty of creativity and a few entertaining robots, but oddly, once people are introduced, the film loses some of its humanity. We did appreciate the homage paid to **2001: A Space Odyssey**, and we liked the ecological message. Hope the message resonates with younger viewers. Andrew Stanton is the writer and director of what is certainly one of the best animated films of recent years. Still, it isn't one of our favorite genres, and Gary would give it only a C+ for his enjoyment. I liked it better and think it deserves at least a B. I think those who are partial to animated films will probably give it an A. **GRADE B/C+**

WANDERLUST: (2012) Sometimes in life you need a detour. And a detour from their high-pressure New York life is precisely what George (Paul Rudd) and Linda (Jennifer Aniston) take. After purchasing their first home—a tiny, high-priced studio apartment or, as the realtor calls it, a mini-loft—George loses his job. They decide to move to Atlanta where George's older brother has promised him employment. That doesn't turn out well, but the drive to Georgia, shown in a series of quick scenes, is hilarious. Ultimately the couple winds up at an idyllic hippie collective where they become vegans, live without doors, and flirt with the idea of free love. Alan Alda, Justin Theroux, Malin Akerman, and Kathryn Hann are some of the commune members. All are amusing. The film is rated R and rightly so, since it is an Apatow production. David Wain directs the movie and also appears in it as a nudist wine-maker/writer. Wain's co-writer, Ken Marino, appears as George's insufferable brother. Wain has directed four feature films and Paul Rudd as starred in all four. In an article in *EW*, Wain lists the reasons he always works with Rudd. Among the reasons are these three: Rudd can act, he's "easy on the eyes," and he and Wain "always laugh at the same stupid stuff." I'll admit that there is some seriously stupid stuff in **Wanderlust**. There is also some very funny stuff. For the parts that made us laugh, we give it a grade of B. **GRADE B**

WAR HORSE: It should be mentioned that this movie is based on a book that was written by Michael Morpurgo for the "young adult" market. In the book, the story is told from the viewpoint of the horse, à la **Black Beauty**. I imagine it makes for a better story, but it would be difficult to do that in the movie, so Spielberg tells the story from the viewpoint of the people who come in contact with the remarkable horse. First is Albert (Jeremy Irvine) who raises the horse he names, Joey. Next is the Captain who rides the horse in the First World War. Joey comes in contact with several more who know that he is "special," and care for him as best they can. Not only is Joey special, he is also extraordinarily lucky, for he survives the war. As you might expect from a film based on a young adult book, the story has plenty of schmaltz, something that Spielberg does expertly—even the music is schmaltzy. A Canadian reviewer went so far as to title his review, "**War Horse** mired in schmaltz." I wouldn't be that hard on it because I like a bit of well-done schmaltz. The many scenes depicting the horrors of war are quite spectacular, but I have little tolerance for carnage no matter how adroitly shot. I can only hope that people, especially young people, come away from the movie with the strong anti-war message. The episodic story is told in an old-fashioned straight forward way. Spielberg is not afraid of sincere sentimentality and the actors are skilled at making it look authentic. I guarantee you will be moved by the ending, even though it is rather unbelievable. **GRADE B**

WAR OF THE WORLDS: If you are a science fiction enthusiast, I think you will love this film. Perhaps Barbara passed this review to me because after nearly every science fiction film I see, I vow never to subject myself to another. But the flesh is weak, and at my age the memory is weaker. I was actually fascinated by the first third of the film. My fascination waned during the second third, and during the last third, I was silently pulling for the space aliens to finish the annihilation. In an uncharacteristic attempt at fairness, I have to say

the film has a lot going for it. It is based on H.G.Wells' science fiction classic, the incomparable Steven Spielberg directs it, and we can watch the always-attractive Tom Cruise make escaping extraterrestrials look plausible. Dakota Fanning can scream in terror with the best of them and, of course, Tim Robbins can handle about any acting assignment handed him. All in all, it is a good film if you like the genre . . .if not . . . not so much. **GRADE C+**

THE WAR ZONE: If you are looking for a few chuckles, I suggest you avoid this film. But, if you like rain, isolation, relentlessly dark scenes, dysfunctional families, teenage depression, and starkly realistic incest, this may be the film you have been waiting for. We wanted to see this film for two reasons. First, it is Tim Roth's directorial debut. We have always admired Roth's acting. Second, Roger Ebert placed this film among his top ten of 1999. I usually agree with Roger Ebert, but not this time. I'm afraid I would have trouble getting this film to the top of my bottom ten list. In fairness to the film, it is well acted and, given the demands of the script, very believable. If any of our readers would like to defend the merits of this film, we would be happy to include your comments in the Readers' Views section. **GRADE: D**

WATER: *Water* is the third in director Deepa Mehta's political trilogy. The first two films were called *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998), and, after seeing this beautiful film, we are anxious to see the first two. In *Water*, Mehta tells the story of India's long-standing practice of shunning widows; of forcing them into group homes and forbidding them to remarry. The film is set in 1938, when a widow had three choices: throw herself on her husband's pyre, marry her husband's brother, or live the rest of her life in seclusion. It is an example of a policy of economic necessity masquerading as religious imperative. Although India has laws that permit widows to remarry, this tradition is still so prevalent today* that Mehta literally risked her life to make the picture. After Hindu fundamentalists destroyed her sets and threatened her life, she had to finish the film in neighboring Sri Lanka. As the story begins, we meet Chuyia, who is 8 years old. Her father tells her that her husband has died, although she can't even remember being married. He takes her to an ashram where a group of widows provide for themselves by begging. She is befriended by a beautiful young widow named Kalyani. Although the widow who rules the ashram insists that widows remain virtuous, she sees no contradiction in prostituting Kalyani in order to earn money for the ashram. One day, Chuyia meets a handsome young man who eventually falls in love with Kalyani, upsetting just about everyone and leading to tragedy. Many of the scenes take place beside the Ganges (actually a river in Sri Lanka) where people go to pray, wash themselves, and cremate their dead loved ones. The New York Times critic called this film "exquisite." We agree. **GRADE A-**
*At the end of the film we are told that there are 34 million widows in India today, most of them living in abject poverty.

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS: Going back a few decades, when I was in my thirties, a friend and I joined a circus for a few exciting days. Going back a few years, when I was in my seventies, I remember the excitement of reading Sara Gruen's best-selling novel which was the inspiration for this film. I should know that films rarely match the intensely personal experience that reading a novel does. In other words, I was hoping for better. Still, it is not a bad movie and you may view it with a cleaner slate than I did. Robert Pattinson, who came to worldwide international fame in the film adaptations of *Twilight*, plays the male lead. He is one of the highest paid actors in Hollywood and I am told the heartthrob of young girls throughout the world. The female lead went to Reese Witherspoon and the role of villain went to Christoph Waltz. For me, Witherspoon sparkled, Waltz was appropriately scary, and Pattinson was a little bland. A small but memorable role was brilliantly played by Hal Holbrook. It is 1931 and Jacob Jankowski (Pattinson) is about to start his final exam in veterinary medicine at Cornell when he is notified that both his parents have been killed in an auto accident. Jankowski drops out of school and stumbles his way into a second-rate traveling circus where he will try to survive during the Great Depression. It is an old-fashioned story that focuses mainly on a love triangle. I am sure the studio executives hope to draw Pattinson's legions of female fans this way, but Barb and I both thought the love story was the weakest link in the movie. For me, the strongest was the ambiance of the circus, the camaraderie of the troupe, and the animals, especially the 9,000 pound elephant (Rosie), realistically played by herself. If you see a lot of movies, this should probably be on your list, but if you decide not to see the film, I enthusiastically recommend the book. **GRADE B-**

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS: 2011/2020 (Recorded from HBO) Barbara and I first saw this colorful romantic melodrama when it opened in 2011. It is based on a best-selling novel by Sara Gruen and is set in a traveling circus. *Water for Elephants* may not be the best show on earth, but it's not bad and it has special significance for me. A little more than a half century ago a friend of mine and I lived out a boyhood fantasy and joined a circus. Following is the review I wrote when we first saw the film and I don't think I can improve it. If anything I might give it a slightly higher grade: (See review above)

THE WAY: (2010, seen on DVD) A father heads overseas to recover the body of his estranged son who died while traveling the "El Camino de Santiago," and decides to take the pilgrimage himself. This is an uplifting story with Martin Sheen as the father and his own son, Emilio Estevez, appears as the dead son in flashbacks and occasional hallucinations. Estevez both wrote and directed the movie and dedicated it to his grandfather, so it's a real family affair. Tom (Sheen) travels the 800 km route to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain, where tradition has it that the remains of the apostle Saint James are buried. He carries the ashes of his dead son and deposits handfuls along the way. Quiet and withdrawn at first, he eventually befriends three other travelers, a Dutchman, a Canadian, and an Irishman. The Dutchman hopes to lose a few pounds on the pilgrimage; the Canadian woman plans to quit smoking when she gets to Santiago, and the Irishman is a writer with writer's block and hopes the pilgrimage will help him write again. Tom finds not only some friends, but also some peace. You can't expect the story of a very long walk to be exciting, but the scenery is nice. Some critics found it a bit contrived, but others appreciated, in the words of Lisa Schwarzbaum (*EW*) "the contemplative loveliness." It's not a great movie by any means, but it is quietly positive. I liked it a bit better than Gary. **GRADE C+/C**

THE WAY BACK: (2020--In a theatre before they closed) Movie fans have followed Ben Affleck's career since his Oscar-winning film, *Good Will Hunting* (1997) that he co-wrote and starred in with Matt Damon. It is no secret that Ben Affleck has struggled with alcohol abuse in his personal life and shot this movie shortly after finishing another stint in rehab. Affleck stars as Jack Cunningham, a former basketball standout stumbling through middle age. At night, he either drinks himself into a stupor at the local bar or hammers down one beer after another at home. Affleck has publicly spoken about his own struggle with alcoholism and he is very believable portraying an alcoholic who is simultaneously energized and repulsed by his addiction. Ostensibly, *The Way Back* is a sports movie about basketball.

But it is so much more than that. It is an unflinching portrayal of an alcoholic coming to terms with his alcoholism and the movie depends on Affleck's performance. Clearly he is tapping into his personal demons to bring Jack to life. Barb and I liked the film a lot, and it fell just short of the A range for us. **GRADE B+**

THE WAY BACK: (2011) The first part of this wartime tale takes place in a Siberian prison and exposes us to the unbelievable conditions in a 1940 Russian gulag. A multinational group of prisoners choose to attempt escape from almost certain death in the camp with the almost certain death of escape. Even if they manage to get away from their captors, they face a journey over thousands of miles through hostile Countries and through spectacular, but unforgiving terrain. It is a stunning testament to human determination over the power of Mother Nature. Jim Sturgess (*Across the Universe*) plays Janusz, a young Polish prisoner with a plan for making his way to the Mongolian border. The band of characters that sign on include a colorful tattoo-covered gambler and criminal (Colin Farrell), and an American prisoner (Ed Harris) and a young girl who later joins the group. Often the men in the group are so bearded and sunburned that they are hard to tell apart. Barbara and I agree that this film is filled with breathtaking landscapes and the cinematography is, at times, magnificent. However, the fictional story depicted onscreen often seems too unbelievable to be true. I fear the story will quickly blend in our memory with many other similar films. To quote Roger Ebert, "Not every incredible story makes a compelling movie." We agree. **GRADE C+**

THE WAY HE LOOKS: 2014/2021 (Available for \$3.99 rental on Prime Video) This is a Brazilian coming-of-age movie about a blind teenager, Leo, who falls in love with a classmate. It is an hour and a half long in Portuguese with subtitles. It may be the first feature film to trace with humor and compassion how hard it is to be gay, blind and in love. On the Tomatometer with 42 reviews it earned a critics' score of 93% and 89% from over 5,000 audience members. It is the debut feature film from Daniel Ribeiro who wrote, directed, and co-produced the film. Ribeiro emphasizes the boy's shyness and longing for independence, feelings that are central to practically everyone's experience in adolescence. Blind since birth, Leo is a smart and charming teenager but is also starting to grapple with the pangs of independence and is beginning to bicker with his parents. His mother is loving, but understandably overprotective. There are no villains in the movie. Even the school bullies are treated more as young and uninformed rather than a serious threat. The film is built upon beautifully acted moments that feel quite honest and real. Barbara and I liked the movie. It was charming and sometimes poignant, but we never felt manipulated. The actor who played Leo was especially good. I had to research whether he is really blind. I found he is neither blind nor gay. **GRADE B+**

THE WAY WAY BACK: (2013) This film was a crowd favorite at the Sundance Film Festival. With a "coming of age" story the film doesn't break new ground, but while breaking familiar old ground, it may grab your heart, make you laugh, and even bring a tear to your eye. Introverted fourteen-year-old Duncan (Liam James) is struggling to find his place in the world. His parent's recent divorce leaves him angry, confused, and resistant to being dragged along to a Massachusetts beach home with his vulnerable mother (Toni Collette) and her controlling and judgmental boyfriend (Steve Carell, playing against type). He finds an unexpected friend in Owen (Sam Rockwell), an extroverted and very funny manager of the Water Wizz water park. Let me interject that I believe Sam Rockwell is the most underrated actor in Hollywood and richly deserving of any supporting actor awards he receives for creating this wonderfully unique role. Deserving of a best female supporting award is Allison Janney playing a flamboyant, wisecracking neighbor. Coming of age movies are usually predictable, but Barbara and I don't mind since it is a favorite genre with nostalgic appeal. In a summer filled with big budget blockbusters, it is refreshing to find a quiet little film with heart, humor and drama. **GRADE B+**

WE ARE MARSHALL: I can never resist a good sports story—especially one about football. Especially one based on true events. In 1971, a plane crash killed most of the Marshall University (Huntington West Virginia) football team along with all but one of its coaches. Four players were not on the plane: three because they were injured and one because he overslept. The University president, nicely played by David Strathairn, makes the difficult decision to continue the football program. He first asks Red Dawson, the one assistant coach who was not on the plane, to take over as head coach. Dawson wasn't on the plane because at the last minute he volunteered to take over a recruiting trip for another coach. Matthew Fox (TC's Lost) is excellent as Dawson, who declines to become head coach because he is suffering from survivor's guilt. Finding someone to coach a varsity football team with only four players proves to be impossible until Jack Lengyel (Matthew McConaughey) volunteers for the job. Critics have been divided on McConaughey's performance. One thought he overacted to the point of chewing the scenery; another called his performance "comic." On the other hand, Richard Roeper thought it was McConaughey's best role ever. Some critics seemed to forget that the actor is playing a real person—one who by all reports was a bit eccentric. Lengyel himself, who now lives in Sun City, AZ, was pleased with McConaughey's performance, so we can assume it is an accurate portrayal. We also liked seeing Ian McShane as a father who cannot get over the loss of his son, and cannot bring himself to support the University football program. We enjoyed the performances and the story. Not the best football movie ever made but an emotionally satisfying one. **GRADE B.**

WE BOUGHT A ZOO: This is a pleasant family-friendly movie with a likeable main character in Matt Damon. It is based on the real life adventure of Benjamin Mee. Mee lives in Devon, England and after his wife died, he decided to make a change for himself and his two children. He bought a zoo. It was a dilapidated one and required lots of work to pass inspection, but Mr. Mee's Zoo is still in operation. I imagine that the movie sticks fairly closely to the facts, except that director Cameron Crowe added two romances, a villain, and a cast of character actors. The result is a formula movie that is totally predictable, although it does have some charm. Damon, who is always a likeable presence, is assisted by Scarlet Johansson and Thomas Haden Church. Patrick Fugit, memorable as the young writer in *Almost Famous*, is one of the character-actor ensemble. Worthy of mention are the three young people: Colin Ford is very good as the 14-year-old son who hasn't been able to deal with his mother's death; Elle Fanning provides some teenage love interest (They grow up so fast, don't they?); And Damon's young daughter is played by the adorable Maggie Elizabeth Jones. There are enough animals to please any zoo-lover, including a tiger whose story is so touching he should be listed as a cast member. *We Bought a Zoo* is, as I said, a pleasant movie with a bit of charm, but not enough to earn a high grade from us. **GRADE B-**

WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE: In this film we follow the lives of two unhappy couples: Jack and Terry (Mark Ruffalo and Laura Dern), and Hank and Edith (Peter Krause and Naomi Watts). Both Jack and Hank are teachers at a local Community College and are best friends. Terry and Edith are stay-at-home wives and mothers and they are also best friends. Predictably, the couples struggle with

boredom in their lives and infidelity as an escape from that boredom. The problem with the script is that is played at one emotional level nearly all the time. On the positive side, the acting is uniformly outstanding. All four actors seem to fit their roles perfectly. John Curran, the director, shows skill in the way that he affords us intimate glimpses into the lives of four people who are going through some sort of early mid-life crisis. It's all just a bit grim. As A.O. Scott of the New York Times said, "John Curran . . . is not inclined to rescue his characters with levity." We agree. But because of the fine acting, we are giving this gloomy story a B. **GRADE B**

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN: (2011) Is a sociopath born or made? Science is still debating the "nature-or-nurture question, but for Kevin, I think it's nature with perhaps a bit of nurture thrown in for good measure. Gary, for one, thought the mother was almost as sick as the son, but I don't agree. Tilda Swinton, in a remarkable performance, is a reluctant mother. She loved her life as a travel adventurer and wasn't quite ready to settle down. After Kevin was born, she probably had a touch of postpartum depression. She also had a baby who cried—make that "screamed"—constantly. As Kevin grew older, he seemed to hate his mother, and she didn't seem to care much for him either. Swinton's Eva is a complicated person. She is cold and remote but maintains her dignity in a situation that could be described as "every parent's worst nightmare." John C. Reilly plays Swinton's husband. He appears to have a normal relationship with Kevin, but perhaps Kevin is just playing the part of a "normal" son. Ezra Miller, who played the teenage Kevin, looks remarkably like Swinton. Two other young actors play Kevin at younger ages. The movie is a series of flashbacks, moving from Swinton's present life to Kevin's childhood and the "nightmare incident." If you don't know the story, you may be a bit confused at first by the non-linear nature of the movie. The director uses a lot of blood metaphors: red paint, red tomato soup cans, and, of course, blood itself. Some of the scenes are bathed in red. She may have overdone it because I was so aware of it. The movie was adapted from a novel by Lionel Shriver. As the movie ended, I heard a man behind me say, "He didn't have any humanity." That about sums it up. But as to why Kevin turned out the way he did, that is a mystery to his mother to, Kevin himself, and to us. I think the movie deserves a B+, but for Gary it is between a B and a B-. **GRADE B+/B**

WE OWN THE NIGHT: Based on the trailers I thought this was a 1940's remake—good brother vs. bad brother starring Pat O'Brien and James Cagney. It did start out that way. Mark Walberg is the good brother, a Captain in the New York Police force. His father (Robert Duvall) is the Chief of Police. Joaquin Phoenix is the bad brother. He manages a Brooklyn nightclub, consorts with questionable characters, uses recreational drugs, and has a lusty relationship with his gorgeous girlfriend, Eva Mendes. The film is set in 1988 when the slogan, "We Own the Night," was painted on the sides of New York squad cars as a promise to reclaim the night streets from the drug lords. Not surprisingly, most of the scenes are shot at night. Unfortunately, many of the characters speak their lines in a soft mumble that makes it difficult for some viewers to catch all the words. Duvall is a notable exception. Even when he speaks softly, you can hear every word. We often find that films of this genre have plot elements that strain credulity and this film is no exception. However, the acting was fine—Phoenix was especially effective—and the story did provide a few new twists on an old theme. **GRADE B**

WE THE ANIMALS: (2018) Award winner at Sundance Film Festival, this independent film was adapted from an autobiographical debut novel with the same name by Justin Torres. Torres, in his teens, was placed by his parents in a mental hospital after they found the boy's journal which revealed an angry gay young man with deep emotional scars. Torres worked closely with director Jeremiah Zager and is quite happy with the film adaptation. All is tranquil at the beginning of *We the Animals* before harsh reality creeps in. It evolves into a sometimes gentle, and sometimes troubling coming-of-age story that captures the joys and pains of growing up in a volatile and desperately poor family. The film was shot mostly in working-class Utica, New York, a fading former mill town with acres of wilderness engulfing its rural homes. Manny, Joel, and Jonah tear their way through childhood and push against the volatile and unpredictable love of their parents. Jonah has close bonds with his two slightly older brothers, but creates an imagined world all his own. The three boys were first time actors and were incredibly believable. Don't expect to be blown away by this movie. Barbara and I admired the creativity and the acting, but don't feel that any but the most ardent of independent film lovers will enjoy it. **GRADE C+**

WE WERE SOLDIERS: This is another outstanding war movie. Like *Black Hawk Down*, *We Were Soldiers* tries to make the battle comprehensible, and it succeeds. Unlike *BHD*, *WWS* shows us scenes before the men leave for battle, which give us a change to identify with some of the soldiers. It also intersperses the battle scenes with scenes of the wives back on the army base and we see Moore's wife (Madeleine Stowe) delivering those dreaded Department of War telegrams. Both films are based on a true incident. This film tells of the first major battle between the Americans and the Viet Cong in 1965. That battle took place in the Ia Drang Valley, known as the Valley of Death. Lt. Col. Hal Moore (Mel Gibson) is the commanding officer who is ordered to take his 450 soldiers into battle against an enemy that numbered in the thousands. Almost half of Moore's men were killed, but he vowed to leave no one behind, and he didn't. Gibson is very good in the role of a battlefield commander who was known for the paternal bond he developed with his men. Chris Klein (Election) stands out as a dedicated soldier and Greg Kinnear adds a needed light touch with his role as a helicopter pilot. Sam Elliot is outstanding as an old-timer who fought with Moore in Korea. Barry Pepper is Joe Galloway, a reporter who began as an observer of the battle, but became a participant. Galloway and Moore wrote a book, *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young* that is the basis for the movie. According to Galloway, the end result is a movie that's "85 percent reality, 15 percent Hollywood." Moore says "Soldiers captures the battle, in all its intensity. It captures the love of soldiers for each other. And it certainly captures my grief. The film is horrifying to watch, and I did get a bit weary of all the unflinching violence and had to look away. There is a lot of blood and gore, so if that bothers you, you may want to skip this one. If you would like to see an accurate depiction of what Roger Ebert called "The curtain-raiser of a war in which American troops were better trained and better equipped, but outnumbered, out maneuvered and finally outlasted," then by all means, see *We Were Soldiers*. **GRADE: Gary A+; Barbara B+**

THE WEATHER MAN: The Studio is marketing this movie as a comedy, but that isn't very accurate. There are some amusing moments, but this is really the story of a man who hasn't lived up to his expectations. It's the story of a man assessing his own life and finding it wanting. Although David Spritz (Nicholas Cage) is the weather man on a Chicago network TV channel and makes a salary well into the six figures, he believes he has fallen far short of his father's (Michael Caine) illustrious career as a Pulitzer-prize-winning author. He doesn't have a degree in meteorology, so he doesn't predict the weather, he only reads it. Viewers passing him on the street and unhappy with the awful Chicago winter, throw food at him. What's more, his personal life is in shambles. He is divorced from Noreen (Hope Davis), and she is seeing another man (Michael Rispoli). His son, Mike (Nicholas Hoult, *About A Boy*) is in rehab for

smoking pot, and his pre-teen daughter is heavy and unhappy. It's surprising that there are any amusing moments at all in a movie about a man who is depressed and unsatisfied with his life. Cage and Caine are both terrific and work well together, and Davis seems incapable of ever giving a less than excellent performance. In spite of the superior acting and the well-written script, the movie is a downer and we don't think it will have much audience appeal. **GRADE B-**

WEDDING CRASHERS: It's a formula plot but it has some winning performances, most notably from Owen Wilson, Vince Vaughn, and Rachel McAdams. John Beckwith (Wilson) and Jeremy Klein (Vaughn), are a pair of womanizers who crash weddings in order to take advantage of the romantic atmosphere and connect with vulnerable single guests. They are very good at it. Until John falls for Claire the sister of the bride at a celebrity wedding. Jeremy connects with another of the bride's sisters at the same reception and finds he has more than he can handle. But Beckwith is in love, for the first time, and this puts a strain on the men's friendship. Rachel McAdams is adorable as Claire Cleary. She is a brunette here and it so becomes her that she should never go back to her blond look. The two men are, by profession, divorce negotiators and the opening scene of them at work is very funny. The montage of the two men at various weddings went on a bit too long and I found myself hoping the movie had a plot and that it would unfold soon. (Gary doesn't agree. He loved the montage.) At another point we were afraid the movie wouldn't be able to sustain the laughs, but they managed to keep it funny and, at appropriate times, suitably serious. I'm a fan of both Wilson and Vaughn and they make a great couple here. Also appearing is Christopher Walken, wasted as Claire's father, and Jane Seymour, sexy and funny as Claire's mother. We were surprised to see Wil Ferrell is a small but amusing role. **GRADE: Gary B+, Barb B**

THE WEDDING PLAN: (2017) This subtitled quirky Israeli romantic comedy is unlike any rom-com I or Barbara have ever seen. What it does is give us an intriguing look into the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish culture through the eyes of 32 year-old Noa Koler, the thoroughly charming female lead who has a smile that can light up the theatre in a completely authentic way. She won the Best Actress award in the Israeli Feature Films category at the Haifa International Film Festival. It may be hard to imagine a romantic comedy in which men and women do not touch, but universal emotions are strong and realistically portrayed in this interesting foreign film. Blindsided by her fiancé's decision to call off the wedding with only a month's notice, Michal (Koler) decides to put her trust in fate and continue with her wedding plans, believing Mr. Right will appear by her chosen date. She forges ahead with the wedding, booking a venue, sending out invitations, and buying a wedding dress. She has everything but a groom. During her month-long search for a spouse, she enlists the help of two different matchmakers and goes on a series of disastrous blind dates looking for a match made in heaven. The movie received a respectable 85% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*. We liked it too. **GRADE B**

WELCOME TO THE RILEYS: This movie is notable for three outstanding performances by James Gandolfini, Melissa Leo, and Kristen Stewart. Gandolfini and Leo are a couple who have been married for 30 years. Several years ago, their only child, a daughter, was killed in a car crash and the tragedy has driven them apart. Leo has become agoraphobic—she never leaves the house, not even to get the mail. Gandolfini has his poker games and his waitress girlfriend to occupy his time, but the girlfriend dies, and, when he visits her grave, a discovery makes him want to embrace life again. On a business trip to New Orleans, he meets a runaway teenage stripper/hooker (Stewart) and decides that she needs looking after. Eventually, his wife braves the outdoors to join him in the dilapidated house he shares with his replacement daughter. All three characters are beautifully drawn and their interactions are real and memorable. We both give this independent film a B+. **GRADE B+**

WEST SIDE STORY 2021: (Seen in a movie theatre.) We went to see Spielberg's updated version of West Side Story. We wanted to love it, but, sadly, we did not. Here's what we did like: It was an inspired bit of casting to include Rita Moreno (the original Anita) in the cast. She was glorious playing Valentina, the widow of Doc, the owner of the candy store where the Sharks and the Jets hung out. (Moreno said that Tony Kushner, who wrote the screenplay, wrote the part especially for her.) Her reprise of "Somewhere" was the highlight of the show for us. We also liked that all the boys in the Sharks, as well as their girlfriends, were played by Latinos. The setting of the original play was the neighborhood of San Juan Hill, on the southern end of the Upper West Side, that was razed to build Lincoln Center. Spielberg used the actual demolition of San Juan Hill, creating a bombed-out look that worked perfectly. There was a brilliant overhead shot of the Rumble, letting their shadows precede them as the Jets and Sharks prepare to fight. And we liked Rachel Zegler as Maria. She was gorgeous and had a beautiful voice that fit the iconic songs. What we didn't like: It didn't bring any new insights into the Romeo and Juliette story that has delighted audiences since 1957. The story of the fear that "others" would take over is directly from current time. The fact that the boys from the Jets and Sharks carried Tony's dead body away doesn't hold out much hope that things will ever change. We liked much of what Spielberg did, but we didn't love it. **GRADE B**

THE WHALE: 2022 (Prime rental for \$5.99) In a town in Idaho, Charlie (Brendan Fraser), a reclusive and unhealthy English teacher, hides out in his flat and eats his way to death. He is desperate to reconnect with his teenage daughter, Ellie (Sadie Sink), for a last chance at redemption. *The Whale* was based on a play by Samuel D. Hunter. Director Darren Aronofsky was wise to keep the story mostly in Charlie's house. As a person living with morbid obesity, Charlie has limited movement, and that confines him to the four walls of his home. Working as a remote University teacher, Charlie has no real necessity to go out. Brendan Frazier deserves his Oscar for Best Actor. His performance is incredible, and the marvelous fat suit he wore was stunningly realistic. The nurse who takes care of Charlie has also been nominated in the Supporting actor category and we think Hong Chau should have won. (But then, we weren't enamored of *Something, etc*). *The Whale* has been criticized as body-shaming since it deals with a socially rejected person with obesity. One of the critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* said the movie's heavy-handed approach could risk alienating the audience. I don't think it did, because the critics gave the movie only 65% but audiences gave it 91%. Gary and I think it should have been nominated for Best Picture, but then as theatre people we approve of plays this good being turned into movies this excellent. The movie has compelling messages which cannot be limited to health problems associated with excessive weight. We urge you to see *The Whale*. Streaming doesn't do anything to lessen the impact of the film. I was undone at the end. **GRADE A+**

WHALE RIDER: We took grandson, Nathan, to this movie and he thought it was just OK. "Too much chanting," he said. We liked it better, but not as much as we had hoped. It tells the story of Pai, a young Maori girl, who wants to be the leader of her tribe. She is the first born of the first born, etc., but she is a girl and Maori tradition says the leader must be the first male son. Her grandfather loves her, but cannot forgive the fact that she is female, even though she displays all the skills and intellect needed to become a leader. The title

comes from the legend that the first leader rode on the back of a whale to lead his people to New Zealand. The film was written and directed by Niki Caro and was inspired by a novel by Witi Ihimaera. Pai is played by Keisha Castle-Hughes and she is luminous. This is what Ebert, who loved the film, had to say: "I fear you might make a hasty judgment that you don't want to see a movie about a 12-year-old Maori girl who dreams of becoming the chief of her people. Sounds too ethnic, uplifting and feminist, right? The genius of the movie is the way it sidesteps all of the obvious clichés of the underlying story and makes itself fresh, observant, tough and genuinely moving." Gary says C+. I thought it was a fascinating look at a different culture struggling to keep tradition alive, so I give it a B. (Maybe it's the feminist in me.) **GRADE: B/C+**

WHAT HAPPENS LATER: 2023 (Amazon Prime rental \$5.99.) What happened to Meg Ryan's face? It doesn't look the same as when she was the darling of the rom-coms. Gary said it looked better as the movie went along, but I maintain he just got used to Ryan's new face. The critics weren't kind to Ryan's new rom-com, but they were kinder than the audience. Perhaps they were brought up in the 90s when Meg reigned supreme. The setup is simple in *What Happens Later*: Two ex-lovers, Bill (David Duchovny) and Willa (Meg Ryan) get snowed in at a regional airport overnight. Willa and Bill realize they're still attracted to each other, but also still equally annoyed with each other. Ryan's Willa is a bit of a free soul, quirkily carrying around a rain stick wherever she goes and walking with a persistent limp due to a bad hip. (She walks like she had a bad hip. I wonder if the actress has a bad hip in real life. Or, maybe she's just a good actor.) It's about what happens after the romance has occurred. Therefore, it's darker than the usual romantic movie and doesn't have much of the 'com' in it. However, the romance is not believable either because there is absolutely no chemistry between them! And they look their age, more like 60 than the 49 the script has them. The movie got better toward the end, but it was a disappointment to us. We expected better. Ty Burr said, "*What Happens Later* has a disarming charm that sneaks up on you." It failed to charm us. **GRADE C+ TO B-**

WHAT JUST HAPPENED: If the life of a Hollywood producer is anywhere near as stressful as it is for Ben (Robert DeNiro), they all must be taking handfuls of pills daily! Ben has two ex-wives. Because of this, alimony and child support take a big bite out of his income. Now, his current film, titled *Fiercely*, is in danger of failing because the director refuses to re-cut the awful ending. What's more, the film he is about to start may be cancelled because its star, Bruce Willis, refuses to shave off his Santa Claus beard. Between picking up his various children for school, attending meetings with studio head Catherine Keener, attending therapy sessions with his most recent ex-wife (Robin Wright Penn), and answering his almost constantly ringing phone, Ben is stressed to the max. De Niro is at his best here, alternately funny and touching, and his performance carries the movie. Barry Levinson directed this insider's look at what goes on in the movie business and it is frequently hilarious. It's also rather sad. Willis is amusing playing a prima donna movie star and John Turturro is hilarious as Willis's frightened agent. *Rolling Stone's* Peter Travers called it *an insider's take on the greed and vanity that make Tinseltown tick*. *Los Angeles Times* reviewer, Carino Chocano, wrote: *The movie is brilliant at portraying the incredibly high stakes of the seemingly inconsequential and the tremendous amounts of money spent on it*. Another critic thought it was too much an insider movie to appeal to non-Hollywood people. We don't agree with that critic. Gary says B+, I say B. **GRADE B+/B**

WHAT LIES BENEATH: This movie has its moments and they are scary. Unfortunately, the spaces between those moments are sometimes boring. It does, however, have Michelle Pfeiffer and she is definitely worth watching. Harrison Ford is Pfeiffer's husband. Our local critic loved this movie, but most of the other critics have been lukewarm. We always have trouble with ghost movies, and thought the final thrilling moments were a bit much. However, Robert Zemeckis (*Forest Gump*) did a capable job of directing, and the actors do their best to make the characters believable. If you enjoy a good scare, you might like this one. **GRADE: C+**

WHAT MAISIE KNEW: (2012) We watched this movie on DVD from Netflix after reader Holly V., IL recommended it. We're so glad she brought it to our attention. It is an adaptation of a Henry James novella by the same title, but don't let that scare you. The screenwriters have created a brilliant contemporary version of the story set in 21st Century New York. Maisie's parents (Julianne Moore and Steve Coogan) love their little girl but are woefully inadequate at parenting her. Their careers consume them, and Maisie's needs are rarely considered. Plus, they argue almost constantly. Their break-up is inevitable, but using their daughter as a pawn in their bitter custody fight is unforgivable. Her father marries the nanny (Joanna Vanderham) whom Maisie loves. In spiteful retaliation, her mother marries a young man (Alexander Skarsgard, who Maisie comes to love. We see the story entirely through Maisie's six-year-old eyes as she tries to find her way through the dysfunctional relationships that surround her. She is remarkably resilient in the face of her parents' overwhelming self-absorption, but it is sometimes difficult to watch this sweet little girl who is so willing to love anyone who is kind to her. Onata Aprile is perfect as Maisie, a character we won't soon forget. **GRADE B+**

WHAT PLANET ARE YOU FROM?: Barbara asked me to review this film knowing that the best I can do is damn it with faint praise. I chuckled occasionally and found it rather amusing at times. I wanted to see the film because Mike Nichols directed it and it is filled with impressive players: Annette Bening, Ben Kingsley, Greg Kinnear, and Garry Shandling. Also I thought the trailer was excellent. Garry Shandling plays an alien sent to earth to impregnate a female earthling. The reasoning behind this leaves one scratching one's head, but suspension of reality testing is often called for in comedy. We did not fall asleep and we did not leave the theater feeling we had been cheated. **GRADE C**

WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME (2020 on Amazon Prime): Fifteen-year-old Heidi Schreck put herself through college by giving speeches about the U.S. Constitution. In 2017 Schreck wrote a play about her experience as a 15th year-old through the eyes and experiences of an almost 50 year-old woman. The play premiered on Broadway in 2019 with Schreck herself in the leading role. A performance was filmed and this offering by Prime is the result. Gary worried that the title might make people think it was pedantic and boring. It is the opposite of that. *What the Constitution Means to Me* is a witty and very personal exploration of women's rights, immigration, and domestic abuse. The most time is spent on domestic abuse and the statistics on violence against women are sobering indeed. She talks about a case in which Jessica (Lenahan) Gonzales sued the Castle Rock Police Department for failure to enforce a restraining order which had led to the murder of her three children by her estranged husband. In 2005 the Supreme Court ruled that a town and its police department could not be sued for failing to enforce the restraining order. That is truly appalling! Schreck is not totally alone on stage. Mike Iveson, who introduces himself in a moving soliloquy, and Rosdely Ciprian, a 14-year-old debater, who joins Schreck at the end of the play in a debate titled, "Should the Constitution be abolished?" Ciprian and Schreck are adept at arguing

either position. *Rotten Tomatoes* critics gave the movie 100%, and we can see why. We laughed and were ultimately moved by this wonderful play. **GRADE A**

WHAT THE #\$! DO WE KNOW?! : O.K., it is a strange title, and I will even concede it is a strange film. But I guess a film dealing with quantum physics would have to be. It is a documentary and closer to an educational film than most films you have seen. There are a lot of brilliant talking heads and mind blowing special effects. Barbara and I expected to see this film in a nearly empty theater but were surprised to walk into a crowded theater near the Arizona State University campus. Apparently it has been doing quite well at film festivals. I would not have predicted this form a film dealing with quantum uncertainty, neurological processes, and altered perception that can alter "reality." I think I liked the film better than Barbara. She feels she can't recommend it, but I think you should take a chance if you have the opportunity to see it. The only familiar face you are likely to see in the film is that of Marlee Matlin, the hearing impaired actress from *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). **GRADE B-/C**

WHAT THEY HAD: (2018) Director Elizabeth Chomko was able to get inspired performances out of her top notch cast which includes Blythe Danner, Robert Forster, Hillary Swank and Michael Shannon. Shannon was also an executive co-producer of this remarkable film dealing with a family facing the ravages of Alzheimer's. Danner is Ruth, an older woman suffering from dementia and Forster is her husband, Burt. He is determined to care for Ruth no matter what happens because "she's my girl and no one's going to take her away." Swank is their daughter who lives in California and doesn't visit often enough. Shannon is their son, who lives in Chicago and feels the stress related to the care of aging parents. On leaving the theater, Gary said, "That was a perfect movie!" I agree that there is no way to improve on the unpredictable script and the strengths and weaknesses of the family dynamics. That it was so real, is partly because Chomko, who also wrote the screenplay, based it in part on her grandmother, and partly because of the outstanding cast. I'm afraid that people will avoid this film fearing that it will make them too sad. *What They Had* has tears, it's true, but it also has lighter moments. As one view wrote "You'll laugh, you'll cry, this movie will stay with you long after you leave the theatre." I hope everyone will seek out this amazing movie. **GRADE A**

WHAT WOMEN WANT: Nick (Mel Gibson) is a talented Ad man and a world-class chauvinist pig. His reputation in the advertising field has been made by appealing to men's testosterone in order to sell products. If you want an Ad with a bikini-clad woman in it, Nick is your man. But the advertising world is changing and Nick's boss hires a hotshot woman to be creative director of the agency. Darcy (Helen Hunt) is fondly referred to in the Ad world as a man-eating bitch, and Nick is determined to get rid of her and claim the job he feels is rightfully his. Nick has never had any trouble talking a woman into bed, but he hasn't a clue how to have a relationship with one. Even his daughter says he behaves more like an uncle than like a father. His idea of charming the "girls" who work in his office is to tell them off-color jokes. In real life, he would have been brought up on sexual harassment charges years ago. That's the set-up and it's pretty good. Now comes the fantasy. In a very funny scene, Nick is accidentally electrocuted. He suffers no injuries, but a strange thing happens--he can now hear women think. At first, he hates his new power, then he realizes it can help him get his job back, and ultimately, he learns to be the kind of man every woman wants--the kind who truly listens and understands. Unfortunately, this part of the movie sinks under the weight of sentimentality. We both liked the way the opening of the film introduces us to Nick by letting us hear others talk about him. We also thought Gibson was unusually good. He manages to be believable in an unbelievable situation and this lighthearted role lets him exert his not inconsiderable charm. His dance number is delightful. I also thought he and Ashley Johnson, who plays his daughter, worked very well together. Their improving relationship is convincingly portrayed. Marisa Tomai is fun to watch and it's nice to see her get a decent part. Hunt is OK as Darcy, although I couldn't quite buy their relationship. Hunt has a very reserved demeanor and Gibson is much more ingratiating. She is cool and he is warm. It's hard to imagine them with a life together. There are some funny lines, though, and *What Women Want* makes for an enjoyable couple of hours. **GRADE: B**

WHATEVER WORKS: Whenever Woody Allen writes and directs a new film, Barb and I are usually interested enough to try it. Our Woody favorites include *Annie Hall* and *Sweet & Lowdown*. Although *Whatever Works* doesn't reach that level of excellence, it did have a lot of laughs for us and we both give it higher marks than most of the professional critics. Larry David plays Boris Yellnikoff, a self-proclaimed genius and world class pessimist. It is not unlike the role he plays in his HBO series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Unlike Woody's annual film releases of the last five years which were set in Europe, this film returns to a familiar Manhattan setting. It is a romantic comedy that he originally wrote in the 1970's for Zero Mostel but it was never produced. With a little rewriting and innovative casting (most Hollywood actors jump at a chance to be in a Woody Allen film) the stage is set for his signature one-liners, tongue-in-cheek philosophy, and his fascination with barely legal young women. The young woman, Melody, is played by the gifted and versatile Evan Rachel Wood (*The Wrestler, Across The Universe*). Here she plays a perky cheerleader type who finds herself homeless and hungry in New York. Acting honors also go to Patricia Clarkson who is a delight to watch playing Melody's mother. Without giving away too much of the plot, *Whatever Works* builds to a warm-hearted and we thought satisfying finale. Many will avoid this film because they just don't like Woody Allen. But in spite of his rocky personal life, we still enjoy many of his films and think this one deserves a look. **GRADE B**

WHAT'S EATING GILBERT GRAPE: (1993/2019) Lasse Hallström directed this 1993 movie, starring Johnny Depp and Leo DiCaprio. Peter Hedges wrote the screenplay, adapting it from his own novel. It totally charmed us then, and it hasn't lost its ability to charm us again as we watched it on *Netflix*. A self-sacrificing young man (Depp) struggles to care for his mentally-disabled younger brother (DiCaprio) and morbidly obese mother while attempting to find out what he wants out of life. We liked Depp's tender, disarming performance as the long-suffering Gilbert Grape, but we were blown away by DiCaprio's role as a mentally-challenged young man. Juliette Lewis appears as a young traveler marooned in the town with her grandmother. She had a lot of kooky rolls after this, but here she was lovely. A very young Mary Steenburgen appears in a key role. We were also impressed with Darlene Cates, who played the obese matriarche of the Grape family. Cates' acting career ignited after she appeared on an episode of Sally Jessy Raphael titled "Too Heavy to Leave Their House". Shortly after, author and screenwriter Peter Hedges proposed to her that she play the morbidly obese and housebound mother in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. Her performance earned stellar reviews; Roger Ebert said about the actress, "Darlene Cates, making her movie debut, has an extraordinary presence on the screen. We see that she is fat but we see many other things, too, including the losses and disappointments in her life, and the ability she finds to take a grip and make a new start." The actress went on to appear in a handful of film and television projects before succumbing to natural causes in 2017. When the

newspaper released a statement on the actress's death, Leonard DiCaprio paid tribute to the actress identifying her as "the best acting mom I ever had." **GRADE A**

WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?: This is the story of a son who has difficulty relating to his father. It is based on a real life memoir by Blake Morrison who also participated in writing the screen play. Colin Firth is Blake and the always wonderful Jim Broadbent plays Arthur, his father. The elder Morrison was a doctor who was full of life and enthusiasm, so full that he frequently irritated and embarrassed his son. When Arthur is diagnosed with a terminal illness, Blake arrives to spend the remaining time with his parents. As he struggles to cope with his father's imminent death, he remembers incidents from their past. We see Blake as a young boy and as a teenager. The film introduces a young actor, Michael Beard, who plays the teenaged Blake, and he perfectly captures a teenager's frustration and annoyance with his exuberant parent. Juliet Stevenson is Blake's mother and Gina McKee, so memorable in the BBC series *The Forsythe Saga*, is Blake's wife. This is a touching story, but it is also very slow-moving. Too slow for Gary, who can't give it more than C+. I am such an inveterate Colin Firth fan that I would watch him do almost anything. I was also very impressed with Broadbent, who manages to bring just the right touch of vulnerability to Arthur: You can understand Blake's conflicted feelings but, in the end, you have great sympathy for both of them. **GRADE B/C+**

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY: 1989 (Seen on HBO Max) This movie has always been my favorite rom-com. I've watched it numerous times every time I ran across it on cable. Nora Ephron wrote the script and Rob Reiner directed, and Gary and I agree with the Critics Consensus on RT: "Rob Reiner's touching, funny film set a new standard for romantic comedies, and he was ably abetted by the sharp interplay between Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan." I assume everyone has seen this movie, and if you haven't, don't delay a moment longer. I am going to end this review on every body's favorite scene and the most famous line from the movie, which has a lot of quotable lines. Over a sandwich, after calling Harry "a human affront to all women," which is quite apt, Sally suggests that some of the women that Harry is sleeping with have been faking their orgasms. Harry expresses doubts saying I know when a girl is faking. She proceeds then to fake an orgasm. As she reaches a climax, Sally smacks her hand on the table, yelling "Yes! Yes! Yes!," as the other diners turn to watch. Sally caps it off with a triumphant bite of coleslaw and a smile. Reiner gave the best line in the movie to his mother, Estelle, across the aisle from the couple. She says to the waiter, "I'll have what she's having." (That line ranks 33rd on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest movie quotes of all time.) At a reunion of the cast, Reiner confessed that he actually performed the scene first, to show Ryan what he wanted it to look like. "Meg doesn't realize she has to do it in front of all these strangers," Reiner said, "and so the first couple of times it looked like it needed more. So I said, 'Meg, let me show you!'" (Billy Crystal joked of Reiner, "He proceeds to have an orgasm that Mighty Joe Young would be proud of.")

Reiner added, "I just had an orgasm in front of my mother, my mother over there. And then Meg does little thing at the end, which I didn't tell her to do. She does a full-on orgasm and when it's over and then she goes right back and she takes a little bite of coleslaw and smiles." Not surprisingly, we give this movie an A+! **GRADE A+**

WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING: 2022 (Seen in a movie theater) I loved the book by Delia Owens and I was so anxious to see the movie that even venturing into a theater couldn't dissuade me. Unfortunately, the magic that the book had for me wasn't transferred onto the film. When I said that to Gary, he said there was magic enough for him. Don't get me wrong. I liked the old-fashioned nature of the movie. Old-fashioned, except for the fact that it had a heroine and not a hero. Kya is the heroine and she was brought to vivid life by Daisy Edgar-Jones who is a British actor we saw in the Hulu series, *Normal People*. Edger-Jones is supported by an outstanding cast, not the least of which is David Strathairn. (Ty Burr said in his review, "Any and all fans of David Strathairn – we are few but we are hardy – will be glad to see him in the sizable role of Kya's foxy defense attorney, making like Atticus Finch with a few miles on him.) Gary and I number ourselves among that hardy band. "The Marsh Girl," as the townspeople call her, had an unfortunate childhood. Her mother left when she was eight and brothers and sisters left soon after that, leaving her alone with her abusive father. But she stayed out of his way, and when he left, she was alone, except for the only thing her father left her--a distrust for people. She concentrated her focus on the animals and plants of the North Carolina marshes. She had support from a kindly couple who ran the only store in the marsh. The movie did a good job of establishing her backstory, intercutting it with her trial for murder. Oh yes the movie has everything: An ode to the natural world, a heartbreaking coming-of-age story, and a surprising tale of possible murder, and a twist ending. We loved the movie, but it didn't reach an A for us, although it was a solid B+. **GRADE B+**

The critics on Rotten Tomatoes didn't much for the movie, calling it bland and sentimental.

(And know how critics hate movies with sentiment.) The critics gave it only 34%,
but the audience loved it. They gave it 95%

WHERE THE HEART IS: This is the kind of story that makes a better novel than a movie. There is absolutely no dramatic flow in this film: The episodes are totally unconnected, and much of the action seems totally unmotivated. I enjoyed the book even though it was a bit on the comy side. Because I already had a fondness for the characters, and because I enjoyed some of the episodes, I could go as high as a C-kind of a wobbly C I admit. Gary thought it was a case of worthwhile actors stuck in a worthless script, and feels his D+ is generous. We both like Natalie Portman and think she is going to be a big star, but agree she was wasted in this movie. We also liked Stockard Channing and Ashley Judd. Perhaps the movie could have benefited from a narrator. I had been looking forward to this film and it was a disappointment. **GRADE: C-/D+**

WHERE THE MONEY IS: This is a mediocre crime caper movie distinguished only by the presence of Paul Newman. He plays Henry, a career bank robber who got caught because a power failure trapped him in a bank vault. He feigns a stroke and is transferred from the prison hospital to a nursing home. Carol (Linda Fiorentino) becomes fascinated with him and convinced that he is play-acting the stroke victim. She tricks him into "waking up," and convinces him to plan a job with her and her husband, Wayne (Dermot Mulroney.) None of this is as interesting as it sounds. Even the caper itself is lackluster. There are maybe two good scenes and too many boring ones. However, Newman's charm and Fiorentino's sultry appeal give this film what little oomph it has. Mulroney plays such a schmuck that it is not at all hard to imagine that Carol is more interested in Newman than she is in him. **GRADE: C**

WHERE TO INVADE NEXT: (2016) This film is a "Documentary" written by Michael Moore, directed by Michael Moore, and featuring Michael Moore. If you hate Michael Moore, you would be ill-advised to sit through sit through 110 minutes supporting your view. But if

you have liked any of Michael Moore's films, Barbara and I think you will like this one. Although it may not win an Academy Award as did **Bowling for Columbine**, it is sprinkled with humor and insight and you will feel more informed for having seen it. Moore travels from one foreign country to the next finding at least one thing each nation does better than we do. Often they are things we once did but no longer do. It left me wondering why United States legislative members would rather give tax cuts on future earnings for the already super wealthy than fund free school lunches for poor children. You can guess which group has better lobbyists. The film is a good conversation starter. It increases knowledge of other countries and makes us wonder why a country most of us consider the best in the world is not better. In Italy, Moore meets a couple who get 30 days paid vacation each year with no loss in productivity. In Slovenia, college is free – even for foreigners. In Portugal drug use actually dropped after decriminalization and focusing on public health. In Norway, the prison system is focused on rehabilitation and sentences are served out in the equivalent of tiny studio apartments, while guards don't carry firearms. Even the worst felons are treated with compassion and prison sentences are capped at 21 years. Still the crime rate is very low, and so is recidivism. In Iceland, bankers who sank the country's economy actually went to jail. The only bank in Iceland that didn't fail was run by women. I remember a time when "for-profit prison systems" would never have been considered in the U.S., but now we have them in nearly every State. Michael Moore cares deeply about values he feels are missing in America today. In **Where to Invade Next**, he makes his points with conviction and sometimes humor and tones down the sarcasm often associated with his films. His critics will still criticize, but Barbara and I liked the film. I will remember it as a light-hearted educational travelogue designed to stimulate thinking. **GRADE B+**

WHERE'D YOU GO, BERNADETTE?: (2019) I liked the movie better than the book. That surprising statement may be because of Richard Linklater, who both directed the movie and co-wrote the screenplay. (After all, it was only based on the book.) It may also be because Cate Blanchett played Bernadette, Billy Crudup played her husband, Elgie, and Emma Nelson, in her first feature role, played Bee, Bernadette daughter. All three were excellent, and Kristen Wiig, Judy Greer and Lawrence Fishburne rounded out a superlative supporting cast. Or, perhaps I liked the movie better because there were no long letters or reports--just voice overs. Bernadette was considered an architectural miracle worker when she left Los Angeles to follow her husband to Seattle. After numerous miscarriages, she finally had Bee. Mother and daughter were each other's best friends, and Elgie, who was eventually hired by Microsoft, worked such long hours that he lost touch with his wife and daughter. Bernadette's aversion to both Seattle and people in general, was so intense that she depended on a virtual assistant in India to run her most basic errands. When Bee aced her report card and claimed her promised reward--a trip to Antarctica--her agoraphobic mother became more erratic than usual--erratic to the point that Algie considered having her committed. You'll have to see the movie because that's all I am going to reveal. Gary and I did not love the movie, but we agree that is a pleasant way to spend a couple of hours out of the Arizona heat. **GRADE B**

WHERE'S MY ROY COHN?: (2019) Ken Auletta, the writer and principal narrator of this documentary, said about Cohn, "When you're in his presence, you know you're in the presence of evil." Appointed as chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy's infamous communist-hunting subcommittee, Cohn used the fear of communist party members in government and in Hollywood to propel his reputation as a lawyer who would do anything to win--anything, no matter how illegal. Along the way, he mentored a young New York real estate developer named Donald Trump, teaching him how to acquire power. The Roy Cohn playbook included these lessons: Never apologize, always stay on the attack, and tell the same lie over and over until it is believed. A lifelong homosexual, he never came out of the closet, not even in 1986 when he was close to death from AIDS. At the height of his career, the lawyer, who represented kingpins of the Mafioso, had many friends in high places. He partied with Presidents, like the Reagans, artists like Andy Warhol, and with his most famous client, Donald Trump. They all deserted Cohn when his many crimes caught up with him and New York disbarred him, charging "dishonesty, fraud, deceit and misrepresentation." Though he never held political office, Roy Cohn's influence has changed politics in this country. This documentary is an insightful and sobering look at an immoral man whose influence is still felt today. Gary and I will never forget that Roy Cohn was the villain in Tony Kushner's brilliant **Angels in America**. **GRADE B**

WHILE WE'RE YOUNG: This film is listed as Drama-Comedy. That is both interesting and accurate. Usually a film is designated as one or the other. But in an hour and a half film writer/director Noah Baumbach gives us both. The comedy, which is often laugh-out-loud funny, grows out of a generation gap between two New York couples skillfully played by four outstanding actors: Ben Stiller (Josh), Naomi Watts (Cornelia), Adam Driver (Jamie), and Amanda Seyfried (Darby). Josh and Cornelia are suspicious of younger people and yet desperately want to see themselves as young. Jamie and Darcy make everything seem cool, which fascinates the older couple, who feel they may have let life pass them by. The one-liners are frequent, enjoyable, and insightful. As several critics have pointed out, Baumbach's humor is reminiscent of Woody Allen. At a certain point, about two-thirds of the way in, "**While We're Young**" changes tone and direction. Josh is a documentary filmmaker with one hit to his credit, but that one success was nearly ten years ago and he is still working on his second film. Jamie is a young aspiring documentary filmmaker who may be willing to cut a few ethical corners to get his first documentary accepted. This sends Josh on a crusade to expose him as a fraud. Josh's wife is a sometime documentary producer whose father, played by veteran actor Charles Grodin, is a legend in the field. I fear that some audiences will zone out when the film takes a philosophical turn, but Barbara and I liked it and feel comfortable with an above average grade. **GRADE B**

WHIP IT: The critics on *At The Movies* agreed that the script for this first directing effort by Drew Barrymore consisted of "one familiar beat after another." But, in spite of the clichés, they enjoyed the film, mostly because of the "hangout factor:" they enjoyed hanging out with the talented cast. We agree that the cast is talented and that they seemed to be having fun making this coming of age film about a girl whose mother wants her to win beauty pageants while she would rather win at roller derby. I'm not much for beauty pageants, but I'm even less so for roller derby. Barrymore does a skillful job of filming this fast and frequently violent sport, but I don't think I'll become a fan anytime soon. Ellen Page is once again a high school student trying to find a place to fit in. Her character, Bliss, is not as articulate as her character in *Juno*, but she is just as likeable. Marcia Gay Harden and Daniel Stern are her parents, and Kristen Wiig, Drew Barrymore and Juliet Lewis play her hardcore roller derby teammates. I loved their names: Maggie Mayhem, Smashley Simpson and Iron Maven. One girl is named Bloody Holly and Bliss becomes Babe Ruthless, much to the eventual delight of her father. The names were the best thing about the roller derby. For us, the banal plot made it difficult to enjoy the movie, in spite of some excellent performances. We thought it was an unusual choice for Barrymore's first directing outing. Hope she finds a better script next time. **GRADE C+/C**

WHIPLASH: (2014) This is a powerful drama written and directed by Damien Chazelle. It was a double prize winner at Sundance Film Festival and professional critics have given it high praise. Barbara and I agree. Amazing performances are given by J.K. Simmons and Miles Teller and I believe one or both will be given serious consideration when the Academy is choosing nominees for Best Actor honors. Simmons plays a possibly well meaning, but brutal and sadistic teacher at a fictional prestigious New York Music Conservatory. He leads the top jazz ensemble at the school and is well known for his teaching talents as well as for his teaching methods. He sincerely believes that excellence is best achieved by pushing people beyond what is normally expected of them using insult and humiliation like an angry drill sergeant. He believes "no two words in the English language are more harmful than *good job*" and that without unrelenting pressure the world might be deprived of the next really great musician. Teller plays a dedicated and ambitious student who aspires to be not just a great drummer, but "*one of THE greats*" like his hero Buddy Rich. He hungers to reach his goal and is willing to suffer for it. When Teller was asked in an interview how much of the drumming he did on the set, his reply was "all of it." If you see the film you will realize how impressive that is. He has been drumming in bands since he was 16. There is a question raised in the film, but never answered: Is cruelty a better motivator than kindness, and can cruelty, in some cases, result in more harm than good? The film sounds very dark, but it is not without humor. It is an independent film and will be unlikely to see wide release unless it receives some help from Oscar nominations. We think *Whiplash* is well worth searching out. **GRADE A-**

WHISKY TANGO FOXTROT: (2016) First, let's deal with the quizzical title. The first letter of each word gives us "**WTF**" which in texting language is the polite way to say "*what the f---!*" and in the military alphabet, the film's title stands for "WTF." Tina Fey plays the lead in this comedy/drama and both Barbara and I hold her in high esteem. She is worlds better in this film than in her last movie, *Sisters*, which we described in *Movie Views* as extremely forgettable. Even though the film has received mixed reviews from critics and scored only 61% on the *Tomatometer*, we thoroughly enjoyed it. It is based on a memoir by Kim Barker, a war correspondent for several years in Afghanistan and author of *The Taliban Shuffle*. Tina Fey delivers a superb performance and is backed up by an excellent supporting cast which includes Margot Robbie, Martin Freeman, Billy Bob Thornton, and Alfred Molina. Make no mistake, WTF is a war movie and focuses more on drama than comedy, though there are many humorous scenes. Avoiding making political statements about the war, the film follows Fey's character as she struggles to be taken seriously as a female reporter in a country that doesn't allow women to so much as show their faces. We owe this movie to Fey who bought the movie rights, produced and starred in it. I was very impressed with the dusty and dirty streets of Kabul, the rugged mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, and the realistic war scenes. It was even more impressive knowing it was not shot on location, but in the buttes around Albuquerque, New Mexico. If you are a Tina Fey fan, you certainly won't want to miss this appealing movie. **GRADE B**

THE WHISTELBLOWER: This 2010 movie ends with a sobering statistic: *Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal enterprises in the world. It is estimated that 2.5 million people are being trafficked.* Kathryn Bolkovac (played by Rachel Weisz) leaves her job as a Nebraska cop to take a position as a U.N. peacekeeper in Bosnia. She is actually working for a private security contractor under the auspices of our State Department. She soon discovers a sex trafficking scandal that involves the local police and members of the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission. When she blows the whistle, she is fired and the executives of the contractor company deny everything. The addition of a love story between Bolkovac and a man she meets in Bosnia, though true, doesn't add much to the movie. It is the story itself that is the star. This frightening thriller is based on the true story of Kathryn Bolkovac, and the facts were supported by a British labor tribunal that investigated her claim of unlawful dismissal against DynCorp--the real U.S. company that hired Bolkovac. The tribunal found the corporation's defense "completely unbelievable." What is even more sobering is the fact that DynCorp, whose operatives committed these crimes and tried to cover them up, is still employed by the U.S. government. Weisz, gives a powerful performance, and she ably assisted by Vanessa Redgrave and David Strathairn in small but significant roles. There are subtitles for the foreign languages used, but we found that the accents were sometimes difficult to understand and we benefitted from using the closed-captioned feature on our TV. **GRADE B**

WHITE OLEANDER: This is the story of the love/hate relationship between a daughter and her mother. And what a mother Michelle Pfeiffer is! Astrid describes her as "dangerous" and yet she says she never felt so safe as when she was with her. When Astrid's mother, Ingrid, is sent to prison for murdering her boyfriend, Astrid is forced to deal with a series of foster homes. Things do not go well. She is also forced to deal with the compelling hold that her mother has over her. The powerful performance of Alison Lohman in the role of Astrid makes this a movie to be reckoned with. We were totally engrossed in the story. Pfeiffer is stunning as an evil but charismatic woman, and Robin Wright Penn and Renee Zellweger were appealing as two of Astrid's flawed foster mothers. Patrick Fugit, from *Almost Famous* is a young man who befriends Astrid. Roger Ebert criticized the screenplay, but we rather liked it. I haven't read the popular novel on which it is based, but would be anxious to hear how the movie and the book compare from anyone who has. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* insultingly called the film an "estrogen overload." What is it with these male critics? They never object to testosterone overload. While we thought this was a good screenplay, it wasn't outstanding enough to deserve an A. **GRADE: B+**

THE WHITE TIGER: (2021) Based on a 2008 best-selling novel with the same title as the movie, Netflix's *The White Tiger* is a brutal and powerful tale of ambition, class, and corruption. At times darkly humorous, it is also a cruelly honest and deeply pessimistic view of humanity. It was written, directed and co-produced by Ramin Bahrani who is an American director and screenwriter. The film is a bitter indictment of India's caste-system. It tells the story of poor villager who claws his way out of the cage created by caste as he attempts to grab his perceived destiny by working as a chauffeur for the son of a wealthy landlord. As a servant, he makes himself indispensable to his rich masters. But after a night of betrayal, he realizes the corrupt lengths to which they will go to trap him and save themselves. It is not a pretty story but Barbara and I agree it is a gripping one. **GRADE B**

WHITNEY: (2018) How does beautiful and talented Whitney Houston go from a 30-year-old Mega-Star to floating in a hotel bathtub dead at 48? Kevin Macdonald tries to answer that question in this documentary on the tragic life of Whitney Houston. He uses archival footage of her singing appearances including family videos of Houston singing in church, her television debut on *The Merv Griffin Show*, and many of her concert tours. He includes her iconic performance of the "The Star Spangled Banner" at the 1991 Super Bowl. He intersperses footage of the singer with interviews with family members and co-workers--those who knew her best. I didn't realize that Houston's mother was a well-known gospel and back-up singer who tried to launch a solo career with limited success. Emily "Cissy" Houston was her daughter's first and toughest voice coach. Why did Whitney Houston die so young? Drugs played a part, but so did

betrayal by her father and loving the wrong man. Houston's first film role was in *The Bodyguard*, released in 1992 and co-starring Kevin Costner. It was wildly successful and made her an even brighter star. It may have been then that her marriage began to fray. Her husband, R&B singer Bobby Brown, had modest success but, as in the plot of the often re-made movie *A Star Is Born*, it is difficult to be married to a Mega-Star. However, perhaps because she had a fear of being divorced like her mother had been, she remained loyal to her marriage. Macdonald ends the movie with another showing of Houston's TV debut. It's calculated to make you mourn for her passing, and it works. Gary and I did, however, feel that the documentary was about 10 or 15 minutes too long, and can only give it a grade of B. **GRADE B**

WHO KILLED THE ELECTRIC CAR?: If you have a tendency toward low blood pressure, I highly recommend this documentary film as a therapeutic fix. Actually, I highly recommend it anyway. It is the sad story of how and why a highly efficient and dearly loved (by its users) automobile was not only pulled out of production, but totally shredded and sent to a dirty grave as if someone wanted to erase a chapter in automotive history. In the early 1990's much of the nation, but especially California, was choking to death in their own automobile emissions. The California Air Resources Board (CARB) adopted a Zero-Emission Vehicle mandate pressuring auto companies to produce working exhaust-free cars. The demand of CARB seemed modest: 2% of all new cars sold in California would be exhaust-free by 1998. GM responded with the EV1, a car that had incredible acceleration and speed and required only recharging to keep running. It was quiet and clean and produced a lot of happy drivers. The cars also threatened to cut into the profits from the gas guzzling polluting cars, So the auto companies sued California and won. Since all the EV1s were leased, they could be legally recalled and destroyed even though satisfied customers and fans wanted desperately to buy them. This is an issue-oriented documentary, as was Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*. If you have the opportunity, I think you will be well rewarded to work it in. **GRADE B+**

THE WHOLE NINE YARDS: There are some laughs in this comedy about a mafia hit man and his next door neighbor. Most of the laughs come from the physical comedy skills of Matthew Perry who plays Oz Oseransky, a dentist trapped in a terrible marriage. Bruce Willis is Jimmy Tudeski, a contract killer who informed on his mob bosses and is hiding out in a Montreal suburb, next door to Oz. This is a typical Willis role, and he is quite good. Rosanna Arquette, who plays Mrs. Oseransky is perfectly awful. Her attempt at a French-Canadian accent is ludicrous. Amanda Peet is Jill, the receptionist in Oseransky's dentist office. She is a contract killer wannabe, and is thrilled to learn that Jimmy the Tulip has come to town. She, too, provides a lot of the laughs. Michael Clarke Duncan, an Oscar nominee for *The Green Mile* also appears. There is a little nudity and a lot of killing. I thought it was rather amusing for a mediocre movie. Gary liked it better because it made him laugh a lot. In fact if someone better than Arquette had played Perry's wife, he might have rated it even higher. **GRADE: C+/B-**

WHY WE FIGHT: (2005 release seen on Video) Filmed during the Iraq war, this documentary dissects America's military machine. Through personal stories of soldiers, government officials, scholars, journalists and innocent victims, the film examines the political and economic interests and ideological factors, past and present, behind American militarism. It was the winner of the 2005 Sundan Grand Jury Award. Gary and I think that this documentary should be seen by everyone who cares about the future of our country. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**
Why We Fight

WICKED LITTLE LETTERS: 2024 (Available for streaming on Prime Video for \$3.99 Rental) "*Wicked Little Letters*" starts with a title card in swoopy handwriting: "*This is more true than you'd think*" *Wicked Little Letters* is remarkable for two things: being stuffed with the kind of language to make a sailor blush, and generosity to the real-life figures who inspired its story. Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley star in this black comedy loosely based on a true story. Colman plays Edith Swan, a middle-aged church lady who still lives with her controlling father and mild-mannered mother. Despite being in her 40s, she's treated like a servant and a child by her father and she is terrified by him. Buckley plays Rose Gooding, a foul-mouthed freshly arrived young woman from Ireland with a young daughter, a new boyfriend, and a love for pubs that makes her a local scandal. Someone has been sending anonymous poison-pen letters to Edith. The letters are written in language so outrageously obscene that it is practically an art form. Based on an actual historical incident, suspicion quickly falls on Rose and she is charged with a crime and arrested. It's impossible to avoid the feeling that the finger was pointed at Rose because she committed the unforgivable sin of enjoying her life. How dare she? Barb and I enjoyed the film. **GRADE B**

WIDOW OF SAINT-PIERRE: Most critics have raved about this somber morality tale. We agree that it is expertly made, but it didn't rate very high on our "enjoyment meter." The story is set in 1849. The wonderful Juliette Binoche is Madame La; her husband (Daniel Auteuil) is a Captain in the military and is in charge of the garrison on a French island off Newfoundland. When Neel Auguste (Emir Kusturica) is sentenced to death by guillotine he is remanded to the garrison prison. There is a problem, though. His execution cannot be carried out because there is neither executioner nor guillotine on the island. It is many months before the death machine can be sent by ship to Saint-Pierre, and during that time, Auguste becomes a protégé of Madame La. She puts him to work in her garden and loans his services out to various townspeople. He actually becomes a productive and valued member of the community and gains the sympathy of most of the community. This is the classic argument against capital punishment: After many months, the man you execute is a different person from the man who committed the crime. Love until death is the second theme of this movie and Madame La and her adoring husband exemplify that theme. In an interesting note, "widow" was slang for the guillotine. The movie plays like a classic novel, and there is no Hollywood ending here. I suspect that some of you will like this one better than we did. **GRADE: C+**

WIDOWS: (2018) This old-fashioned action thriller, co-written and directed by Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*) and co-written by Gillian Flynn (*Gone Girl*), is the story of four women with nothing in common except a debt left behind by their dead husbands' criminal activities. *Widows* is based on an 1983 British TV series of the same name. Set in contemporary Chicago, the movie has an abundance of unexpected twists and turns and focuses more on issues of politics, race, gender divides, corruption, and police brutality than on car chases and explosions. That always elevates the grade from my biased perspective. It doesn't need seemingly endless chases to be captivating from start to finish. McQueen dazzles the audience with an adrenaline-pumping opening and follows it with an intricately plotted crime thriller that's more about characters than explosions. *Widows* has a large perfectly cast ensemble cast filled with award winning actors: Viola Davis, Liam Neeson, Colin Farrell and Robert Duvall. One of the less well-known names was Elizabeth

Debicki who stands nearly 6' 3" and is beautiful. Oscar and Emmy winning Viola Davis skillfully leads the ensemble and brings together the women who attempt to pull off the complicated heist that was designed by her deceased husband. The four women are from different racial, social, and financial backgrounds but they work together to achieve a common goal. I prefer not to spoil it by getting into the surprise filled plot. Barbara and I enjoyed the film and were grateful for the decision not to jiggle the scenes with hand-held cameras. I am torn between grades. **GRADE B/B+**

THE WIFE: (2018) Glenn Close is brilliant as the wife of a writer who is slated to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. We see an incredible range of subtle emotions in Close's expressive face as she and her husband receive the phone call, as they travel to Stockholm and as they take part in the festivities surrounding the Nobel Prize. Emotions that become clearer as the story of their marriage, with its secrets, betrayals and mutual love, gradually unfolds. Jonathan Price is excellent as Joe, the prize-winning novelist, but it is Close as Joan, the great man's shy wife, that captures our imagination. Through flashbacks we see the younger version of Joan and Joe. Annie Starke, Close's own daughter, play the younger Joan. Along the way, we meet the couple's two children—the daughter who is about to produce their first grandchild, and the son, David, who is also a writer desperate for his father's approval. David (played by Max Irons) goes along on the trip to Sweden and we witness the stormy relationship between father and son. Christian Slater plays a writer who wants to pen Joe's biography and it his insistence that there is a buried secret in the couple's seemingly idyllic relationship that threatens to destroy their 40-year marriage. The film is set in 1993 and the script is based on Meg Wolitzer's novel of the same name. Gary and I were stunned by the performances of Close and Price, and we hope that many will get the chance to see this wonderful movie. **GRADE A**

The Wife offers viewers a chance to observe one of the finest--and most criminally underpraised--actresses of her generation working at the very top of her shrewd, subtle, superbly self-controlled game.
Ann Hornaday--Washington Post

WILD: (2014) What would make someone walk eleven hundred miles along the Pacific Crest Trail? And walk alone through desert, snow and over mountains? In Cheryl Strayed case, it was to kick start a new life. But we don't know that at the beginning of the movie. We see Cheryl (Reese Witherspoon) starting off on her walk with a pack that must have weighed a hundred pounds. As she proceeds along the trail we see what brought her there through flashbacks, some of which are no more than fleeting memories. Many of those memories have to do with her beloved mother (Laura Dern), and some involve the despair which brought her to the trail. Discovering what motivated a non-hiker to brave scorching heat, knee-deep snow, rain, rattlesnakes, the occasional wild animal, some of the human variety, is the appeal of the movie, so I don't want to spoil it for you. Cheryl's journey is a celebration of life, and Witherspoon makes it both compelling and touching. Witherspoon also produced *Wild*. She started her own production company so that she could develop movies with strong female leads. Her company's first movie was *Gone Girl*. After the announcement that a movie was to be made of Gillian Flynn's novel, book sales jumped to #1. The same thing happened with the memoir Strayed wrote about her physical and emotional journey. When asked why she chose to play Strayed, Witherspoon replied, "Well, Cheryl sent me her manuscript asking me to play her. We had a conversation: 'Do you want me to do it?' She said 'Yes, absolutely.'" Gary agrees that Cheryl's journey and Witherspoon's performance are unforgettable and well worth your time. The minus is his. I give it an A. **GRADE A/A-**

THE WILD PARROTS OF TELEGRAPH HILL: (2003 release seen on Video) Mark Bittner was a homeless musician when he first became acquainted with the flock of wild parrots that live on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. Caring for them gave meaning to his life. Through Mark and the efforts of filmmaker Judy Irving, we are introduced to his colorful companions and the relationship they share—a relationship that changed Bittner's life forever. It is amazing how individual the parrots are and how touching their stories are. This is quite a remarkable documentary, and the ending will surprise and delight you. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP!**

WILD ROSE: (2019) *Wild Rose* tells the story of Rose-Lynn, a woman on a quest to become a country music star, while also grappling with the responsibilities of being recently released from prison and being a young mother of two children. Rose wears white cowboy boots and an American flag T-shirt. On her forearm, she sports a tattoo reading, "three chords and the truth." This quote comes from a celebrated songwriter, Harlan Howard, who famously defined country music as "three chords and the truth." The film showcases the immense talent of Jessie Buckley, an Irish singer/actress, in the leading role. In a supporting role is Julie Walters playing Rose's mother. Barbara and I fondly remember Walters in a role that brought her to our attention: a 1983 movie titled *Educating Rita*. *Wild Rose* starts slow and steadily grows to a powerful and poignant ending. It is the kind of story of which country music is made. And take a package of Kleenex because director Tom Harper's and writer Nicole Taylor's gritty feel-good movie may get to you in unexpected ways. **GRADE A-/B+**

WILD TALES: (2014) Barbara and I agree that this is one of the most original, engaging, and well executed films we have seen in the past year and we have seen a ton. *Wild Tales* is actually six short subtitled stories that give us variations on the themes of outrage and revenge. That may not sound appealing, but please believe us, it is. The six fascinating tales were written and directed by the young Damián Szifron, Argentine film and television director and screenwriter. In addition to our high praise, *Wild Tales* was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film last year, and both critics and audiences have been enthusiastic, giving it an impressive 94% on the *Rotten Tomatoes* "Tomatometer." It is the highest-grossing Argentine film ever made. Sprinkled with lighthearted touches and dark humor, the stories are uniformly relevant and entertaining. Often humor and subtlety lose something when moving from one culture and language to another, but Szifron is so skilled in his writing and direction that this isn't a problem here. We can only hope our readers find a way to view this remarkable film. **GRADE A**

WILD TARGET: Seth W., FL recommended this quirky 2010 British movie with Bill Nighy as a middle-aged, solitary hit man who prides himself on his own peerless reputation for lethal efficiency. When he is hired to kill Emily Blunt because she sold a fake painting to one of his clients, he winds up acting as her protector, not her assassin. The movie is a mixture of brutality and zaniness that provides some laughs, although most critics felt it didn't provide enough laughs. Yahoo users, however, gave the film a B+. If you enjoy quirky you might get a kick out of *Wild Target*. **GRADE C+**

*You might enjoy Nighy more in the 2005 TV drama **The Girl in the Cafe**, another case of an uptight older man undone by a disastrous flirtation. If you haven't seen that Nighy film, we recommend it highly.*

WILD WEST COMEDY SHOW: In September, 2005, Vince Vaughn loaded four stand-up comics into a bus and set off on an unprecedented 30 day comedy tour. They traveled over 6,000 miles and performed 30 shows on 30 consecutive nights in 30 cities from Hollywood to the Heartland. In the documentary, Vaughn plays host and also performs improvisational sketches with surprise celebrity and musical guests. (Dwight Yoakam is one of the guests.) If you enjoy stand-up comedy you will definitely enjoy this film. We thought it was funny and interesting, and, at times, rather touching. In between snippets of the stand-up routines, we got glimpses of the comics off-stage, interacting with fans, with their families and with each other. We saw their anxiety before, and sometimes after, performances and learned how and why they became comedians. The troupe was in the South at the time of Hurricane Katrina and donated the proceeds from several of their shows to the Katrina Relief Fund. One of the most interesting off-stage events was their visit to a Katrina relief camp, where they distributed free tickets to that night's show. The four comics featured are Ahmed Ahmed, who turns his airport experiences into humor; Sebastian Maniscalco, who left his day job as a waiter to go on the tour; Bret Ernst, who is a bundle of energy and especially good at physical comedy; and John Caparulo, who we thought was the funniest of the four, in spite of his proclivity for four-letter words. In fact, if four-letter words offend you, perhaps you'd better skip this one. **GRADE B+**

THE WILDE WEDDING: (2017) After seeing *Mother!* a film that got a 69% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* and not liking it at all, we decided to see a 33% movie that a few of the critics liked. We liked it too! It is a pleasant and entertaining way to spend an afternoon at the movies. Glen Close is a movie star who is getting married for the fifth time to Patrick Stewart. Her three sons, several grandchildren, Stewart's two daughters and an ex-daughter-in-law (Minnie Driver) and several other young people who we never could keep straight, come together to celebrate the nuptials. Also invited was Close's first husband, charmingly played by John Malkovich. Gary and I especially enjoyed seeing him because we remember him from the early days of Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago. The movie is worth going to if you enjoy Malkovich, want to see Patrick Stewart with hair, and hear Minnie Driver, who is playing a rock star, sing two songs. Homemade chocolates with psychedelic mushrooms as an ingredient are passed around after the rehearsal dinner, and people get a little silly and a little wild. But the ending, which I could see coming from far away, was sweet. Our audience was mostly white-haired, and I can't imagine young people would flock to *The Wilde Wedding*, but I think most of our readers would enjoy the film. **GRADE B**

WILDLIFE: (2018) This is a bittersweet coming-of-age story and a portrait of a family in crisis that Barb and I streamed on Netflix. It is the directorial debut of 36 year-old actor turned filmmaker Paul Dano (*There Will Be Blood*) who also co-wrote the screenplay with Zoe Kazan. The film follows 14-year-old Joe, the only child of Jeanette (Carey Mulligan) and Jerry (Jake Gyllenhaal). It is based on a 1990 novel with the same title written by Richard Ford. The story is set in a small Montana town in 1960, a time when women were supposed to be ideal housewives and husbands expected to conform to their prescribed role. An uncontrolled forest fire rages close to the small town and is symbolic of the fire raging on the home front. Joe is suddenly forced into the role of an adult as he witnesses his family falling apart. Joe is played by Ed Oxenbould, a talented young actor who I predict will have a promising career in Hollywood. The film had its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. When it opened more widely it was acclaimed by critics and holds an approval rating of 93% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. It is a morally complicated film focusing on the breakdown of the family unit through the eyes of a shell-shocked son. Barbara and I were especially impressed with the standout performance by one of our favorite actors, Carey Mulligan. We both liked *Wildlife* and give it a high grade just short of an A rating. We suspect it might have had a greater impact if we had seen it on a big screen in a darkened theater. **GRADE B+**

WIMBLEDON: I'm partial to movies with a sports background and I also like romantic comedies so, when the two genres are combined, I have high expectations. Wimbledon more than met those expectations. Even though I don't play tennis, I enjoyed experiencing the Wimbledon atmosphere, and both Gary and I thought the tennis playing looked authentic. Peter Colt (Paul Bettany) is a fading British tennis star, currently ranked 119 in the world standings. He is a wild card player in the famous tournament and plans to retire after his last match. Lizzie Bradbury (Kirsten Dunst) is a hot young American star. They meet "cute" and it doesn't take long to see they were made for each other. Bettany and Dunst make a most appealing couple. The comedy is provided by Colt's unorthodox family and by Jon Favreau who is Peter's former agent. The script is literate and smart and the director keeps it light and entertaining throughout. Bettany must have played tennis because he looked good to us when serving and volleying on the Wimbledon grass courts. He is surely one of the most charming actors working today. He was memorable as Russel Crowe's imaginary friend in *A Beautiful Mind*, and as the surgeon in *Master and Commander*. He also impressed us in *Dogville*. He is a most versatile and talented actor. Sam Neill appears as Lizzie's dad. **GRADE B+**

WIN WIN: Struggling attorney Mike Flaherty is also moonlighting as a small town high school wrestling coach. Paul Giamatti brilliantly plays Flaherty. With his sloped shoulders, receding chin, and hangdog natural expression, Giamatti looks more like he belongs in an unemployment line than playing leading roles in movies. But he has had too many winners playing vulnerable losers to believe he shouldn't belong in another winner, titled *Win Win*. It is a touching, warmhearted, and ultimately poignant indie film that both Barbara and I loved. It is written and directed by Tom McCarthy who is quoted as saying in an interview, "In the game of life, you can't lose 'em all." That may not always be true, but when it comes to film making, writer/director McCarthy has 3 wins and no losses. The other two appealing films that are favorites of ours and have gained considerable critical acclaim are *The Station Agent* and *The Visitor*. McCarthy creates interesting characters and puts them in unique, compelling, and believable situations. He made several winning choices when he assembled the supporting cast for *Win Win*. At the top of my list would be the casting of Alex Shaffer as Kyle, a troubled kid who turns out to be a wrestling prodigy. A first-time actor and topnotch wrestler, Shaffer, brings authenticity to his role and to the film. Amy Ryan who was nominated for an Academy Award and Golden Globe for her performance in *Gone Baby Gone* does a fantastic job in the role of wife and mother. Filling out a memorable supporting cast is Burt Young, Jeffrey Tambor, and Bobby Cannavale. Sadly, this film may not make it to many theaters, but you will be justly rewarded if you put it on your Netflix hold list. **GRADE A-**

WINCHELL: (1998 release seen on Video in 2000) Interesting biopic of the famous columnist who is known for his powerful gossip columns and his rapid-fire delivery on the radio. Stanley Tucci won a Golden Globe for this HBO special now out on videotape. Glenn Headley also appears. Winchell was a complicated man: a hero for the way he vilified Hitler in his columns and told the truth about what

was happening to the Jews in Nazi Germany, but less than a hero for the way he fawned over Joseph McCarthy and supported the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. **THUMBS UP**

WIND RIVER: (2017) To Barbara and me, this gritty crime thriller with a grisly murder at its center is as much about the brilliant writing and directing of Taylor Sheridan as it is about the strong performances of a skilled cast and the subzero wintry landscapes that make you feel to the bone that you are in a completely different world. This is Sheridan's third screenplay, the first two being the critically acclaimed *Hell or High Water* and *Sicario*, both of which received high grades from us. (See the Archives) Sheridan, who was an actor before he became a successful writer, both wrote and directed *Wind River*. The lead in this film is filled by Jeremy Renner who blew both of us away in the Academy Award Winning film, *The Hurt Locker*. Here Renner plays Cory Lambert, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agent tasked with patrolling the snowy wildernesses of Wyoming in winter. While out hunting for a predatory mountain lion, he instead comes across the body of a young woman frozen in the snow. She had been sexually assaulted before fleeing barefoot into the night, until her lungs literally burst from gulping the subzero air. This happened on a Native American Reservation which makes it a federal crime. Enter the female lead Elizabeth Olsen, sister of the famous Olsen twins, effectively playing a rookie FBI agent who finds herself out of her depth in this dangerous sub-zero landscape in a light jacket. But I haven't told you why we would put this brilliantly made film on a "must see list." For me it is the clash of cultures and the immersion into a world I found totally new. It is a film that grabs your attention in the first scene and holds it until the final credits. It is also a thought provoking film. At the film's end we are informed that no records are kept of how many Native American women go missing each year*. I think it was no coincidence that while *Wind River* revolves around the disappearance and death of a young Native American woman, that she is largely missing from the film herself, appearing alive only in one brief flashback. The film opened in only one theater in greater Phoenix, but I hope and believe it will open more widely as word spreads. **GRADE A**

THE WINDERMERE CHILDREN 2020/2021 (Recorded on PBS) It's difficult to move forward when everyone you loved is in your past. And yet, this is exactly what was expected of a group of 300 young orphaned Jewish refugees from the concentration camps when they arrived in England in 1945. Leonard Montefiore, a prominent Jewish philanthropist, used his pre-war experience of the Kindertransport and successfully lobbied the British government to agree to allow up to 1,000 young Jewish concentration camp survivors into Britain. It was decided that the first 300 children would be brought from the liberated camp of Theresienstadt to Britain. The girls and boys were housed at the Calgarth Estate by Lake Windermere. A child psychologist and a team of counsellors were tasked with helping the children reclaim their lives. The children had lost their families and had nothing but the clothes they were wearing. For those who could remember happier times, the things they went through in the camps were horrific. For these children, who grew up in the camps, it was normal. Small wonder that when they got their first breakfast a melee ensued as the children grabbed the bread and ran to hide it. One teen said that he had survived because he was strong enough to take the bread from someone too weak to eat it. How could these young people learn to trust and live again? And yet, they did, and the friendships formed at Windermere lasted their whole lives. At the end of the movie, several old men stood by Lake Windermere and talked about their experiences there. We had seen young actors playing them as teenagers, and rejoiced to learn that their lives had flourished, thanks to the loving care they got at Windermere. We have seen a great many Holocaust films, but this one was different from every other film. In the words of one critic, the film was "Impressively devoid of sentimentality, grim in its facts, and moving in its portrait of the determined effort to rescue these young lives." **GRADE A**

WINTER SOLSTICE: (2004 Release seen on video.) This film is very slow-moving but, for me, quite affecting. Gary, however, couldn't get into it because of the slow pace. It stars Anthony LaPaglia as a Jim, a widower struggling to make a life for himself and his two teen-age sons. Older son Gabe is planning his escape to Florida, and younger son Pete has retreated into a private world of anger, drift and disappointment. Jim has no idea how to handle his sons, and it is only when a neighbor (Allison Janey) enters the picture that he is able to get some perspective. The acting is excellent and I thought the film's ending was hopeful. However, unless you really like the kind of independent films that are the darlings of film festivals, you will probably find it too slow moving for your taste. **Qualified Thumbs Down**

WINTER'S BONE: Yesterday Barbara and I saw *Salt*, a well made fast moving action thriller starring Angelina Jolie. Today we saw a well made but slow moving independent film, *Winter's Bone*, starring Jennifer Lawrence, a nearly unknown actress. The films are hard to compare, but both deserve high marks. Although this film is slow moving, it is compellingly realistic and sometimes painfully so. Shot on location in the back woods of the Missouri Ozarks, we almost expect to see moonshine stills. The stills have been replaced by meth labs, but the underlying culture, including codes of silence, are still powerful. Lawrence plays 17 year-old Ree Dolly who has problems bigger than most adults face in a lifetime. She is trying to hold together a family of two young siblings, and a mentally ill mother who has long since withdrawn from her parental duties. Her father is apparently on the run from the law and has put up the ramshackle family house as collateral for his bail bond. If he does not show up for his hearing he will forfeit the family's only hope of remaining together. In scene after scene we are mesmerized by a spectacularly talented newcomer, a seasoned supporting cast, and a few well cast locals. Only slowly do we realize we are watching a gripping crime story. There was not a lot of showy camerawork like there was in *Salt*, the big budget Hollywood thriller we saw yesterday, but this low budget film met the challenge. **GRADE: A**

WINTER'S BONE: (2010/2020) The first time we saw Jennifer Lawrence was in this 2010 movie. We gave *Winter's Bone* an A in 2010, and would probably grade our 2020 re-viewing even higher. In 2010, Gary wrote: *Although this film is slow moving, it is compellingly realistic and sometimes painfully so. Shot on location in the back woods of the Missouri Ozarks, we almost expect to see moonshine stills. The stills have been replaced by meth labs, but the underlying culture, including codes of silence, are still powerful. Lawrence plays 17 year-old Ree Dolly who has problems bigger than most adults face in a lifetime. She is trying to hold together a family of two young siblings, and a mentally ill mother who has long since withdrawn from her parental duties. Her father is apparently on the run from the law and has put up the ramshackle family house as collateral for his bail bond. If he does not show up for his hearing he will forfeit the families only hope of remaining together. In scene after scene we are mesmerized by a spectacularly talented newcomer, a seasoned supporting cast, and a few well cast locals. Only slowly do we realize we are watching a gripping crime story. I will leave it at that, except to say that we were as impressed with the film today as we were ten years ago. Both Lawrence and John Hawkes, who played Ree's uncle, Teardrop, got Oscar Nominations, along the writer/director Debra Granik for best adapted*

screenplay. (The movie was based on a novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell.) *Winter's Bone* won AFI's "Movie of the Year" award, and in their description of the film, they said that the film is part Ozarks gothic and part Shakespearean tragedy. We agree that it is the best of American independent filmmaking. **GRADE A+**

Grankik went on to direct another outstanding film, *Leave No Trace* (2018)

WISH I WAS HERE: (2014) We were enthusiastic about *Garden State* (2004), Zach Braff's first movie as writer, director and star. Therefore, despite some negative reviews, we were anxious to see his second effort, *Wish I Was Here*, and I'm happy to say we liked it. Once again, Braff's protagonist, Aiden Bloom, is an actor struggling to realize his dream. This time, he is older with a wife and two children. His patient wife (Kate Hudson) works at the local water company so that he can pursue his almost non-existent acting career. He is also dealing with a dying parent (Mandy Patinkin)—a father who is not reluctant to express his disappointment in a son who fails to be the man of the house. Josh Gad is Noah, Aiden's younger brother, a genius who lives alone in a trailer playing video games and obsessing about comic con. Needless to say, Aiden's father is mightily disappointed in Noah. Patinkin and Gad are both excellent, but we were particularly taken with Kate Hudson. We loved her as Penny Lane in *Almost Famous*, but have been disappointed in her subsequent films. Not here. Here she is wonderful. We hope it puts her career on a positive trajectory. There are some genuinely funny moments in *Wish I Was Here*, along with some touching scenes. Aiden's children are beautifully played by Joey King & Pierce Gagnon. (Gagnon is currently excellent in TV's *Extant*.) It's true that the story is sentimental and that may be its downfall with critics, who called it "achingly sincere," "maudlin," "drab and predictable." Those who wrote positive reviews called it a "funny, touching movie" and "...engrossing and heartfelt." We believe it is an excellent second movie for Braff and we look forward to his next one. **GRADE B+**

WITCH HUNT: (2009 release seen on DVD) Executive Producer Sean Penn presents and narrates this gripping indictment of the American justice system told through the lens of one small town. Over the span of a few years in the mid-1980s in Bakersfield, California, child molestations and satanic killings started spreading like wildfire according to a District Attorney who was elected on a tough—on crime platform. Dozens of innocent working class moms and dads were convicted. Their conviction were based solely on the testimony of children—children who were grilled for hours until they said the "right" thing. The convicted went to prison, some for decades, before being exonerated. Years later, when the witnesses recanted and told how they were coerced and bullied into their testimony, many of the convictions were overturned. This is a stunning example of how our civil rights are in jeopardy when power is allowed to exist without oversight. The Bakersfield District Attorney is still in office today. We saw this documentary on Cable TV, but it is available from Netflix. **THUMBS UP**

WITHOUT LIMITS: (1998 release seen on Video in 2000) Steve Prefontaine was a long distance runner who placed fourth in the 5,000-meter race at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. This 1998 biopic starring Billy Crudup as "Pre," tells the story of his brief life and his desire to not merely win races, but to test his limits every time he ran. Donald Sutherland is Pre's coach, Bill Bowerman, who later started a company to manufacture running shoes of his design. The company is called **Nike**. Robert Towne, the director, sees sports as a metaphor for life. We enjoyed this one and give it an **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**.

THE WOLF OF WALL STREET: Directed by one of Hollywood's greatest directors, Martin Scorsese, this likely Oscar contender is based on a book written by a former Wall Street stockbroker, Jordan Belfort. Playing Belfort is one of Hollywood's finest actors, Leonardo DiCaprio. Barbara and I were hesitant about going to this movie after hearing about its daunting three hour running time. I am glad we were not put off by the film's length. Scorsese, DiCaprio and an excellent supporting cast which includes Jonah Hill, Matthew McConaughey, Kyle Chandler, and Rob Reiner pump enough energy into every scene that makes the time fly by. This is an entertaining movie about despicable characters. Using illegal and unethical methods, Belfort swindled millions from unsuspecting investors by selling worthless stock. Forbes Magazine described Belfort as "a modern-day Robin Hood who steals from the poor and gives to himself." Scorsese doesn't get bogged down with investment details or financial jargon. He focuses on the drug crazed lifestyle of debauchery. Belfort, who in the beginning is a classic nice guy quickly devolves into a selfish, boorish jerk who cheats on both his wives and ignores his kids. I should warn our readers who are offended by nudity, sex scenes, or abundant profanity that this is one you may want to skip. But it is a brilliantly crafted film that will undoubtedly win numerous awards. **GRADE A**

THE WOLFPACK: (2015) The story is incredible: Six brothers locked away from society in an apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan under tight rules imposed by their father. They learn about the outside world through the films that they watch. Homeschooled by their mother, the boys have good vocabularies, although the four-letter words that populate their favorite movies—*The Godfather Trilogy*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*—also populate their conversation. The father was terrified by New York and believed he was protecting his family from harm. They rarely went outside the apartment. One year, they never went out at all. When they did venture out, all dressed in black with dark sunglasses, they looked at home on the mean streets. I doubt that anyone would have messed with them. Through interviews, home movies and by following the boys when they grew up enough to defy their father's rules, Crystal Moselle introduces us to this unusual family. I suspect the father was abusive, at least to his wife, and clearly rigid in his control over everyone. When we left the theatre, Gary commented that while the story was remarkable he felt it could have been better told. It seemed disjointed and unnecessarily fragmented. We agree with the critic who said "It's a fascinating story however you present it, but a tighter structure and a little more context wouldn't have hurt." The young men were engaging, their mother was sympathetic, and their father was mostly inarticulate. The story itself is worth a higher grade, but we were disappointed in the movie. **GRADE C+**

THE WOMAN IN THE FIFTH: (2011 release seen in 2012) We took a chance on this film showing at our Phoenix Film Festival. It stars Ethan Hawke and Kristin Scott Thomas. Hawke is a writer just out of what sounds like a mental hospital. (I'm guessing here.) He travels to Paris to be closer to his daughter and estranged wife. He takes a menial but ominous job and starts an affair with a mysterious widow (Thomas). Gary thinks this film is simply an exercise in filmmaking. As that, it's quite good with arresting visual images, great faces, and unusual camera work. As a story, however, it's more like an abstract painting: You have to fill in a lot of big holes to find any kind of meaning. As we left the theatre, I heard one woman say to another, "I guess it's anything you think it is." My reaction was, "Was any of that real?" We don't mind weird and we don't mind ambiguous, but this one is far too obtuse for us. If we had to grade it, we'd have to give it a C-. **GRADE C-** (Note: The "Fifth" refers to the 5th arrondissement, the area in Paris where the mysterious widow lives.)

WOMAN IN GOLD: (2015) This is the true story of Maria Altmann's struggle to retrieve paintings stolen by the Nazis, among them Klimt's famous painting "Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I." The woman in the portrait was Marie's beloved aunt. When the Nazis came into Austria, they seized the property of Jews and eventually sent all who could not escape to the concentration camps. Altmann did escape and came to live in Los Angeles. In 1998, she and a young lawyer set out to retrieve the painting of her Aunt, now the prized possession of an Austrian museum. Some critics thought that the movie was too simplistic and rather dull, but it is a straightforward telling of an important legal story. As Helen Mirren, who plays Maria Altmann, says in the film, "I'm doing this so people won't forget, and so young people will learn what happened." It is an important story—one nobody should forget. Mirren is, as usual, superb. It was nice to see Ryan Reynolds holding his own with the formidable Mirren. Going back to Austria forces Maria to relive not only the terrible events, but also the guilt she feels for escaping and leaving her parents behind. The legal ins and outs of the art retrieval case are interesting, though hardly exciting. However, the fully realized flashbacks scenes, especially Maria's terrifying escape from Austria, are very exciting, and Tiitana Maslany (TV's *Orphan Black*) is wonderful as the young Maria. *Woman in Gold* is not a great movie, and probably deserves a grade of B. But, Gary and I are of the generation that remembers the horrors of Nazi Germany, and we feel the movie deserves a B+. **GRADE B+**

THE WOMAN KING: (2022 Available for streaming on Netflix and Prime Video) *The Woman King* is the remarkable story of the Agojie, an all-female unit of warriors who protected the African Kingdom of Dahomey in the 1800s with skills and a fierceness unlike anything the world had ever seen. This is the first time the American film industry has dramatized this compelling story. How historically accurate is *The Woman King*? While most characters in the film were largely fictionalized, a few of its central roles were inspired by actual accounts of Agojie women. Set in the 1820s, the film stars Viola Davis as a general who trains the next generation of warriors to fight their enemies who are determined to destroy their way of life. If you choose to see this film, be prepared for explicit violence. The abundant killings include plenty of throat slitting's, stabbings, and even decapitations. Barbara and I usually avoid films like this, but it is loosely based on significant historical events that we knew nothing about. If you're wondering why the film is not just called "The Queen," it's that the people of Dahomey believe in a legend of two kings, a man and a woman who were exact equals. The film seems designed to inspire audiences and elicit cheers. For the most part, it succeeds. The Audience Score of 99% from Rotten Tomatoes is based on over 5,000 viewings. Critics liked it too with 94% on the Tomatometer based on 265 reviews. Dahomey is now known as the Republic of Benin, a small country in Western Africa adjacent to Nigeria. Dahomey was one of the most powerful states in Africa back in the 18th and 19th centuries. *The Woman King* is a first for Hollywood. It is produced by women, directed by a woman, written by a woman, and cast with predominantly black women. You might think of it as a Black African female version of *Gladiator* and try to comprehend how Viola Davis could ever have been passed over for a Best Actress Oscar nomination. Barbara and I are glad we chose to see this historical action epic that mostly women brought to the screen. **GRADE A**

THE WOMEN: In 1939 George Cukor brought *The Women*, a play by Claire Booth Luce, to the screen. It starred such Hollywood luminaries as Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell, Paulette Goddard and Joan Fontaine. It was remarkable for its day because no men appeared in the film. It was all women, and all about women. It was catty and bitchy and lots of fun. Diane English, creator of TV's *Murphy Brown*, has spent over 13 years bringing her updated version to the screen. Unfortunately, the story is a bit of a mess. It doesn't have the rapid-fire pace of the original, and English is not successful in creating characters that are compelling. The basic story is the same: Nice rich woman (Meg Ryan) finds out her husband is having an affair with a sexy slut. She handles it with help from her friends (Annette Bening, Debra Messing & Jade Pinkett Smith). We both liked Candice Bergen (Murphy Brown), who plays Ryan's mother. The other women were all OK, but except for Debra Messing, none was particularly amusing. And Meg Ryan's shaggy curly locks make my fingers itch for a comb! Gary liked it better than he expected to, but would give it only a C. (He was one of three men in the theatre when we saw it on a Sunday afternoon.) The women in the audience seemed to enjoy it and laughed frequently. We laughed occasionally. I say B-. **GRADE B-/C+**

WOMEN TALKING: 2022 (Available for streaming on Prime Video) The women in an isolated Mennonite colony discover that men have been drugging them and then repeatedly raping them while they're subdued. Some of the victims are children as young as three. After the attackers are arrested and sent to a city jail, the men of the colony travel there to get them released on bail and tell the women that they must forgive these men or they will never be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The film was inspired by actual events that occurred in a Mennonite community in Bolivia, a country in west-central South America. Canadian Writer/Director, Sarah Polley, takes us through a day of women deciding whether to "do nothing, stay and fight, or leave the Mennonite community." Because as women they have never been taught to read or write, they ask the local schoolteacher to take notes in order to have a written record of their discussions. *Women Talking* is adapted from a novel of the same name that was inspired by real events. It is a thought-provoking drama that is both timely and timeless. The film was nominated for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay Oscars and won Best Adapted Screenplay. This is a film Barbara and I highly recommend. **GRADE A**

THE WOMEN'S BALCONY: (2017) This subtitled gentle comedy was one of Israel's biggest domestic hits of all time landing five award nominations from that country's equivalent to our Academy Awards. Though the sample was small and probably biased it earned an impressive 96% from 27 American critics who reviewed it for Rotten Tomatoes. You might think of *The Women's Balcony* as a battle-of-the-sexes comedy set in a devout Orthodox community in Jerusalem where they are undergoing serious internal conflict over treatment of women in religious life. Barbara and I were not as enthusiastic as the American critics, but we often attend foreign films just to gain insight into cultures quite different from our own. This movie offers insight into day-to-day living in a loving and devout Israeli community. The women in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem are appalled when they get a strict new rabbi, a charismatic ultra-ultra-ultra Orthodox rabbi who preaches rigid gender roles that clash with their more moderate beliefs. It is a story of moderate people who are forced to deal with growing religious extremism. The women even draw from an approach dating back to ancient Greece and a 2500 year-old classic play, *Lysistrata*. While the movie is a light and predictable comedy, it makes some extremely good points about fanaticism, sexism masked as holiness, and tolerance among the faithful. We think it is a film worth seeing. **GRADE B-**

WONDER: (2017) This family film is based on a children's novel by Raquel Jaramillo, under the pen name of R. J. Palacio. Palacio wrote *the* novel after an incident where she and her three-year-old son were waiting in line to buy ice cream and saw a girl with facial birth defects*. The book has had a massive cultural impact in recent years as teachers across the country have used it as a textbook to

teach empathy in schools. What children with faces that don't look like everyone else's want most is for others to see beyond their faces. The movie stars Jacob Tremblay as Auggie Pullman, the hero of the story. Tremblay won numerous awards for his stunning performance in *Room* (2015) and he is equally impressive in *Wonder*. Covered with special makeup and prosthetics, he is able to communicate feelings beautifully. The story opens with a traumatic event for Auggie. His mother has home schooled him in the past, but now has decided that he's ready for regular school, hoping against hope that the other children will be kind. His parents are nicely played by Julia Roberts and Owen Wilson. Izabela Vidovic is marvelous as Auggie's older sister, Via. I was pleased that director/writer Stephen Chbosky kept the book format and told Auggie's story from different points of view. We thought that Via's story was especially moving. It's not easy being a planet revolving around the sun that was Auggie's place in the family. I loved the book and the movie and appreciated that, although sentimental, the director and actors did everything in their power to make the characters real and not caricatures. One of the taglines for the movie is: *You can't try and blend in, when you were born to stand out.* Gary, who did not read the book, and I agree that *Wonder* is worth a grade of B+. **GRADE B+**

Fearing he would react badly, Palacio attempted to remove her son from the situation so as not to upset the girl or her family but ended up worsening the situation.

Natalie Merchant's song "Wonder" (1995) made her realize that the incident could teach society a valuable lesson. Palacio was inspired by Merchant's lyrics and she began writing.

THE WONDER: (2022 Available for streaming on Netflix) The movie is based on a novel with the same title by Emma Donoghue, who shares credit for the screenplay with Lelio and Alice Birch. The story of *The Wonder* isn't based on real-life events but was inspired by the phenomenon of "the fasting girl," dating back to the 1500s, whereby girls would starve themselves as a form of penance. *The Wonder* is a period drama based on Emma Donoghue's novel about a fasting girl in 1862 Ireland. A young girl stops eating but remains miraculously alive and well. The film stars Florence Pugh as an English nurse who uncovers a dark secret behind the miracle. The main theme of the film: the power of belief. Florence Pugh is spectacular in this movie. She doesn't share the girl's beliefs, but uses them to save her life. The film is a slow starter, and to be honest, at the halfway point I was about to jump ship. But the pace picked up in the second half and by the end I was totally involved and happy I stayed with it. Barb and I are very close in our evaluation of this movie. I liked it only slightly better than she did. **GRADE B+/A-**

WONDER BOYS: What does a dead dog have in common with a jacket once worn by Marilyn Monroe? Not much, except that they are both plot elements in this goofy but very amusing comedy. *Wonder Boys* is based on a 1995 novel of the same name by Michael Chabon, and it was directed by Curtis Hanson who scored big with his first film, *L.A. Confidential*. Michael Douglas, looking scruffy and laid back, is Grady Tripp, an English professor who wrote a best-selling novel seven years ago, but hasn't produced anything since. Toby McGuire (*The Cider House Rules*) is James Lear, the most promising student in Grady's writing class. He is also the weirdest. The two of them have a weekend adventure that is indescribable. Frances McDormand is the chancellor of the University and Grady's lover, while Richard Thomas is her husband, the head of the English Department and the owner of the aforementioned dog and jacket. Robert Downey appears as Grady's editor. The script is literate, unpredictable, and totally entertaining. The characters are quirky and yet completely believable. **GRADE: A-**

WONDER WHEEL: (2017, streamed from Amazon Prime 2018) Written and directed by Woody Allen, this movie was not well received by critics. It earned a humbling 30% from 178 reviews counted at Rotten Tomatoes and did not do well at the box office. *Wonder Wheel* tells the story of four characters whose lives intertwine in the 1950's at the famous Coney Island amusement park. It is a tale of passion and violence with larger-than-life characters. To me it plays like a movie made in the 1950's and released as the second film in a double feature. I liked the film a little better than *Barbara*, but we both grew up with double features and are, perhaps, more tolerant than most. Allen has had a prolific career that spans more than sixty years. Despite considerable negative press when he left Mia Farrow, and married Soon-Yi Previn, one of Farrow's adopted daughters from a previous marriage, Woody has no problem putting together impressive casts. Here the four leads are played by Kate Winslet, Jim Belushi, Juno Temple, and Justin Timberlake. As one critic wrote, "Like the fairground ride for which it's named *Wonder Wheel* is entertaining but not enlightening." It may not measure up to his best films like *Annie Hall*, but the cinematography is great and streamed in a relaxed setting where you can pause it for trips to kitchen and an occasional nap, it may be worth a look. **GRADE C+**

WONDER WOMAN: (2017) Before she was Wonder Woman, she was Diana, princess of the Amazons, trained warrior and daughter of Hippolyta and Zeus. Safe on an island populated only with Amazons, Diana becomes the greatest fighter—a fighter with magical powers. Gal Gadot, who played Wonder Woman in the 2016 movie *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, is wonderful in the part. Chris Pine plays the man who is responsible for taking Diana into World War I, and he is, as usual, charming and handsome. Diana has been convinced that Ares, God of War, is responsible for the evil in the world and if she can kill him, peace will reign forever. She does eventually confront him and they have a spectacular battle. However, since Diana doesn't succeed in killing him—she merely stops WWI singlehandedly—I predict a sequel, many, in fact. David Thewlis as a British politician, Connie Nielsen as Hippolyta, Robin Wright (taking a timeout from *The House of Cards*) as the Amazon who trains Diana, and Danny Huston as an evil German, are terrific. So is the CGI. I believed that Wonder Woman could leap buildings in a single bound and deflect any ammunition thrown at her with her silver wrist cuffs. We celebrated my birthday by going to see a kick-ass female superhero, and I was not disappointed. The movie was directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, and set a dollar record for the biggest opening weekend for a film with a female director. As superhero movies go (and we don't usually go), this one is worth a B+ from us. I suspect fans of this type of movie will grade it higher. **GRADE B+**

WONDER WOMAN 1984 (2020 on HBO Max): Diana Prince (Gal Gadot) lives quietly among mortals in the vibrant, sleek 1980s -- an era of excess driven by the pursuit of having it all. Though she's come into her full powers, she maintains a low profile by curating ancient artifacts, and only performing heroic acts incognito. But soon, Diana will have to muster all of her strength, wisdom and courage as she finds herself squaring off against Maxwell Lord, whose desire for extreme wealth sends the world down a path of destruction. The artifact which causes all the damage was made by one of the Gods—the God of Lies. (Does that sound like anyone?) The artifact grants a person a wish, and Diana wishes for her long-dead lover to come back to her. The lover is Chris Pine, who is captivated by the wonders of the world of the 80s, escalators for one. Barbara (Kristen Wiig), a shy but cheerful colleague of Diana's, wishes to be like

Diana, but that doesn't turn out well for her. In the end, Max Lord has an epiphany, but that's only because he truly loves his young son. "Nothing good comes from lies," Diana tells Barbara, and that may be the lesson of this film. Kristen Wiig provides some humor and some fierce fighting, but Wonder Woman wins the day and world destruction is averted. The movie is too long at 2 hours and 31 minutes and Gary would cut some scenes drastically. But I wouldn't cut the scenes of Wonder Woman flying above the clouds. I especially liked those thrilling scenes. The ending fight is a bit ridiculous, but I agree with the critic who said, "Gadot as Wonder Woman...may be the single best piece of casting in a superhero role since Christopher Reeve first donned the cape and spandex of the Man of Steel." I'd give the movie a B, but Gary wouldn't go that high. **GRADE B/C+**

THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HENRY SUGAR: 2023 (Netflix) Wes Anderson has made movies out of four short stories by Roald Dahl--*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, *The Swan*, *The Rat Catcher*, and *Poison*. All 4 are now streaming on Netflix. **The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar** is a 39-minute adaptation, but it's the longest one of the four. The other three are 17 minutes each. Starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Ben Kingsley, it's colorful and clever. This is from a New Yorker article by Richard Brody: *They* (The Collection) make even clearer what his features have long shown: *Anderson is one of the two most original inventors of cinematic forms since the heyday of the late Jean-Luc Godard. The other is the late Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami.* Gary and I haven't always liked Anderson's movies, but give him credit for being clever and creative. Mick LaSalle said in his review of **Henry Sugar** that movies are too long these days, *that's why it's refreshing to see two major filmmakers — Wes Anderson and Pedro Almodóvar — bucking that trend by releasing short films...Rather than tailoring the artwork to some predetermined frame, they're tailoring the frame to the artwork.* We enjoyed **Henry Sugar**, although the brisk, deadpan recitation of dialogue made the film seem longer than 39 minutes, and had soporific effect on both of us. Fortunately, the stylized, artificial sets were interesting enough to keep us awake--that, and the skills of Cumberbatch and Kingsley which are prodigious. **GRADE A FOR CREATIVITY & B+ FOR ENJOYMENT**

WES ANDERSON'S SHORT FILMS: 2023 (Netflix)

The Swan: Rotten Tomatoes describes it as: *A young-adult Roald Dahl short story about a small/brilliant boy ruthlessly pursued by two large/diotic bullies.* But it has the weaker kid, the boy being bullied, winning. Not until the end, however. It starts out with 2 boys taking a gun and going to shoot birds, and ends with a white swan flying over the village. I didn't care for it because of the disturbing cruelty toward the weaker boy. It stars Ralph Fiennes and Rupert Friend.

Poison: A well-known Roald Dahl short story about a man who discovers a poisonous snake asleep in his bed. It stars Dev Patel, Benedict Cumberbatch and Ben Kingsley. (Anderson has no trouble getting A-list actors.) Ty Burr thinks **Poison** is *the weakest of the bunch*, but I don't agree. I liked it best of the three.

The Rat Catcher: It's about a garage mechanic (Rupert Friend) with a rat problem, Richard Ayoade as his neighbor/narrator, and Fiennes again, fantastically creepy as a pest removal expert who may be too close to his quarry. ("You gotta know rats if you wants to catch 'em," he says insinuatingly.) Ty Burr says: *It's not much more than a skit, but it gets under your skin and stays there.* This is the one to which Rotten Tomatoes critics gave 100%. (The other two got 92% from the critics.) But Gary and I didn't care for it. Apparently, we don't care for Wes Anderson as much as the critics on RT.

All three were characterized by brisk, deadpan recitation of dialogue and stylized, artificial sets. We didn't like the three short films as much as the longer **The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar**. Perhaps we got tired of the style. **GRADE C**

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR? (2018) When hate and fear seem to be epidemic in our world today, it was refreshing to see a documentary about a man who was all about love. **Mr. Roger's Neighborhood** was an American half-hour educational children's television series that was created and hosted by Fred Rogers. The series originated in 1963 on several East Coast channels but made its national debut in 1968 on NET, which was the forerunner of PBS. It ran until August 31, 2001, although Mr. Rogers made a special show after 9/11 to help children deal with the tragedy. During each half-hour segment, Rogers spoke directly to the viewer about various issues, taking the viewer on tours of factories, demonstrating experiments, crafts, and music, and interacting with his friends. Rogers made a point to simply behave naturally on camera rather than acting out a character, stating that: "One of the greatest gifts you can give anybody is the gift of your honest self. I also believe that kids can spot a phony a mile away." Mr. Rogers was careful to separate the real from the make believe, because he believed it was important. Many other so-called "children's programming" didn't make that distinction. He was not afraid to tackle difficult issues like death, divorce, civil rights and, after the death of Robert Kennedy, assassination. Everyone wanted to know if the person on the TV show was like that in real life. The answer is a resounding Yes! He was the truly good person he portrayed on his show and it is incomprehensible to me that there was a demonstration denouncing his tolerance of gay people at his memorial service. The thing that would have horrified Mr. Rogers the most was that the people demonstrating brought along their children. Director Morgan Neville did an excellent job of getting out of the way and letting those that knew Mr. Rogers best have their say. Gary and I were genuinely moved by Fred Roger's essential goodness, and couldn't help but contrast it with today's public discourse. **GRADE A**

THE WOODSMAN: It takes courage to make a film about a pedophile and to make him sympathetic. To play that character is a challenge for an actor. Kevin Bacon lives up to the challenge in this disturbing film. His is Walter, a man recently released from prison after spending 12 years incarcerated for molesting young girls. The only apartment he is able to rent is, ironically, across the street from a grammar school. Walter is shut down emotionally, afraid of his urges. He asks his therapist, "Will I ever be normal?" To Walter, "normal" is being able to see young girls and not have the urge to do wrong. Walter is befriended by Vickie, a co-worker (Kyra Sedwick). His only other friend seems to be his brother-in-law (Benjamin Bratt). Walter's sister refuses to see him. He is visited frequently by a hostile police officer (Mos Def). Watching Walter watch the children in the schoolyard is unsettling. When he follows a young girl, we fear the worst. Statistics are against a man like Walter changing, but when Vickie says to him, "I see something good in you," we hope that she is right. This is not for those who want a good time at the movies. The Woodsman is difficult to watch, but we think it handles a difficult subject with skill and sensitivity. It is the first film directed by Nicole Kassell, who wrote the screenplay together with Steven Fechter, based on his play. **GRADE B**

THE WORDS: (2012) **Fact:** Almost every word Ernest Hemingway wrote in the years immediately before 1922 was lost by his first wife Hadley, who packed the pages in a briefcase and lost it on a train. **Fiction:** This movie--although the writers were obviously familiar with the Hemingway story. The movie is a story within a story. A young writer who has yet to be published finds an old manuscript in a

briefcase. It's a good novel and he decides to pass it off as his own, never dreaming that the resulting book would be a critical hit and win a prestigious award. Then, he meets an old man who claims to be the author and who says that it is the story of his life in Paris after WWII. Should the writer own up to the plagiarism? What does the old man really want? These are questions to ponder after seeing the movie. The critics have generally praised the performances but criticized the screen play. We liked it better than we expected to and found ourselves discussing it afterwards. That's always a good sign. We cannot fault the performances. Bradley Cooper is the young writer and Zoe Saldana plays his wife. Jeremy Irons plays the old man and he definitely looks the part. Dennis Quaid, who opens the movie, plays the author of a book about the plagiarism. So I guess the movie is actually about a book that is about a book that is about a story. That's really more confusing than it sounds. We would like to hear from others who see **The Words**, and hope those who see it find it as intriguing as we did. **GRADE B**

WORDS AND PICTURES: (2013) I don't care what the critics say, I liked this movie. Gary did, too. While the screenplay has a couple of disjointed elements that bothered me, we agree with the Boston Herald critic who said, "The glorious leads make this work." He was right. Clive Owen and Juliette Binoche are accomplished actors, and together they are terrific. It's true that the love story is predictable, but still enjoyable. As former teachers, we liked the fact that the intellectual aspect of the movie had to do with two inspired teachers. Owen teaches honors Literature and Binoche teaches honors Art at an upscale high school. When Binoche makes an off-hand comment in her class saying that words lie and pictures tell the truth, the gauntlet has been thrown down. Owen declares war, and sets out to prove that the cliché "a picture is worth a thousand words" is hokum. As always in these romantic comedies, the two central characters are flawed. Owen has a drinking problem and Binoche is suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. She was a celebrated artist, but since RA has crippled her hands, she has not painted anything. (Binoche did her own painting in the film, and all of the paintings used in the film were her paintings.) It probably isn't giving anything away to say he gets dry and she paints again. The sentimental happy ending probably put off the critics, but it didn't keep us from enjoying **Words and Pictures**. That "enjoyment factor" is responsible for our positive grade. **GRADE B+**

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP: 1982 (I watched it on HBO Max, but it also is on Prime as a 2.99 rental) Based on a novel by John Irving of the same name, I read the book before watching the movie. I loved the book and have fond memories of the movie which I first saw in 1982. Here is the synopsis on Rotten Tomatoes: *A nurse during World War II, Jenny Fields (Glenn Close) conceives with a dying pilot and bears a boy named T.S. Garp (Robin Williams) whom she raises alone. When Garp grows up, he has some success writing fiction, but not nearly so much as his mother has with feminist-themed nonfiction. (Jenny ignites a dormant feminism, which brings her admirers and many detractors.) Rich and famous, she starts a center for troubled women, and while Garp marries Helen (Mary Beth Hurt) and has children, he remains a constant, if somewhat critical, observer of the strange community that forms around Jenny.* One character is Roberta, played with sensitivity and subtlety by John Lithgow. Roberta is a former football player turned woman. (That was in the days before trans.) That was the first time we had seen Lithgow and we have watched his subsequent career with much pleasure. The movie had garnered criticism when it first appeared and now it seems quaint. One of the Critics on R.T. said, "If you hated the book you'll loath the movie." Gary and I, however, are more kind. We loved this repeat viewing. **GRADE B+**

WORLD TRADE CENTER: Oliver Stone tells the story of two Port Authority Policemen trapped in an elevator shaft in the concourse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. There is no conspiracy theory here and no politics; just an amazing story of a day in which the world saw both incomparable evil and unparalleled heroism. It is the true story of John McLoughlin and William Jimeno, two of the last survivors extracted from Ground Zero and the rescuers who never gave up. As usual, Stone can be a bit heavy-handed but the film really worked for us. We both thought it was incredibly moving. It brought back the horror and the patriotic response we all felt that day. Nicholas Cage (McLoughlin) and Michael Pena (Jimeno) spend most of the film pinned under debris, unable to move and desperate to stay alive. Now that's acting! Oliver Stone cuts away from the trapped men to show us the agony their families are going through. We liked both Maria Bellow and Maggie Gyllenhaal as their two wives. Oliver Stone cuts away from the trapped men to show us the agony their families are going through. Stone goes a bit over the top when it comes to the character of David Karnes, the Marine who found the two trapped men. He gives him an uncharacteristic and overly melodramatic line, but after all, it's Oliver Stone. He likes his emotion a bit overwrought. That didn't spoil the film for us. We think it's worth a B+. **GRADE B+**

THE WORLD'S FASTEST INDIAN: (2005 release) I liked nearly everything about this film except the title. Although technically appropriate and certainly clever, I'm afraid the title misled many to miss this little gem of a movie. The Indian referred to in the title is a 1920 Indian motorcycle that was lovingly modified over the next few decades by Burt Munro, a New Zealander who still holds a world speed record. Burt Munro, a legend in New Zealand, is brilliantly played by Anthony Hopkins who is also a legend in his field. In the year 1967 at the age of 68, Burt competed against riders four decades younger, while using an ancient Indian held together with spare parts and mechanical genius. But the film isn't only about racing. It is a heart-warming story of an immensely likeable man played by an immensely likeable actor. I liked the film marginally more than Barbara, but we both highly recommend it. **GRADE A-/B+**

WRISTCUTTERS: A LOVE STORY: (2006) We watched this very peculiar movie on the Sundance Channel. The movie is set in a strange afterlife that has been reserved for people who have committed suicide. Patrick Fugit (**Almost Famous**), despondent over his breakup with his girlfriend, slashes his wrists. He wakes up in a weird place with a job in a pizza parlour. The landscape looks a lot like California. I recognized the Joshua Tree Forest and one scene reminded me of Death Valley. When Fugit learns that his girlfriend offed herself a few months after he did, and is looking for him, he sets off with a Russian friend to find her. Along the way, they pick up a hitchhiker who is obsessed with looking for the "People in Charge," believing she's there by mistake since she didn't kill herself, but merely overdosed by accident. Tom Waits and Wil Arnett appear briefly and we recognized several other actors. The Croatian-born director also wrote the screenplay. He has a bizarre imagination. We were interested enough to watch the entire movie just to see where the story was going. The soundtrack features songs from a number of famous suicides: Del Shannon, Ian Curtis, Nick Drake, and David Sutch. Gram Parsons, whose drug overdose is paralleled by that of the hitchhiker, is also featured. We only recommend this movie if you're partial to strange inscrutable film festival movies. **GRADE C+**

THE WRESTLER: Barbara and I agree that Mickey Rourke delivers a memorable portrayal of a burnt-out 1980s-era professional wrestler that will probably earn him an Oscar nomination. But since I liked the film marginally better than she did, I earned the honor of

writing our views. Rourke plays Randy "The Ram" Robinson, a man on the downward slope of a professional career that had a few high points in the distant past. Many in the movie business said the same about Rourke, but I hope this film will turn heads and open up a better future in the industry for this talented man. No matter how well you remember him from films like *Diner* (1982), *9 ½ Weeks* (1986), or *Barfly* (1987, you will find it nearly impossible to find that skinny boy's body inside the mass of old muscle playing "The Ram." Nearly as impressive in her role as an aging stripper is Marisa Tomei who won an Oscar for her wonderful role in *My Cousin Vinny* (1992). Tomei is 44 and I guess that would be considered old in the "exotic dancing" profession, but I have to say she still looks pretty terrific. The wrestler gives us a glimpse behind the scenes of Professional Wrestling, but ultimately it is a character study and to me a fascinating one. The high expectations we carried with us into this 1¼ hour independent film may have slightly lowered our final grade, but we still think it earns: **GRADE B+/A-**