

Movie Titles that begin with “C”

Café Society * Cake * The Cake Eaters * Calendar Girls * California Typewriter * Call Me By Your Name * The Call of the Wild * The Campaign * Can You Ever Forgive Me? * Capernaum * Captain Fantastic * Capitalism: A Love Story * Capote * Captain Corelli's Mandolin * Captain Phillips * Carnage * Carnal Knowledge * Cassandra's Dream * Casanova * Casino Jack and The United States of Money * Casino Royale * Cast Away * Catch and Release * Catch Me If You Can * The Cat's Meow * Cedar Rapids * Celebrity * Celeste and Jesse Forever * The Cell * Cellular * Center Stage * Certain Women * Cesar Shavex * Changeling * Changing Lanes * Chappaquiddick * Charlie Wilson's War * Charlie's Angels * Chef * Cheri * Chicago * The Children of Huang Shi * Children of Men * Chimes At Midnight * Chimpanzee * Chinatown * Chi-Raq * Chocolate 2000&2020 * Choke * A Chorus Line * A Christmas Story * Chuck * Churchill * Cinderella * Cinderella Man * Citizenfour * City By The Sea * City Island * City of God * The Claim * The Class * The Clearing * Clemency * Clerks II * Closer * The Closet * Closing Escrow * Cloud Atlas * Clouds of Sils Maria * Coach Carter * Coast to Coast * Cobb * CODA + Coffee and Cigarettes * C'mon C'mon * Cold In July * Cold Mountain * Cold Pursuit * Cold Souls * Colette * Collateral * The Color of Paradise * Come Early Morning * Comedian * The Comey Rule * Coming Home * The Commuter * The Company * The Company Men * The Company You Keep * Compliance * Concussion * Confessions of a Dangerous Mind * Confessions of a Shopaholic * Confidence * Connie and Carla * The Conspirator * The Constant Gardener * The Contender * Contagion * Contraband * Conviction * The Cooler * Coriolanus * The Counselor * The Count of Monte Cristo * The Countefeiters * Country Strong * Couples Retreat * The Courier * The Cove * Cowboys * Cowboys & Aliens * The Cradle Will Rock * Crash * Crazy/Beautiful * Crazy Heart * Crazy Rich Asians * Crazy, Stupid, Love * Creed * Creed II * Crip Camp * Critical Thinking * Crossing Over * Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon * The Croupier * Cruella * Cry Baby * The Cup * The Curious Case of Benjamin Button * Cyrano * Cyrus

CAFÉ SOCIETY: (2016) If you are a Woody Allen fan, as I am, you might wonder where this film would rank if you ranked his films from best to worst. Films like *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Midnight in Paris* (2011) would be near the top and films with titles you have never heard of would be near the bottom. Were it me, I guess I would rank *Café Society* well above average. But for me anything from the middle up is an Allen film well worth seeing. You may not laugh or cry in this bittersweet romance, but you will probably smile or even chuckle frequently and occasionally feel a tear forming. Barbara and I were charmed and if you are a Woody fan, I think you would like it too. If you are not, I am surprised you have read this far. Set in the late 1930's, *Café Society* is a tribute to the golden age of Hollywood when movie stars, celebrities, artists, socialites, and even gangsters represented glamour and excitement. Woody, now 80, does not appear in this film, but he wrote, directed, and narrated it. He also cast Jesse Eisenberg in the role he would have played when he was younger. Eisenberg seems well cast playing Bobby, a shy Bronx born lad who travels to Hollywood where he works as an errand boy for his Uncle Phil, (Steve Carell) who is a hotshot talent agent for a stable of stars. In the female lead is the talented Kristen Stewart. Allen never has trouble finding a strong supporting cast and this film is no exception. Steve Carell, Blake Lively, and Parker Posey are surrounded by many familiar faces. Centering on events in the lives of Bobby and his colorful Bronx family, we see him grow from an unsophisticated, but sincere romantic to a suave nightclub manager. As we left the theater, Barbara commented on how much she loved the color pallets and the flattering lighting throughout the film. Credit goes to one of Hollywood's most respected cinematographers, Vittorio Storaro. The movie contains numerous "Allenisms" — jazzy music, neurotic New Yorkers, and wonderful "one-liners." I will close with an Allen one-liner from the film that I think I will remember: "Live every day like it's your last, and one day you'll be right." Time has taught us that grading Woody Allen films immediately after viewing is unwise. They need to ferment. Right now I am torn between B and A. **GRADE B+/A-**

CAKE: (2014) *Cake* has received mixed reviews from professional critics. One reviewer referred to it as "a big performance in a small personal film," and he felt the main reason for seeing it is Jennifer Aniston. Barbara and I disagree. We concur that the movie provides a showcase for her incredible talent, but we give far higher marks for the overall film. Aniston is best known for her work in the most popular long running T.V. sitcom of all time, *Friends*, and also for her infamous failed marriage with Brad Pitt. For the most part her film career is filled with comedies, though a few show her more serious side. It comes as no surprise that Aniston is a good actress, but *Cake* offers her a meatier, more serious role than we think of her as playing. *Cake* deals with heavy issues like grief, intractable pain, addiction, and suicide, but softens it with a disarming sense of humor. Aniston plays Claire, a woman living with excruciating pain who is so hostile and abrasive that she's asked to leave her support group. We learn early on that she is a scarred victim of a horrible accident that we never witness but learn about as the backstory emerges slowly and painfully throughout the film. Honorable mention goes to Mexican actress Adriana Barraza who gives a terrific performance as a caring housekeeper, but it is Aniston's film. Her performance is so strong that Barb and I agree she should have received at the very least an Oscar nomination. It is also a travesty that the film did not receive a nomination for Best Picture. Whether or not you are an Aniston fan, you deserve to see her in a performance of a lifetime. We fear that this movie gem will not receive the attention it deserves. **GRADE A**

THE CAKE EATERS: This debut film for director Mary Stuart Masterson is out in limited release. It got a good review from our local critic and received an average grade of B+ by Yahoo viewers. It is about a young handicapped girl who wants to experience sex before she dies. We saw it last year at the Method Fest Film Festival in Calabassas, CA and thought it was very well done. Here's what we wrote in last year's April issue: *The Cake Eaters*: Directed by Mary Stuart Masterson and starring Bruce Dern, Elizabeth Ashley and Kirsten Stewart. It was a good story with interesting characters. Stewart was outstanding playing a young girl with Fredreich's Ataxia, a rare inherited disorder than affects the nervous system. A good film with an unfortunate title. **GRADE B+**

CALENDAR GIRLS: What fun this movie is. Any woman of a certain age is going to love it. Calendar Girls should lift her spirits and lower her neckline. Helen Mirren and Julie Walters recreate the events of 1999 in the small town of Rylstone, North Yorkshire, England. Every year the Rylstone Women's Institute creates a calendar to raise money for charity. This year Chris (Mirren) and Annie (Walters) decide the calendar should honor Annie's husband, John, who had recently lost his fight with Leukemia. John was fond of saying that the flowers of Yorkshire were like the women of Yorkshire, most glorious in their last phase. The two women decide that the best way to honor John is to do a nude calendar with themselves and their friends as models--women in their last phase. The movie provides some obstacles, mostly in the form of the local Association president, but I understand that in real life, everyone thought it was a grand idea.

The calendar gets made and is such a smash hit that the women are invited to appear on the Tonight Show. To date, the Calendar has raised over 500,000£ for Leukemia research. The taking of the calendar pictures provides most of the laughs in this delightful movie. There are also some touching moments. Most importantly, Chris, Annie, and their friends make being in your fifties and sixties look truly glorious. God bless them for that! **GRADE: Somewhere between B+ and A**

CALIFORNIA TYPEWRITER: (2017) Ostensibly this film is an entertaining documentary about people who love typewriters, but, to be fair, it is much more than that. Director Doug Nichol told an enthusiastic audience at the Telluride Film Festival that he started out to make a documentary about a small, struggling typewriter repair shop in Berkeley, Calif. But the canvas gradually expanded to a rich and rewarding cinematic essay on what the demise of the typewriter might tell us about our changing civilization. As one critic writes, "*California Typewriter* is a love letter to an antiquated device - one that retains its charm and utility even in the digital age." There is, of course, nostalgia as well as history and an interesting link to creativity. It received an impressive 100% from the first 22 critics on the Tomatometer. The film features a number of talking heads the most familiar being Tom Hanks who owns over two hundred typewriters and gives them as gifts to any of his friends who show an interest and Sam Shepard, award winning author who wrote all his 44 plays on a typewriter. Nostalgia has brought back an interest in vinyl records, perhaps typewriters which are no longer manufactured anywhere in the world will stir a renewed interest. Barbara and I enjoyed the documentary, but felt that a rewrite that reduced the length to about an hour and a half would have improved it. The filmmakers forgot the wise advice to entertainers, 'Leave the audience wanting more.' **GRADE B**

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME: (2017) This is a beautifully photographed movie about a summer spent in a Northern Italy villa that made me want to travel there immediately. The swimming hole, the languid summer days, and the slow-burn love story combine to create an atmosphere that is sensual and wonderfully appealing. Unfortunately, for us, the pace of the film was too languid, and while we appreciate the acting and the beauty of the setting, we wished frequently they would just get on with it. We may be in the minority, though, because critics and audiences alike give it high marks. Elio is a teenager spending the summer in the villa with his father and mother. Every summer, his father, a professor of Greco-Roman culture, invites a graduate student to visit and assist him in his work. The summer of the movie, the visitor is a handsome American named Oliver who is working on his doctorate. The budding friendship between Elio and Oliver is slow to develop. They spend the sun-drenched days riding bicycles through the village and the countryside, swimming, eating and drinking and doing a lot of reading. I'm not sure what the time period is, but it was obviously before cell phones and I-pads, because the characters read real books. We appreciated the acting skills of Timothée Chalamet who played Elio as a precious 17-year-old who doesn't quite know how to handle his lust and sexuality. Armie Hammer is perfect as the handsome American. Gary said that the only scene that he found outstanding was the talk between Elio and his father, touchingly played by Michael Stuhlbarg. That scene occurs near the end of the movie, and Gary said that, good as it was, it wasn't worth the wait. We agree with Clint O'Conner (*Beacon Journal/Ohio.com*) who said, "*It is pleasant enough, as a character study of Elio, but it doesn't offer much in terms of dramatic payoff.*" I grade it a bit higher than Gary does. **GRADE B-/C**

(Warning: The movie might make you think differently about apricots.)

THE CALL OF THE WILD: (2020) Starring Harrison Ford, this Action Drama is based on a beloved literary classic by prolific essayist and author Jack London, published in 1903. Barbara and I both remember it as required reading in high school back in the 1950's and I have heard kids are still reading it in many schools today. The story clearly has appeal, given that it's been adapted into one silent film and four talkies with Clark Gable (1935), Charlton Heston (1972), Rutger Hauer (1997), and now Harrison Ford (2020) playing the lead. Ford is nothing less than believable playing a grumpy frontiersman in a frigid Alaskan wilderness. He also doubles as narrator. One thing is different in the latest version. The dog, Buck, and in fact all the animals in the film are the product of CGI, which stands for computer-generated imagery. Considering the backlash Disney would have received if they used a real dog- making it swim down waterfalls and under icebergs—the use of digital effects seems like the right call. The animals look very real. The problem is that Disney created not only a realistic CGI dog, he also gave us an unrealistic anthropomorphized dog. As we left the theater, Barb gave me her one sentence review: "*too much Disney and too little Jack London.*" An L.A. reviewer put it this way: "It's got some thrilling moments, but it has way too many cheesy moments." I agree with them both. I wanted the film to bring back my school feelings of excitement. It didn't. **GRADE C**

THE CAMPAIGN: How does one satirize something that is already so far over the top that it looks like a full-fledged satire. This crude, but often funny, 1 hr. 25 min. political satire runs mercifully shorter than the current mud-slinging campaigns on which it is based. The Campaign pokes fun at candidates being bought by billionaires as well as how campaign managers take over a candidate's life. It is often vulgar, cynical, and mean-spirited and it may be exactly the movie we deserve as this election heats up. But before my cleats get too high, let me confess that Barbara and I laughed a lot with our occasional groans. Comics Will Ferrell and Zach Galifianakis work well together playing Cam Brady a long-term congressman seeking reelection and Marty Huggins an unlikely challenger to his seat. John Lithgow and Dan Aykroid play the super-wealthy Motch brothers, thinly veiled facsimiles of the Koch brothers. Dylan McDermott plays a cutthroat campaign manager hired by the Motch brothers to buy another politician and add to their staggering wealth at the expense of the community. I feel pretty confident that none of our readers will go to this movie expecting enlightenment, but if you don't mind "crude" and you enjoy the humor of Will Ferrell, this may well provide a respite from this interminable election year. **GRADE C+**

CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?: If you are familiar with Melissa McCarthy only from her work in comedy such as *Mike & Molly* on TV or *Bridesmaids* in film, you will probably be surprised at how effectively she plays more serious or darker roles. In *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, a film that drew raves at Telluride and Toronto film festivals, McCarthy plays Lee Israel, a real-life author who died in 2015. When Israel found she was unable to get her writing published because she had fallen out of step with the marketplace, she turned her skills to forging letters "written" by Dorothy Parker, Noel Coward, and other celebrities, and selling them to collectors for cash. Israel was such a talented writer and such a fan of the authors in question that her fakes come across as genuine and believable. Critics loved this movie and especially the work of McCarthy. Some think McCarthy will be in contention for an Oscar. Also turning in a great performance was Richard E. Grant playing her partner in crime and only friend with the exception of her cat. **GRADE B+**

Lee Israel's book is titled *Can You Ever Forgive Me?: Memoirs of a Literary Forger*

CAPERNAUM: (2018) Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and one of the five films nominated for a foreign film Oscar this year, this subtitled movie tells the story of Zain, a 12-year-old Lebanese boy who sues his parents for the "crime" of giving him life. *Capernaum* was made in the slums of Beirut with a cast of non-professionals playing characters whose lives closely parallel their own. The performances are nothing short of terrific. Directed and co-authored by Nadine Labaki who tells the heartbreaking story of poor children in her home country. Labaki chose the title "*Capernaum*" because the word was often used to mean "chaos" in French literature and one dictionary I consulted defined it as "a confused jumble." That's precisely what she presents to us, with passion. She gives us a powerful and devastating look at the miserable existence of poor children in Beirut. They are not so different from thousands of poor and forgotten children the world over who deserve so much more from life than they are destined to have. Barbara and I cannot pretend it was an easy movie to watch, but it tells an important story that that needs to be heard. Although it is set in the depths of a society's inhumanity, *Capernaum* is ultimately a hopeful film that stirs emotions deeply as it cries out for action. I also must mention that the authors and director sprinkled the film with a welcome sense of humor. It is difficult to put a meaningful grade on such a film. I cannot give it less than an "A" but realize that an "A" on a foreign film is quite different from an "A" on a Hollywood movie. **GRADE A**

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC: (2016) The worst thing about this film is the title. It reminds me of movies I have hated. I nearly avoided the film based on an irrational prejudgment. When I read that it was a story about a protective and loving father, and his well-intended method for raising his children in a non-conventional way, I wavered. Then when I learned that Viggo Mortensen plays the father and Frank Langella is in the cast, my mind was made up. Earning a favorable review from a respectable 75% of professional critics, the movie was even better liked in a poll of nearly 4,000 audience members. With elements of humor and heartbreak, the movie invites us to examine our own culture as well as a more rugged existence deep in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Ben (Mortensen) and his wife decided to homeschool their six children. They would read the best literature, learn to appreciate the best classical music, have mastery of science, math, history, and philosophy at levels exceeding what they would get in public or private schools. They would also learn to fish, hunt, and survive in an indescribably beautiful, but harsh environment. As the story unfolds, we learn that the wife has been hospitalized and all the parenting has fallen to Ben. The children, now ranging from 5 years to 18 years, are extraordinary. The plot thickens when notice of the mother's death arrives. A decision is made which will force us as well as the family to compare the counter-culture with what we might regard as the "real world." Barbara and I agree that this is an interesting film that is well above average, even though it might not reach the A range. **GRADE B**

CAPITALISM--A LOVE STORY: A curious title for independent filmmaker Michael Moore's latest documentary. Twenty years ago Moore gave us *Roger & Me* in which he told how General Motors undid his hometown (Flint, Michigan). He went on to write, direct, and produce films about gun control, the handling of the Iraq War, and health care. In this film he examines an economic system most Americans believe is the best in the world. As I watched this film, I realized I carry two images of capitalism: one I learned in school in the 1940's, 50's and 60's and one that has gradually formed as corporate deregulation and unfettered greed has led to enormous numbers of people in the middle and working class losing their jobs and often their homes. The richest one percent of Americans now hold more wealth than the bottom 95 percent combined. Deftly moving from pathos to humor, Moore gives us a film that both informs and entertains. For me, one of the most memorable segments shows us never before publicly viewed film footage of Franklin Roosevelt calling for a Second Bill of Rights for Americans. His words were put on film less than a year before his death. Sadly, the rights he calls for have never been achieved. Permit me to end this review with a prediction: If your politics and view of history leads you to have higher regard for Ronald Reagan than for Franklin Roosevelt, you will probably avoid this film or will be highly critical of it. Barbara and I agree that it is difficult to evaluate documentary films using the same criteria used on films in other genres. And politically charged films are even harder to evaluate. Even so, we were both impressed by this film and award it relatively high marks. Mine is slightly higher than Barb's. **GRADE A-/B+**

CAPOTE: Truman Capote was an incredibly complicated man and a brilliant and completely self-absorbed writer. He was a fixture on the New York party scene and was as well known for his high-pitched, lisping voice, outrageous manner of dress, and wild fabrications about acquaintances and events as he was for his literary output. (from Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia.) In November, 1959, the town of Holcomb, Kansas became the scene of a brutal massacre. Four members of the Clutter family were murdered in their home. Capote became interested in the story and, with his childhood friend, Harper Lee, traveled to Kansas for the purpose of researching an article for *The New Yorker* magazine. He soon realized that the story was too big for an article and decided to write a book. When Perry Smith and Dick Hickock were arrested for the murders, he became fascinated with Smith. The two men were sentenced to death, but Capote needed time to gather material for his book. He hired an attorney to file an appeal for Smith and Hickock, thereby postponing their execution. That gave him the time needed to befriend Smith and use that friendship to gain insight into the man and the murders. The book that resulted, *In Cold Blood*, made Capote a world-famous author. Philip Seymour Hoffman doesn't just play Truman Capote, he becomes Capote. That he is able to play a supreme narcissist who will sacrifice anything for his work, and make him achingly human is a testament to his skill as an actor. His performance is definitely worth an Oscar nomination and should not be missed. Catherine Keener is Harper Lee, Clifton Collins Jr. is Perry Smith, Bruce Greenwood is Jack Dunphy, Capote's longtime companion, and Chris Cooper is Alvin Dewey, the Kansas agent in charge of the case. Hoffman's performance is an A+. Because the film's measured pace sometimes seems too slow, we rate the film at B-. However, since Capote, the man, is Capote the film we give it a B+. **GRADE B**

CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN: If watching the movie, *Enchanted April* made you want to rent a villa in Tuscany, then watching this film will make you long for a vacation in the Greek Isles. The WWII love/war story is set on the Greek Island of Cephalonia, and the scenery is magnificent. We can understand why most critics think the scenery is the best thing in the movie. The *New York Times* reviewer thought the script was "plodding," and some critics thought the love story lacked chemistry. Almost all the critics I read hated the accents. However, the accents didn't bother us and we thought the love story was convincing. The story did plod a bit at the beginning, but once we got into it, we quite enjoyed it. Nicholas Cage is Captain Corelli, an Italian soldier who is sent to occupy Cephalonia, along with a contingent of German soldiers. He and his squad have never been in battle, and they seem to prefer singing and drinking to fighting. Penelope Cruz is Pelagia, the beautiful daughter of the local doctor. John Hurt is the second best thing in the movie: He gives Dr. Iannis great dignity and wisdom. Pelagia is betrothed to a local fisherman who is now fighting with the Greek resistance, but she falls in love with Corelli in spite of the fact that he is "the enemy." When the Italian Army surrenders to the Allies, the

Italian soldiers on Cephalonia are ordered to surrender their arms to the Germans. And that's when the real trouble begins. There are some stirring pyrotechnics in a vigorous, though confusing, battle scene and also in an earthquake scene. (Life on Cephalonia is not as peaceful as it looks!) Roger Ebert didn't care for the movie, but he was very fond of the 1994 novel from which the screenplay was taken. When you love a book, you often don't like the movie: Too many details and wonderful characters have to be eliminated. The movie did make me think I might like to read the book. We give it a **B. GRADE B**

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS: The tension in this film about the hijacking of a cargo ship by Somali pirates is off the charts. Tom Hanks is terrific as Richard Phillips the man in charge of the Maersk Alabama, a cargo ship traveling through the Indian Ocean when it was taken over by four young pirates. The jerky hand-held camera work, irritating at first, ultimately contributed to the dramatic tension. While some details have been changed, the story is remarkably true to the facts of this real-life hijacking--the first successful pirate seizure of a ship registered under the American flag since the early 19th century. The pirates take Captain Phillips hostage aboard one of the container ship's lifeboats. For several harrowing days he lived in constant fear for his life. Our country responds with a Navy warship and a contingent of Navy Seals who affect a daring rescue. Even though we knew that Phillips survived the ordeal, it was still a nail-biting experience under the skilled direction of Paul Greengrass (*United 93*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*) and the remarkable acting of Hanks. In addition, the pirates, all on screen for the first time, were outstanding. Barkhad Abdi plays Muse, the captain of the pirates. Born in war-torn Mogadishu, Abdi and his family eventually made their way to Minneapolis where the young Somali finished high school and enrolled in the University of Minneapolis. When he heard about an open casting call for the movie, he and three friends went to the tryouts. Although he had never even thought about acting, he was a fan of Hanks and decided to give it a whirl. Expecting to be cast as extras, Abdi was astonished to learn he had won the part of the pirate captain, and his three friends were cast as his crew. Their performances have garnered enthusiastic praise from critics. For those interested in a first person account of the hijacking, you might want to read Richard Phillip's book, *A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs, and Dangerous Days at Sea*. **GRADE A**

CARNAGE: (2011) Barbara and I recently saw a well performed stage production of *God of Carnage* on which this film is based. Consequently it will be difficult to be totally objective. I had high expectations given an ensemble cast with four talented stars: Jodie Foster (*Silence of the Lambs*), Kate Winslet (*Titanic*), John C. Reilly (Chicago), and Christoph Waltz (Inglourious Bastards). Directed by the now infamous Roman Polanski (*Rosemary's Baby*, *Chinatown*, *The Ghost Writer*) how could it miss. Well, it didn't really miss. For me, it just wasn't a direct hit. Two couples meet to have a civil discussion about a playground fight between their children that left one boy with two damaged teeth. The 79-minute film, which starts with a thin veneer of civility soon devolves into effective zingers, revealed truths, and changing alliances that is reminiscent of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. There is yelling, tears, and even vomiting. It leaves one with the not so subtle question: who is more savage, the kids or the parents? *Carnage* isn't uninteresting. I just think that a movie based on a play that won a Tony for best play of 2009 should have been better. I grade it marginally higher than Barbara. **GRADE C/C+**

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: (1971 Available for streaming on Prime Video) "Carnal knowledge" was for years a legal and commonly used euphemism for sexual intercourse. It was also the title of a low budget 1971 popular movie that became, in polite society, the film everyone hated, but everyone had to see. It was produced and directed by Mike Nichols, written by Jules Feiffer, and starred Jack Nicholson, Art Garfunkel, Ann-Margret, Candice Bergen, and Rita Moreno. The script was originally written as a play but when Jules Feiffer sent it to Mike Nichols, Nichols thought it would work better as a film. The script contains language which was rarely heard on the screen before this time. Many critics deemed the language too strong, and the film was so controversial that one theater manager was actually convicted for "distributing obscene material." The conviction was upheld by the Georgia State Supreme court. Ultimately the case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court where it was ruled that the movie was not obscene. If you only like films in which you can identify with one of the screen characters, this may not be the film for you, but it is historically significant. **Carnal Knowledge** is a coming-of-age portrait of masculinity and male sexuality in the post-World War II culture. It follows the sexual thoughts and exploits of two Amherst College roommates, Sandy (Art Garfunkel) and Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) over a 25-year period, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. Sandy idolizes women and wants an intellectual girlfriend while Jonathan is more interested in a woman's physical attributes defined by her bust size and figure. The film is in three parts. In Part I Sandy and Jonathan are college roommates. Part II follows the men several years after college and part III when the men have become middle-aged. Critics were all over the map on this film as exemplified by two of the best, collectively known as Ebert & Siskel. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times gave the film four stars out of four and called it clearly Mike Nichols' best film. Siskel gave it only two-and-a-half stars out of four and called it a one-note story. Barbara and I were motivated to see this fifty-year-old film because we recently listened to an audiobook titled "Mike Nichols, A Life", written by Mark Harris. It has a fascinating chapter on the making of **Carnal Knowledge**. We liked the audiobook and we also liked the movie. **GRADE B+**

CASSANDRA'S DREAM: (2008) This is a Woody Allen film we missed last year. It is a morality tale about two brothers who, in an attempt to better their lives, commit a heinous act. Ewan McGregor and Colin Ferrell play the brothers who react to what they have done in decidedly different ways. We both thought Ferrell was particularly good. The film is dark and unsettling, but the acting is terrific. If you like Allen's character studies, you might enjoy this one. **THUMBS UP**

CASANOVA: If asked to compile a list of the most widely recognized proper names in the English language, "Casanova" would have to be high on the list. It would be rare to find anyone living today who has read the autobiography of Giacomo Casanova (1725-1798), but it would be equally rare to find anyone who does not recognize the name and associate it with sexual excess, sexual compulsiveness, or sexual conquest. For over two hundred years the escapades of Casanova have titillated the imagination of writers and readers. The 2005 movie of that title is inspired fantasy. It puts a comic twist on Casanova's life and results in a playful romp through eighteenth century Venice. Heath Ledger (Brokeback Mountain) effectively plays the title role, and Sienna Miller is lovely as the woman who captures Casanova's heart. Also worth mention are Lena Olin, Jeremy Irons, Charlie Cox, and the funny and always excellent Oliver Platt. Lasse Hallström (The Shipping News, Cider House Rule, An Unfinished Life) is the director. For us, it was a solid B movie. **GRADE B**

CASINO JACK AND THE UNITED STATES OF MONEY: Academy Award winner Alex Gibney has done it again. After giving us *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) and award winning *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2008), he gives us another documentary that will be seen by depressingly few people. Jack Abramoff is a name most Republicans and some Democrats would like to forget. He is finishing out a four-year prison term after pleading guilty to fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe public officials in 2006. Now disgraced, Abramoff was once the most powerful lobbyist in Washington. It comes as no great surprise that money buys power and influence in government, but the scope of arrogance, greed, and corruption chronicled in this film is breathtaking. When Abramoff heard Gibney was making this film, he scoffed, "No one watches documentaries." I would like to be optimistic, but I fear he is right. **GRADE B/B-**

CASINO ROYALE: See Bond run. Run, Bond, run. Daniel Craig does a lot of running in this latest Bond film, and he is very good at it. In fact, he's good at everything "Bondian." In this film, James has just earned his double O status and is on his first mission. He's a younger Bond than we are used to seeing, but he is Bond through and through. Ever since I saw him in 2004's *Layer Cake*, I have been a Daniel Craig fan. His appearances in *Munich* and *Infamous* increased my admiration for his acting ability. This film proves he can fight and womanize with the best of them. He is a tougher Bond—a man who looks like he doesn't give a damn if his martini is shaken or stirred. And when he fights, he actually bleeds. I know there was a lot of controversy when it was announced that Craig was chosen out of 200 actors to play Bond. I think this film will silence the dissenters. According to U.S.A. Today, "Except for his blond mane, new James Bond star Daniel Craig is closer to Ian Fleming's original physical description of British Secret Agent 007 than others who have played the part." The Danish actor, Mads Mikkelsen, makes an interesting villain, and Eva Green is not your typical Bond girl. She is smart and definitely worthy of Bond's affection. I'm glad that the Bond movies don't sacrifice plot for impossible stunts and explosions. (Although there are some thrilling action scenes.) I'm glad they kept Judi Dench in the role of "M." I'm glad we saw a tender side of James. But most of all, I'm glad that Daniel Craig is playing Bond, James Bond. **GRADE B+**

CAST AWAY: We walked out of this film marveling at the ability of Tom Hanks to become invisible in any role that he undertakes. He is such a familiar actor, and yet here we completely accept him as Chuck Noland, a workaholic manager for Federal Express. I'm sure you have seen the ads for this movie and realize that Noland is the only survivor of a plane crash. He washes up on the shore of a deserted island and must learn to survive with only the help of some Federal Express packages that wash up on the same shore. It is on the island that Hanks and the movie excel. With no one to talk to, Noland creates a friend named Wilson. Wilson is volleyball, and yet he becomes another character for us as well as for the castaway. Many critics have been disappointed with the ending of this film, and we can understand why. The final scenes are manipulative and ultimately unsatisfying. I also thought that the pace of the final scenes was too slow, and I wish the last scene had been more ambiguous. In addition, I was a bit confused by the opening scenes, and, since I knew what was coming, I kept waiting for the crash. The crash itself was not disappointing. It is a terrifying and wonderful crash! We also decided that Helen Hunt was not the right actress for Kelly Frears, the girl who loved Noland, mourned his "death," and moved on with her life. We sensed no chemistry between Hunt and Hanks. (Sounds like a vaudeville duo, doesn't it?) Hunt is in real danger of being overexposed. She was good in her TV show, but I don't think she is right for some of the movie parts she has had recently—especially this one. A better choice would have been Laura Linney or Tea Leoni—in other words, a better actress. Robert Zemeckis, who teamed with Hanks on *Forrest Gump*, directed *Castaway*. Gary was bothered by the ending even more than I, hence his grade of B-. **Grade B/B-**

CATCH AND RELEASE: When you go to a romantic comedy film, you have to expect some schmaltz. Yes, this movie does have a bit of schmaltz, and it has a happy ending—but isn't that what romantic comedies are all about? We both enjoyed *Catch and Release*, and we don't know why the critics have been so hard on it. The movie has a lot of charm, some unpredictable moments and some clever dialogue. It is both tender and amusing. The Los Angeles Times reviewer said it was "neither a comedy nor a drama but existing in that comfortable space in between." Jennifer Garner is lovely as Gray, whose fiancé, Grady, dies just before their wedding. In her grief, she turns to Grady's best friends. Before long, Gray learns that Grady was not exactly the man she thought he was, and she has to deal with the secrets he kept. Timothy Olyphant* (TV's *Deadwood*) displays real star quality as Fritz, a documentary filmmaker who comes from Los Angeles for the funeral. Kevin Smith, who you may remember as Silent Bob in the *Clerks* movies, is one of Grady's friends. Smith is a large man—huge, in fact—but he's also hugely funny and appealing. Juliette Lewis, as one of Grady's secrets, and Fiona Shaw as Grady's grieving mother, are both excellent. Cynical critics called the film "...forgettable serio-comic blather," "bland," and "banal," but we thought it was thoroughly likeable. **GRADE B**

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN: Frank Abagnale Jr. practiced medicine without attending medical school, practiced law without a law degree and passed as a pilot without attending flight school. And—he did it all before he was 19. Steven Spielberg brings Abagnale's remarkable story to vivid life in *Catch Me If You Can*. Leonardo DiCaprio's performance as Abagnale is, in the words of the New York Times, sensational. We agree. Also impressive is Tom Hanks as Carl Hanratty, the FBI agent who doggedly pursues Abagnale and eventually brings him to justice. We see enough of Abagnale's family life to understand why he became such an accomplished imposter. As Hanratty says to him near the end of the film, "Sometimes it's easier to live the lie." The graphics behind the opening credits are great fun and help set the mood for this entertaining film. Christopher Walken, who has made a career by playing strange often evil men, appears here as Frank Abagnale Sr., and his delightful, sly performance is one of his best. Martin Sheen appears in a small role as does Jennifer Garner (TV's *Alias*). We saw the film with two Movie Viewer friends, Carl and Joanna S., Phoenix, AZ. They, too, enjoyed the movie and both would give the film an A. I'll say A-, only because a movie has to really blow me away to get an A. Gary agrees. **GRADE A**

THE CAT'S MEOW: In November of 1924, the publishing giant William Randolph Hearst invited some guests to join him on his yacht, *Oneida*. His mistress, Marion Davies was on board, along with Charlie Chaplin, gossip columnist, Louella Parsons, writer Elinor Glyn, movie producer Thomas Ince, and miscellaneous friends. The cruise proved fatal to Thomas Ince who was taken off the boat in grave condition and died a few days later in his own home. Did Hearst shoot him? Did he die of a heart attack? No one knows. The Police never questioned anyone about his death and no one on board the yacht during the cruise ever talked about it. But there were plenty of whispers and rumors. Peter Bogdanovich weaves his film around one plausible scenario—"the whisper heard most often." Watching these celebrities at play is a way for Bogdanovich to give us an idea of what Hollywood was like in the 1920s, when movie celebrities

could do pretty much anything they wanted. We thought Herrmann and Dunst were especially good as Hearst and Davies. Likewise Eddie Izzard as Charlie Chaplin. Jennifer Tilly gives an interesting performance as Louella Parsons, who, it is rumored, my have witnessed Hearst shoot Ince. The price of her silence was a lifetime contract with Hearst Publications. We particularly enjoyed Joanna Lumley's portrayal of Elinor Glyn. Her wry narration is the best thing in the film. I thought this one got off to a rather slow start, but it picked up quite a bit when the murder occurred. Both Gary and I put this one in the B to B- range. **GRADE B/B-**

CEDAR RAPIDS: Ed Helms is very good as Tim Lippe, an insurance agent from a small town in Wisconsin. He's a small-town guy and a bit of a dork, but he's also straightforward, honest and rather sweet. He makes *Cedar Rapids* entertaining. The movie has been promoted as a raunchy comedy, but Gary thinks it's really raunchy-lite. Although there is occasional frat boy humor, there is an underlying sincerity that is refreshing. The movie is about a nice guy who finds out that the insurance business isn't quite the honorable profession he thought it was. Along the way, this small-town guy has some big city experience in the metropolis of Cedar Rapids. Arriving in the big city for an insurance convention, he first meets Ronald (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.) and Dean (John C. Reilly). Both are fellow insurance agents and roommates for the convention. Anne Heche is especially good as an insurance agent who uses the annual convention as a way to escape from her regular life. Sigourney Weaver is amusing as the older woman in Tim's life. We both liked Cedar Rapids and if you see it, we suggest that you stay through the closing credits. You'll be glad you did. **GRADE B**

CELEBRITY: (Seen on video) In this latest from Woody Allen, Kenneth Branagh plays Woody's role. As is typical with a Woody Allen film, you have a series of scenes populated with well-known names. Judy Davis has what might be called the lead role. She is an Allen favorite and no one plays nervous depression better than she does. Celebrity is shot entirely in black and white, an affectation that Allen actually pokes fun of in the movie. If you like Allen's films, you'll probably enjoy this reasonably pleasant effort. **THUMBS UP**

CELESTE AND JESSE FOREVER: When the couple you meet at the beginning of the movie is already separated and going through a divorce, you know this isn't your typical Romcom. There is no "meet cute" and no ridiculous hurdles for the couple to jump through until the inevitable clinch. Instead, there's a couple who are best friends trying to maneuver the path to divorce and starting over. Rashida Jones and Will McCormack partnered on the screenplay. They dated for a while in the past, but discovered they worked better as friends—tight friends. (McCormack appears in the movie as the couple's drug-dealing friend.) They probably borrowed from their actual relationship to write this script which is, in its better moments, insightful and real. However, the script is not as good as the two who play Celeste and Jesse. We expected Jones to be good, but were pleasantly surprised that Andy Samberg, who we knew mostly from SNL, was equally effective in his role. Celeste and Jesse met while in college and continued to play their youthful and frequently silly games into their marriage. When Celeste becomes successful, she waits impatiently for the unambitious Jesse to grow up. When he doesn't, she initiates the separation. Their friends don't understand how they can continue to be best friends, seeing each other every day, while getting a divorce, but to them, it's natural. But when it looks like Jesse is starting to move on, Celeste begins to regret her decision. We enjoyed this unconventional romantic comedy. It began and ended well and, although it slowed a bit in the middle, we nevertheless think it deserves a B. **GRADE B**

THE CELL: Gary wanted to see this film because Ebert thought it was one of the year's best. He was disappointed. A ridiculous story and bizarre visual images added up to a C movie for him. I agree that the story is ridiculous: a child therapist, who can enter the mind of a coma patient, enters the mind of a serial killer to try and locate his current victim before she dies. The science is definitely fiction and that is not our favorite genre. However, I was impressed with the stunning visual imagery and feel the movie is worth a B. The imagery takes precedence over the story. I regretted that we never learn much about the central characters. Jennifer Lopez is the therapist and Vince Vaughn is an FBI agent. Vincent D'Onofrio is the warped serial killer. **GRADE: B/C**

CELLULAR: Everywhere you look today people are talking on cell phones. Cellular technology has transformed the way we communicate. It's not surprising that an enterprising writer made cell phones the basis for a movie. This is a tightly plotted, exciting and reasonably plausible thriller. A young man receives a call on his cell phone from a woman he doesn't know. She tells him she has been kidnapped and begs for his help. When he finally realizes that her story is true, we see him race through Los Angeles traffic jams and over barricades in a desperate attempt to stay on his phone and do what he can to help. It is always necessary to suspend your disbelief in a movie like this, but here the tension is so continuous that you don't have time to question the improbable coincidence of events. You're just along for the ride and enjoying every minute of it. Chris Evans is the man on the phone and Kim Basinger is the kidnapped woman and both are excellent. Roger Ebert thinks that this was a star-making role for Evans, and he may be right. Jason Statham is memorable as the leader of the kidnappers, and the ubiquitous William H. Macy appears as a weary but curious cop. Larry Cohen, who collaborated on this project also was involved in 2002's Phone Booth. Gary gave that film an A- but gives this one a B+. I liked this movie better than Phone Booth, which I rated a B. I agree with a B+ for Cellular. **GRADE B+**

CENTER STAGE: This is your standard young-student-dancers-trying-to-get-into-a-ballet-company plot. It covers stage mothers, bulimia, bad feet, sore feet, and the inevitable coming from the corps d'ballet to star in a ballet. However, the performers are so appealing and the dancing is so wonderful that we both really enjoyed the movie. As Roger Ebert said, "The movie uses the materials of melodrama, but is gentle with them." Ethan Stiefel, who plays the star of the company, is a principal dancer for the American Ballet Theater and there are many people who think he is the greatest dancer in the world. They may be right. He also plays his part well. Amanda Schull, who is a member of the San Francisco Ballet is Jody, the girl who no one thinks will make it. Zoe Saldana plays a student with attitude, and Susan May Pratt is Maureen, a talented dancer who is living her mother's dream, not her own. (Debra Monk of TV's NYPD Blue is Maureen's mother.) Sascha Radetsky, a dancer with the American Ballet Theater, is Charlie, one of Amada's suitors. The dancing is so beautiful is almost brings tears to your eyes. Gary liked it even better than I did. **GRADE: B/B+**

CERTAIN WOMEN: (2016) Barbara and I were underwhelmed by this film even though it has done well at Film Festivals and with critics. It had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah and later won the Best Film Award at the London Film Festival. Kelly Reichardt who directed and wrote the screenplay for this independent film has been making movies for over twenty years. On the Tomatometer, audiences always rate her films lower than professional critics. They typically complain that her movies are boring and have no plot. Critics are more likely to point out that her minimalist style produces movies that have sparse dialogue and silences that

speak volumes. **Certain Women** is set in a small Montana town and is based on three short stories by Maile Meloy focusing on women struggling to cope with the lives they have been dealt. The best known of the actresses playing the women are Laura Dern, Michelle Williams, & Kristen Stewart. They do well with the roles they have been dealt, and the Montana landscape is beautiful. This is the third Reichardt film we have seen, the other two being **Meeks Cutoff** and **Night Moves** (see Archives). Apparently we are growing less tolerant of her style for our grades keep dropping. **GRADE C-**

CESAR CHAVEZ: (2013) It is hard for me to understand why a film about one of history's most important labor leaders and civil rights activists wasn't made decades ago. Chavez helped organize California's migrant farm laborers in the 1960's. Chavez always insisted on non-violence despite brutal confrontations with police and wealthy grape growers. For years it was a bitter fight for living wages, better working conditions, and the important right to organize. Labor movements have always met with strong and often violent resistance. Even the making of a feature film about Chavez must have met resistance. Nearly all the modest \$10 million production budget came from Mexican investors. The film features Michael Peña in the title role with Rosario Dawson, America Ferrera, and John Malkovich in supporting roles. There is no doubt that the filmmakers were striving for historical accuracy. The locations looked realistic and I read that the actors were taught to speak in a Chicano dialect typical of the late 1960's and early 1970's. As a history lesson **Cesar Chavez** is inspiring and I would love to give it above average marks. Unfortunately it just isn't an above average film. I think the script needed a few rewrites. Both Barbara and I were hoping for better. **GRADE C** (Barb's note: And I think Cesar Chavez deserved better.)

CHANGELING: Clint Eastwood has directed this true story in his typical spare and direct style. It is a story of a lost child, incredible police corruption and a serial killer. It is an emotional story, but Eastwood doesn't let those emotions go out of control. He tells the story of Christine Collins (Angelina Jolie) in a linear fashion beginning with the love this young single mother has for Walter, her 8-year-old son. He shows us her fear and worry when she discovers that Walter is missing and her frustration in dealing with a police department that can't find him. When she is told that they have found her son, she is thrilled, but the instant she sees the boy, she knows he is not Walter. The Los Angeles Police Department, currently under siege from all sides for rampant corruption, got some positive press from the case and they cannot afford to admit a mistake. Consequently, they go to great lengths to insist that the boy is Walter and that Christine is psychotic. Even to the length of having her forcibly committed to a psychiatric ward. If it weren't for the efforts of a local Presbyterian minister, Gustav Briegleb (John Malkovich), Christine's true story might never have been told. Briegleb had made it his mission to expose corruption in the Los Angeles government, specifically in the police department. Eastwood has done a masterful job of re-creating the look of Los Angeles in 1928—houses, street cars, clothes, automobiles, all quite amazing. Jeffrey Donovan (TV' Burn Notice) is very good as a malicious police captain. I'm sure he is thrilled to be in an Eastwood film, but I hope we can see him soon in a more positive role where he can use his considerable charm. Jolie is wonderful, as is Malkovich. I did think that one scene toward the end was unnecessary and didn't add much except length to a film that had a running time of 2 hours and 21 minutes. This film can't compare with *Unforgiven* or *Million Dollar Baby*, but an Eastwood film is always worth seeing, and you will not fail to be touched by Jolie's performance. **GRADE B**

CHANGING LANES: Two men are involved in a fender bender and the accident sets off a chain of actions that causes each man to examine his life and his conscience. It's too bad that the film's trailer gave away the entire sequence of events. I don't know why Hollywood does that—it spoils the movie for the viewer. However, the trailer shows only the events, not the consequences, and it is the consequences that make this a better than average film. Each man reacts in a way that he later comes to regret. Each man experiences insight and learns something about his values from the terrible events of the day. Gavin Banek (Ben Affleck) is a young partner in a prestigious corporate law firm. He is on his way to the court to deliver an important file when the accident with Doyle Gipson (Samuel L. Jackson) occurs. In his haste to get to court, Banek is rude and arrogant. He also leaves behind the important file, and Gipson retrieves it. The rest of the film is the story of Banek's attempts to retrieve the file. Sydney Pollack is Banek's boss and father-in-law. Toni Collette is a colleague, and William Hurt appears as Gipson's AA sponsor. The film was directed by Roger Michell and the screenplay was written by Chap Taylor and Michael Tolkin. (Tolkin wrote the novel and screenplay for *The Player*.) The writers tell us who these two men are and how they got to this day in their lives. We both enjoyed the movie and were impressed with Affleck. He is turning into a fine actor. Jackson, of course, is superb as always. **GRADE B+**

CHAPPAQUIDDICK: (2018) You may remember it clearly or never have heard of it, but whether you refresh your memory or fill in a historical blank, a tragic accident on the night of July 18, 1969 cost a young woman her life and changed the course of political history. **Chappaquiddick**, is a fact-based account of what happened on that night when U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy drove his car off a narrow bridge near Martha's Vineyard, causing the drowning death of a young campaign worker Mary Jo Kopechne. The extensive news coverage was muted by Neil Armstrong's moon landing and his first human steps on the moon. The first part of this riveting suspense drama focuses on the events surrounding the accident and Ted's response to it. Possibly dazed and confused, he failed to report the accident for nine hours. The role of Ted Kennedy is brilliantly played by Jason Clarke (**Mudbound, Zero Dark Thirty**). The middle of the film deals with the turbulent aftermath of the accident and the political and legal power and maneuvering which followed. The remainder of the movie centers on the efforts by the Kennedy machine to craft a story that would rescue the senator from a career-ending disaster. There seems little doubt that without the Kennedy name and influence, Ted would have served time in prison and would not have served over four decades as one of the most influential and effective senators in United States history. Barbara and I agree the film is well made and does not try to sugar coat Ted's role in a tragic event. We think it is an informative film that will be appreciated by those who seek it out. **GRADE B+**

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR: This film is a double delight: you learn something while being entertained. Based on the true story of U.S. Congressman Wilson whose position on three key committees allowed him to arm the Afghanistan Mujahedin and help them triumph over the Russian invaders. It was a win-win situation at the time—we helped end the Cold War by helping Afghanistan overthrow our mutual enemy. Only in the light of current events, do we understand the consequences of that covert war. But, as I said, you will be entertained, especially by the performances of Hanks as Wilson and Philip Seymour Hoffman as Gust, an unlikely C.I.A. agent. They are both splendid. Julia Roberts takes the part of Joanne Herring the real-life socialite who joined Wilson in the scheme to defeat the Communists. Roberts looks great. Amy Adams proves that she is just as good playing a real girl as she was playing a Princess in

Enchanted. But the real star of the film is the crackling smart dialogue of Aaron Sorkin. It's like watching the best of *The West Wing* and really made me miss those first few years of that terrific TV show. Did I mention that it's also quite amusing? Knowledge, amusement and Oscar-worthy performances all rolled up into one film. Gary says A- and I agree. **GRADE A-**

Joanne: Why is Congress saying one thing and doing another?

Charlie: Tradition, mostly.

CHARLIE'S ANGELS: The plot is non-existent, the stunts are stupefying, the explosions are abundant, and both the heroines and the bad guys are ridiculously resilient. Are my comments a bit over-the-top? Well, so is the movie. The angels are in great form, though. I doubt the three of them ate as much during the filming as I can put away in a day. There's no reason to see this film except to watch the girls do impossible things wearing as little as possible. And what they do wear is skin tight. Gary thought they were trying to make a spoof of action films. Is that possible? Action films have become animated comic books, and as comic books go, this one has some style: The action is fast and furious, Bill Murray supplies some humor, and Charlie's operatives are stylish and perky to a fault. If that's your cup of tea, you might get a kick out of it. We didn't. **GRADE: C-**

CHEF: (2014) One critic said, If "Chef" were a musical, you'd walk out humming the food." (Maira MacDonald, *Seattle Times*) She's right. The food preparation scenes by the chef (Jon Favreau) were the best. Second best were the father/son scenes. Emjay Anthony was adorable as Favreau's son. The part played by Twitter brought the predictable story into the modern age. Sofia Vergara was Anthony's mother and Favreau's ex-wife, in a performance that was toned down from her character on *Modern Family*. In a surprising guest cameo, Dustin Hoffman played the owner of the restaurant where Favreau cooked. Scarlett Johansson, almost unrecognizable in a black wig, was the restaurant's hostess and a close friend of the chef. Oliver Platt was a restaurant critic whose lukewarm review of the chef's menu—a menu that Hoffman insisted upon—eventually caused Favreau to lose his job. In another surprising cameo, Robert Downey, Jr. supplied the chef with a food truck. After fixing up the dilapidated truck, Favreau, along with his son, Percy, and John Leguizamo as his sous chef, sets off on a trip from Miami to Los Angeles. On the way, we see some scenes of the three bonding. They also stop at several cities to serve crowds of appreciative fans of the Chef's Cuban food. The crowds were drawn to the food truck because Percy excels at social media. (I just don't get "twitter!") Gary didn't enjoy this one as much as I did, but that's not surprising since Gary's idea of food preparation is zapping Lean Cuisine meals in the microwave. **GRADE B/C+**

CHÉRI: Michelle Pfeiffer is one of the most beautiful women in movies today, and she looks gorgeous in the elaborate costumes and hats of La Belle Epoch. She is believable as a famous courtesan whose beauty has only just begun to fade. Her Lea de Lonval is the original cougar, taking as a lover a young man whose nickname is Chéri. Intending only to "make a man of him," she makes a mistake that she has heretofore avoided: She falls in love. When Chéri's mother arranges a marriage for him, we witness a lot of heartbreak and pining on both their parts. The slim screenplay is based on what I imagine is a slim novel by Collette. Except for Pfeiffer and the costuming, there isn't much to this film, and we were both slightly bored. Rupert Friend's Chéri is supremely arrogant and such a cold fish that we wondered what it was that attracted such a sophisticated and experienced woman. I suspect he made her feel young again. The poignant closing shot of Pfeiffer looking at herself in a mirror is the best scene in the film. The film is lovely to look at, but there's not enough there to give it more than a C. **GRADE C**

CHICAGO: It's the Jazz Age in Chicago where murder is theater and killers are celebrities. At least according to this stunning adaptation of one of the best of Broadway's musicals. I've never seen a stage musical brought to such vibrant life on screen. All the excitement of the marvelous Fosse production numbers is here, along with a realistic telling of the tale of Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger). She killed her lover, it's true, but she wasn't a criminal—simply the victim of liquor and jazz. Richard Gere is surprising as Roxie's lawyer, Billy Flynn. His tap dancing will astound you. The courtroom scene where Billy must tap dance to get Roxie off is an example of the creative intercutting between staged numbers and real-life action. When Roxie is acquitted and can't understand why the formerly fawning press has deserted her for a new husband-killer, Billy says, "It's Chicago, Babe. You can't beat fresh blood on the walls." Queen Latifa may be the best Mama ever. She plays the Prison Matron with great verve and she shines in her big musical number, "When You're Good to Mama." Catherine-Zeta Jones, a former dancer, is Velma Kelly personified and she is dynamite in the opening number, All That Jazz. She brings glamour and a touch of low class to the role of a nightclub singer who killed her husband and her sister. She caught them rehearsing something that wasn't in the act. And Renee Zellweger is perfect as the sweet-looking Roxie. Sweet-looking, but really a bit of a bitch, yet we like her anyway. John C. Reilly plays Roxie's faithful husband and with his pudding face he is the perfect nebbish. His rendition of Mr. Cellophane is charming and poignant. The director, Rob Marshall, is a stage veteran making his big screen debut and he does it with great style. This is definitely an A movie! **GRADE A**

THE CHILDREN OF HUANG SHI: This film is based on the experiences of George Hogg, a British journalist who, along with an Australian nurse, saved a group of orphaned children during the Japanese occupation of China in 1937. Hoping to get a scoop for his newspaper, Hogg (Johnathan Rhys Meyers) witnesses unspeakable atrocities and is almost beheaded by the Japanese. He is saved from a terrible death by Chen (Chow Yun Fat), a leader of a Chinese partisan group. Sent to a safe town to recuperate from his bullet wound, Hogg stumbles upon a run-down orphanage housing sixty young boys. The adults have all fled, and Hogg reluctantly takes over the place. With perseverance and hard work, he manages to protect, feed, and teach the boys. A travelling nurse, Lee (Radha Mitchell) provides some occasional help, as does a local businesswoman. Concerned that the Chinese Nationalist Army might conscript the young boys into their army, he leads the children on an extraordinary journey. They travel over 700 miles on foot across the snow-bound Liu Pan Shan mountains to safety on the edge of the Mongolian desert. Meyers is believable as a young journalist who came to China for some excitement and a good story and instead found the true meaning of courage. Chow Yun Fat, so memorable in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is equally charismatic here, and Mitchell, providing the story with some love interest, is appealing as the brave nurse. This is a moving story proving once again that heroes are created by circumstances. It is also a reminder of the devastating effect that war has on anyone who comes close to it. Readers Sam & Sharon B, AZ saw this one and said they "loved it." **GRADE B**

CHILDREN OF MEN: This movie is another grim view of the future. And not all that far in the future, either. The year is 2027, and all the women in the world are infertile. There are no more children. The story begins with the death of Baby Diego, the world's youngest

person—An 18 year old young man. The story is set in London, where the government gives out tranquilizers and suicide kits to the citizens, and the army rounds up all non-citizens for deportation. They are housed in detainment camps that remind one of Nazi concentration camps. Several sects, opposed to the government, roam the streets bombing and shooting indiscriminately. It's a very ugly world! Clive Owen is a disillusioned, depressed government bureaucrat. The story revolves around his decision to protect a young pregnant woman and deliver her to a group called "The Human Project," where she and her child will be safe. The hope is that this child will restore some faith in the future for the peoples of the world. (They make their final escape in a small boat, which made us think of the baby Moses and the bull rushes.) In his TV review, Roeper said that he hoped someday someone would do a movie where the future was in pastels and everyone was happy. This is not that movie. This one is shot in blues and grays and nobody is happy. Also appearing briefly are Julianne Moore, Michael Caine, and Danny Huston. Owen is excellent, as is Claire-Hope Ashitey who plays the pregnant woman. There are a lot of very scruffy-looking extras who look appropriately menacing. Be warned. This is not a feel-good movie. **GRADE B**

CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT (1965/2016) This is the little seen and for decade's unavailable film directed and starring Orson Welles. Welles fondly thought of it as his favorite film even while history usually bestows the honor of "best film ever made" to his powerful **Citizen Kane**. **Chimes at Midnight** blends scenes from five of Shakespeare's plays and expands the role of one of the Bard's most memorable characters, Sir John Falstaff. Welles brings Falstaff to life with pathos and humor. It was a role Welles was destined to play and he plays it well. **Chimes at Midnight** was filmed in Spain between the fall 1964 and spring 1965 with the backing of Spanish film producers. This was the only way it could have made its way onto the screen since Welles fell out of favor in Hollywood with his now classic film **Citizen Kane**. He incurred the wrath of right-wing publisher William Randolph Hearst since **Kane** was loosely based on parts of Hearst's life. Hearst had the power to anathematize Welles in Hollywood and intimidate theatre chains by threatening to ban advertising if they showed Welles's films. The story is about a young and wild Prince Hal, a drinking buddy of Falstaff, who later assumes the throne of England after the death of his father, King Henry IV, beautifully played by John Gielgud. **Chimes** earned an impressive 97% from critics on the Tomatometer, but I have to warn that this movie is not for everyone. Shakespeare's dialogue can be difficult, even for devotees. I liked the film but was short of falling in love with it and Barbara would rate it a few notches below me. **Grade B-/D**

CHIMPANZEE: This is Disney's 2012 Earth Day movie. The footage of Chimpanzees in the Ivory Coast rainforest is wonderful, but the narration, voiced by Tim Allen, is too cutsey. Plus, two songs used at the beginning and ending of the movie are downright irritating. A remarkable team of photographers was able to film a touching and exciting story that speaks for itself. We watch little Oscar with his loving mother, Isha. When Isha is killed by attacking rival chimps, we fear for Oscar's life. He tries to find a new mother, but is rebuffed by the females in the tribe. When he is adopted by Freddie, the alpha male leader of the tribe, we breathe a sigh of relief. Apparently, it is unlikely that any male chimp would adopt a baby, let alone the alpha male. But Freddy proves to be a loving father. It is interesting to see the chimps using tools to get at their preferred meals, and grooming each other to reinforce friendly bonds. Time lapse photography of jungle plants adds significantly, probably because it is without narration. The excitement is added by a rival band of larger chimps who invade Freddy's territory in search of food. Disney would have been wiser to take a look at The Frozen Plant where the narration is educational and helpful but never cutsey. The filming deserves an A, but, averaged with our dislike of the narration, we give the movie a B. However, for kids, this is a far better movie than most of animated films geared to youngsters. We were happy to see a lot of families in the theatre. **GRADE B**

CHINATOWN 1974/2021 (We recorded it from HBO, but it available on Prime Video for a \$3.99 rental.) The question I asked myself was: Why should I watch and review a 1974 film. There are a few pretty good answers. It is frequently listed as one of the greatest films of all time and at the 47th Academy Awards, it was nominated for 11 Oscars. Many regard it as director Roman Polanski's finest work and it stars Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and John Huston. Director Polanski appears in a cameo as the gangster who slices Nicholson's nose. If you saw the film back in 1974, it was a scene you are not likely to forget. He made this movie just five years after his wife, Sharon Tate, was murdered by the infamous Charles Manson cult. Set in 1937 Los Angeles, Nicholson plays a private eye, Jake Gittes, specializing in the grubby business of investigating extra-marital affairs. He is in every scene of the film and fills each frame with a mixture of wit, charm and explosive energy. Seeing him opposite Faye Dunaway, another of the all-time greats, is one of the bonuses of **Chinatown**. Dunaway, plays a troubled widow and arguably gives the performance of her career. It earned Dunaway her second of three Oscar nominations. In the beginning the film appears to be about a private eye hired to catch a cheating husband, but like in all good film noir, things get complimented. It becomes a tangled story of deceit, corruption and sinister family secrets. And don't expect what has come to be known as a Hollywood ending. In fact, **Chinatown** is seen as having one of the great downer endings of all time. Barbara and I enjoyed seeing the film again after nearly fifty years and feel it is worth the 2h 11m runtime. **GRADE A**

CHI-RAQ: If you never heard of director/writer/producer Spike Lee or have never seen any of his earlier films, this may not be the movie for you. Spike Lee is not a subtle filmmaker. He makes controversial films that explore race relations, political issues, urban crime, and violence. Lee has never been reticent about drumming his messages home and one of the main messages in **Chi-Raq** is not one the NRA (National Rifle Association) would endorse. His critics often accuse him of being outrageous, gaudy, preachy, and bawdy. His fans think he is a film genius. Chi-Raq is a modern day adaptation of the ancient Greek play "Lysistrata" written by Aristophanes over two-thousand four hundred years ago. Lysistrata, a persuasive Greek woman, convinces her female friends to withhold sexual privileges from their menfolk as a means of forcing them to end the interminable Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Samuel L. Jackson in a three-piece orange suit takes over the role of the "Greek chorus" used in classical Greek theatre. The Greek chorus was a group of players who spoke in unison commenting on the dramatic action. A great deal of the movie is spoken in rhyme, for example, "*No more sex from any female in the hood, If that doesn't stop the deaths, nothin' ever could.*" *The unique title is used to focus attention on a statistical fact: The fatality rate in Chicago exceeded the combined total of American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan over the same period.* **Chi-Raq** is also the nickname of the leading male character, a rapper and gang leader played by Nick Cannon. Teyonah Parris plays Lysistrata, the female lead. Jennifer Hudson plays a young mother who finds that her 8-year-old daughter has been killed, hit by a random bullet in a drive-by shooting. Set in modern day Chicago, the movie definitely has its moments. One of the most effective of these comes near the middle of the film when John Cusack playing a pastor based on real Chicago priest and social activist, delivers an impassioned sermon for a young girl slain by gang violence. Barbara and I found the

ending of the film moving and memorable, but we also found the whole movie uneven as so often happens when so many goals are sought. **Chi-Raq** is a ribald sex comedy, a political polemic, a social satire, and a plea for change. I confess I had more fun writing the review for this two hour movie than I did viewing it. One of the things I like about Spike Lee is his willingness to tackle the toughest subject matter with irreverence, wit, and enthusiasm. So I will continue to seek out his efforts even if I can't always give them the highest grades. **GRADE C+**

CHOCOLAT: (2000) I may have gained five pounds just watching this movie! Juliet Binoche plays Vianne Rocher, who wanders into a small French town with her daughter and opens a chocolate shop. The local Mayor, Count de Reynaud (Alfred Molina) is enraged because she opens her shop at the beginning of Lent. Actually, Reynaud is more than just a mayor: He is the spiritual conscience of the entire town. Reynaud considers Vianne's shop, which is devoted to the pleasure of eating sweets, as a temptation sent by the devil to destroy the piety of the townspeople. Our local critic called **Chocolat** a fairy tale, and it certainly does have a whimsical quality. We aren't quite sure if Vianne is a druid princess, a witch, or simply a woman who believes chocolate can cure the ills of the soul and the body. (One of her special confections seems to work like chocolate Viagra.) Sitting over a cup of hot chocolate, she hears the confessions and dreams of some of the local citizens. Judy Dench, playing her typical crotchety old lady, is a woman who is estranged from her daughter and longing to see her grandson. We aren't quite sure if Vianne is a druid princess, a witch, or simply a woman who believes chocolate can cure the ills of the soul and the body. (One of her special confections seems to work like chocolate Viagra.) The conflict between piety and licentiousness is heightened when a group of river gypsies stops in town. To Count Reynaud, they represent the ultimate immorality. Vianne, naturally, sees them as kindred spirits. (Of course it doesn't hurt that Johnny Depp, looking incredibly hot, is their leader.) The local priest has the last word when he tells his congregation that you shouldn't define goodness by what you don't do and who you exclude, but by what you embrace and who you include. The characters here are typical of a fairy tale, and we have no trouble telling the good guys from the bad guys. We also have no trouble predicting from the beginning who will win in the end. However, the tale is told with such charm and grace that we think it's worth a B+. Binoche, Olin, Depp and Molina (**Enchanted April**, **Topsy-Turvy**) are splendid. Lasse Hallstrom (**My Life As A Dog**, **Cider House Rules**) directed this film based on a novel by Joanne Harris. **GRADE B+**

CHOCOLAT: (2000/2020 recorded from HBO) Gary and I saw this film in a movie theater and decided to give it a second look. It is the story of a woman named Vianne (Juliette Binoche) and her daughter who open a chocolate shop in a small French village. The fact that they open the shop during Lent shakes up the rigid morality of the community. What's more Vianne has never been married, and she consorts with Irish gypsies that glide into town. (But who can blame her when the leader of the gypsy group is Johnny Depp.) In my 2000 review, I said "I may have gained five pounds just watching this movie!" The chocolate looks heavenly and that's what worries the town's mayor, Count de Reynaud, played in all his righteous anger by Alfred Molina. Again, quoting from my original review, "He is the spiritual conscience of the entire town. Reynaud considers Vianne's shop, which is devoted to the pleasure of eating sweets, as a temptation sent by the devil to destroy the piety of the townspeople. Our local critic called Chocolat a fairy tale, and it certainly does have a whimsical quality. We aren't quite sure if Vianne is a druid princess, a witch, or simply a woman who believes chocolate can cure the ills of the soul and the body. (One of her special confections seems to work like chocolate Viagra.)" Binoche is joined by Judy Dench, as a crotchety grandma, and Lina Olin, as a browbeaten townswoman who eventually comes to work in the Chocolate Shop. Lasse Hallstrom directed this film based on a novel by Joanne Harris This delightful movie was as delicious the second time around. **B+**

CHOKER: If you are tired of quirky independent films that revel in gratuitous sex, you may want to skip this one. Choke centers on Victor, brilliantly played by Sam Rockwell, a sex-addicted tortured loser with mommy issues. Mommy is, of course, brilliantly played by Anjelica Huston, who is living out her final years in a private institution. It all sounds terribly depressing, but in fairness, the despair is broken with humor and the likability of a scruffy Sam Rockwell and the unexpected lucidity of his delusional mother. Victor is able to afford the private institutions with an effective scam involving the Heimlich maneuver and the tendency of people to feel somehow responsible for those they have saved. Special mention should be made of Kelly MacDonald and Brad William Henke who effectively fill out the talented cast. Although we laughed out loud a few times and admired the acting, neither Barbara nor I can give high marks to this film. **GRADE C**

A CHORUS LINE: 1985/2020 (Amazon rental) We can remember the thrill of seeing **A Chorus Line** on Broadway in the fall of 1975 with the original cast. I was so stunned that when the last note sounded, I couldn't leave my seat. I thought that if I sat there long enough, they might come out and do it again. That's why seeing the movie version for the first time was such a disappointment. Gary and I should have checked it out on *Rotten Tomatoes* before we spent \$3.99 to see it on *Amazon Prime Video*. The critics only gave it 42% with audiences giving the movie a tepid 60%. Director Richard Attenborough could not have seen the original musical or he would not have gotten it so wrong. Casting Michael Douglass as the director was his first mistake. When you have a star you have to give him a part, and so they wrote him a part with dialogue that wasn't in the show. They also left out some of the songs. I suppose Attenborough thought he had to make use of all cinema has to offer, but the beauty of the original was the empty stage, bare except for the dancers. I hope this lackluster movie hasn't dimmed my memory of the glory of that Broadway show. We agree with the critic who wrote of the movie: *Attenborough takes the show that set the stage alight and, in this curiously flat version, dampens its spirit.* Thank goodness they didn't make that mistake with **Hamilton**. I'm so thankful that they filmed the stage version. **GRADE C-**
(Instead of the movie, watch the **Hamilton** cast honoring **A Chorus Line** on its 40th Anniversary in 2015.

(I love that all the solo singers are members of the chorus. It's so appropriate!)
You will see the original cast members, much older now, as we all are.

A CHRISTMAS STORY (recorded from TV) We couldn't resist watching our favorite holiday movie on Christmas day. We hadn't watched it for several years, and we had forgotten how funny it is. In the 1940s, a young boy named Ralphie attempts to convince his parents, his teacher and Santa that a Red Ryder BB gun really is the perfect Christmas gift. They all tell him "you'll shoot your eye out." Jean Shephard wrote the screenplay based on a novel of his, and he narrates the movie. Peter Billingsley is Ralphie, and his parents are played by Melinda Dillon and Darren McGavin. We think it's the perfect Christmas movie. **GRADE A**

CHUCK: (2017) This film is based on the true story of heavyweight boxer Chuck Wepner who was probably the real life inspiration for Rocky Balboa in the Oscar winning 1976 movie *Rocky*. Chuck Wepner was the pride of Bayonne, New Jersey and was affectionately nicknamed the Bayonne Bleeder. His claim to fame was going almost the 15 rounds in a highly publicized title match with the great Muhammad Ali. The fight was stopped late in the 15th round on a technical knockout. **Chuck** may contribute little to the long list of boxing movies coming out of Hollywood, but the work of Liev Schreiber in the lead and a talented cast of supporting actors elevate what might have been a routine sports biopic to a heartfelt film worth seeking out. Schreiber has for years been on Barbara's and my list of most talented actors in Hollywood. Elisabeth Moss and Naomi Watts costar and were excellent. I grade the movie a little higher than Barbara but we were both moved by the story. **GRADE B+/B**

CHURCHILL: 2017 Reviews of this modestly budgeted production of the days leading up to D-Day in June of 1944 have been sharply divided among critics. Following are two quotations illustrating the extremes: (1) "Brian Cox gives a phenomenal performance in this sharply focused biopic about the beloved British Prime Minister. (2) "A load of utter rubbish from first frame to last." The film stars an impressive Brian Cox as the title character with the always memorable Miranda Richardson playing his wife. Barbara and I agree that its main appeal will be to Cox fans, WWII buffs, and people old enough to remember WWII and Winston Churchill. The movie dramatizes the agonizing private doubts that the Britain's wartime leader felt during the buildup to the D-Day landings in June 1944. Hollywood is known for taking liberties with historical accuracy, and even though the screenplay for this film was written by a historian, I fear it may have played fast and loose with the facts. Or maybe this is just another example of alternative truths. There will almost certainly be many articles protesting the portrayal of Churchill as an aging beleaguered man in decline. This is the first WWII movie I can remember where you never see a shot fired or a bomb dropped. It is also interesting that Miranda Richardson's portrayal of Clementine Churchill is far beyond the usual dutiful spouse. The intent of the film may be to humanize a towering, almost mythic figure, but to many it comes across more as a way to undercut him. **GRADE B-**

CINDERELLA: (2015) "Have courage and be kind." That is a dying mother's advice given to her beloved daughter, Ella. Ella will become Cinderella when her widowed father remarries and she acquires an evil stepmother with two obnoxious daughters. I'm sure you know the rest of the story. *Cinderella* or *The Little Glass Slipper* is a European folk tale. Written versions were published in 1634, 1697, and in 1812 it appeared in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. The story embodies the theme of unjust oppression, and the word "Cinderella" has come to mean one who unexpectedly achieves success after a period of obscurity and neglect. The story continues to influence popular culture internationally, and nowhere is that influence more noticeable than in the movies. *Moviefocus.com* lists 47 films with the Cinderella theme. Director Kenneth Branagh's live action version of this beloved fairy tale is sweetly sincere and visually beautiful, and I loved it. Lily James, who plays Lady Rose on *Downton Abbey**, is lovely in the title role, and Richard Madden, who played Robb Stark on *Game of Thrones* is the perfect Prince. Cate Blanchett, as the evil stepmother, proves once again that she can do anything, and do it well. And her costumes are spectacular. Helena Bonham Carter has great fun with the Fairy Godmother role. While it is good to have courage and be kind, we could all use a little magic in our lives, and Branagh sprinkles his movie with delightful magic. The making of the carriage out of a pumpkin is marvelous, but the scene where Cinderella flees the ball in a carriage that is rapidly turning back into a pumpkin is sensational. Gary admits that, as fairy-tale-movies go, this one is a winner. He would go as high as a B+, but for me, this *Cinderella* is an A movie. **GRADE A/B+**

*Sophie McShera, another *Downton Abbey* regular (Daisy) appears as Drisella, one of Cinderella's step-sisters.

CINDERELLA MAN: I don't usually care for prizefight movies and I don't much like Russell Crowe, but this is a very good movie. I liked it—a lot. *Cinderella Man* tells the story of an American hero, Jim Braddock, who won the Heavyweight Championship in 1935. He had fought in the late 20s and was known for never having been knocked out. However, repeated injuries ruined what appeared to be a promising career. He and his wife and three children were beaten down by the Great Depression. Without enough money to pay for heat electricity, and food, Braddock was finally reduced to applying for public assistance and begging former associates for a handout. Then, his former manager was able to get him one fight—one fight that would be Braddock's farewell to Madison Garden and the fight game. But that fight turned out to be the beginning of an improbable comeback. Braddock was too old and too tired to win, but win is exactly what he did. He became a hero to the working people: a living example of what a man can do with a second chance. Crowe is excellent as Braddock and Renee Zellweger shines in the role of Braddock's supportive wife. Giamatti brings all his considerable skill to bear in the part of Braddock's manager and creates a memorable character. And once again, Ron Howard proves what a talented director he is. Although I found the punishing fight scenes difficult to watch, I can agree with Gary's grade of A-. **GRADE A-**

CITIZENFOUR: (2014) This is a documentary about Edward Snowden, a twenty-nine-year old NSA- infrastructure analyst who blew the whistle on the U.S. government's program of warrantless mass spying on its own citizens. Unless you find history boring and hate documentaries, I think you will find *Citizenfour* to be a compelling and terrifying slice of history. The film's title comes from Snowden's codename which he used in his encrypted communications with the filmmaker, Laura Poitras, award winning filmmaker who is responsible for this sobering documentary which I think will be a contender for an Academy Award. Poitras was part of a team that received this year's Pulitzer Prize for public service for its work on the NSA disclosures. Whether you consider Snowden a traitor or a hero, the film features meetings of tremendous historical significance. Snowden's revelations caused an international uproar that started in June of 2013, continues to this day, and will probably take decades before the ramifications are fully understood. Professional critics have been very complimentary, some even touting it as a "riveting spy thriller." Barbara and I didn't see it that way, but see it as an important historical document. **GRADE B+**

CITY BY THE SEA: (Seen on video) The premise of this movie is good: A worn out NYPD cop, whose father was executed for murder many years ago, now faces the possibility that his son is a killer. Not many actors can play a worn out cop with more authenticity than Robert DeNiro. James Franco is Joey, Det. Vincent LaMarca's junkie son, and he is impressive in the role. Frances McDormand is LaMarca's girlfriend and her presence in a film always raises the interest level. It is the personal relationships that make this a film worth seeing. All the pieces are here for a superior movie, but this one is merely a good movie. However, we can recommend this video. **THUMBS UP**

CITY ISLAND: This irresistibly charming ethnic family comedy left Barbara and me smiling, quoting lines, and recalling scenes for hours after the fast moving hour and forty minutes we spent in the theater. Vince Rizzo (Andy Garcia) is a lifelong resident of an enclave in the Bronx. City Island is a perfect setting: a waterside village with a big city backdrop. The film is about secrets and about family. Professional critics tend to underrate warm-hearted films that may bring a sentimental tear in the closing scene. Barbara and I tend to over-rate films that have scenes about acting classes, auditions, and an ensemble that seems to be perfectly cast. The ensemble included familiar names like Andy Garcia, Julianna Margulies, Emily Mortimer, and Alan Arkin. Newcomers Steven Strait and Ezra Miller are excellent and are names to watch in the future. Garcia and Margulies are a perfect match as husband and wife in a twenty-year marriage and both are playing characters unlike any we have seen them play previously. Vince, a prison guard, is a closet Brando fan with hidden aspirations of becoming an actor. It turns out that every member of the family has something to hide and the creative revelation of these secrets makes a delightful movie. Like City Island, the location, this movie is a breath of fresh air. It is the best comedy we have seen in 2010. **GRADE A-**

CITY OF GOD: Watching this movie, I knew I was seeing a very well made film. First time director Meirelles began as a director of TV commercials and he doesn't waste any time telling his story. The quick cuts and mobile, hand-held camera techniques added to the realism of this gritty story of life in the slum projects of Rio de Janeiro. It almost seemed like a documentary. Life in the City of God (the name of the housing project) is hard: you are either a worker or a hoodlum. Most are hoodlums. The only way to make a living is by dealing drugs, and running a drug business requires a lot of killing. The violence is constant--too much for Gary. I was stunned by the casual attitude toward killing, especially in very young boys. The film is sort of a Brazilian Goodfellows and it is a sobering look at what happens to people who have no hope and few choices. One young man, Rocket, is remarkable in that he avoids becoming a hoodlum and at the end of the film, he actually seems to have a future. This is a memorable film, but not a very enjoyable one. It is hard to grade. From a filmmaking standpoint it is at least a B+, but Gary wouldn't give it more than a C based on his emotional reaction to it. I think that I will remember this one for quite a while, though, so I would have to give it a B. It is in Portuguese with English subtitles and is based on a true story. **GRADE B/C**

THE CLAIM: Magnificent scenery and a classic tale of love and betrayal combine to create a compelling movie. It is set in the mining town of Kingdom Come located in high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The year is 1869, and all the elements of that time period are faithfully reproduced here. A man named Dillon (Peter Mullan) owns Kingdom Come and he rules it with an iron fist. The Union Pacific has sent a survey crew to the area and the results of their work will determine that path of the transcontinental railroad. It could mean everything to Kingdom Come and to Mr. Dillon if the path of the railway is through the town. The survey crew is headed by Donald Dalglish (Wes Bentley). Into this mix comes Elena Burns (Natassja Kinski) and her daughter, Hope (Sara Polley). Their arrival triggers painful memories for Dillon, and they serve as living reminders of what is truly important in life. Milla Jovovich is quite affecting as an entertainer/madame who loves Dillon. Our local critic thought the story plodded along and said, "Nothing happens in this movie." We strongly disagree. Everything happens in THE CLAIM. The story is the stuff of grand opera. It should come as no surprise that **The Claim** is based on Thomas Hardy's 1886 British novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. We believe the film compares favorably with Altman's McCABE AND MRS. MILLER. However, it is fairly heavy going and totally devoid of humor. It is also very dark--the sun NEVER shines and the interior scenes are light circa 1869. That may turn off some viewers. (**The Claim** was #3 on Richard Roeper's list of the ten best films of 2000.) **GRADE: B+**

THE CLASS (*Entre les murs*): (2008) This subtitled French film was nominated by The Academy for Best Foreign Language Film. It didn't win, but it has won several other awards including the Golden Palm award at Cannes Film Festival. François Bégaudeau, teacher and novelist, wrote the screenplay and plays himself as a high school teacher in a tough neighborhood. I have had 30 years experience teaching in classrooms and giving students anything resembling an education can be tough even under the best circumstances. When cultures and attitudes clash in the inner city, a teacher may feel fortunate to just survive. The film has the feel of a documentary. If you chose to go, don't expect a Hollywood happy ending. It doesn't end in tragedy, but it has no resemblance to films like To Sir, with Love or Stand and Deliver. The teacher is sincere and dedicated, but flawed. He wants and sometimes demands respect in a permissive atmosphere. He wants honesty from his students, but his standards are tested when students begin to challenge his methods. Barbara and I liked the film, but I was hoping for better. **GRADE B**

THE CLEARING: The Clearing is the first film directed by the successful producer Pieter Jan Brugge (The Insider, The Pelican Brief, Heat). The screenplay is by Brugge and Justin Haythe, a British novelist. Brugge was able to attract a dynamite cast. Robert Redford is Wayne Hayes, a successful businessman who lives a rich life with his wife, Eileen (Helen Mirren). One morning, on his way to work, he is kidnapped by Arnold Mack (Willem Dafoe). When he fails to come home that night, his wife reports him missing and the FBI gets involved. Mack handcuffs Hayes and forces him on a long walk through the woods. At home, Eileen waits anxiously for some word. Eventually there is a ransom demand. The movie intercuts between two story lines but the time lines of the two stories are not parallel. The conversations between the kidnapper and his victim are well written and exceptionally well acted. Helen Mirren is perfect as a concerned wife who knows that she wants her husband back even though their marriage is less than perfect. This film does not have wide distribution--it is playing in only one theater in Phoenix. If you miss it in the theater, you might want to look for it at Netflix. **GRADE B**

CLEMENCY: (2019) This film had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival where it deservedly earned the Grand Jury Prize. Written and skillfully directed by Chinonye Chukwu, the film is brought to life by Alfre Woodard and a powerful supporting cast. Woodard is one of the most versatile and accomplished actors of her generation. She sweeps you up with the force of her talent. In this story she plays Bernadine Williams, a warden at a men's prison. Her duties include supervising the execution of Death Row prisoners. Years of carrying out death row executions have taken a psychological toll on the warden. **Clemency** isn't exactly a good time at the movies, but it is the kind of film that stays with the audience long after the credits roll. Examining capital punishment from the eyes of a prison warden is a novel approach, and director/writer Chukwu in only his second film is to be commended. Barbara and I were moved by **Clemency** and hope you have a chance to see it. **GRADE A**

CLERKS II: The original *Clerks*, released in 1994, is now considered by many as an independent film classic and *Clerks II* has been favorably received by most critics who have given it an average grade of "B." If memory serves, Barbara and I both liked the low budget off-beat original film, but her insistence that I write this review leaves me to believe she was less impressed with the sequel. Let me start with a warning. If you avoided *The Aristocrats* (2005) because you heard it was raunchy and filled with unspeakable obscenities, you will also want to avoid *Clerks II*. Dante (Brian O'Halloran) and Randal (Jeff Anderson) are a decade older but their days of working at the strip-mall Quick Stop end abruptly, and in this film they spend their days at Mooby's Fast Food. Life isn't much different with Jay and Silent Bob setting themselves up as fixtures--hanging out and selling weed in front of the store. A welcome newcomer is Rosario Dawson playing the sanest member of the group. Also appearing in cameo roles are Wanda Sykes, Ben Affleck, and Jason Lee. It may be a reflection of my advancing age, but I thought they might have pushed the envelope a smidgen too far with the protracted scene of "interspecies erotica" involving a donkey. (Don't ask.) **GRADE C-**

CLOSER: The four characters in this film are flawed individuals. None of them has a clue about maintaining a relationship. Lies come easier to their lips than the truth. (To be fair, their occasional truths cause them more problems than do their lies.) Anna (Julia Roberts) is a photographer, Dan (Jude Law) writes obituaries, Alice (Natalie Portman) is a former stripper, now a waitress, and Larry is a dermatologist. Their lives are disastrously intertwined. The story is told in episodic scenes that, for the most part, jump forward in time. Except for a line from a cabdriver, the only dialogue in the movie is from the four actors. The dialogue is superb, and the acting is flawless. Mike Nichols (director) certainly knows how to cast a film and how to get the very best from his actors. Gary was impressed with the acting and directing, but his failure to identify with, or even like, any of the characters resulted in a grade of A-. I agree that there is no hero here, but I found that I did care about each of them. For me, it's an A film. **GRADE A/A-**

THE CLOSET: (French--subtitled) When Francois learns he is about to be fired from a job he has had for twenty years, he is suicidal. His life is in shambles. He is divorced from a woman he loves and his teenaged son refuses to spend time with him. A new neighbor (Michel Aumont) stops Daniel from ending it all and comes up with a solution. He suggests that they spread a rumor that Daniel is gay, and his company, a condom manufacturer, will be afraid of the bad publicity associated with firing a gay employee. The neighbor cautions Daniel that he must act no differently. The difference will be in how others perceive him. What follows is fairly predictable. The personnel manager (Gerard Depardieu) at the condom plant is a loutish bigot who has always tormented the meek Francois. The funniest scenes are those in which Depardieu tries to befriend Francois to show that he is not a gay-basher. Francois is played by Daniel Auteuil, a very popular French actor and he reminded me a bit of the prissy Felix as played by Tony Randall. Gary very much enjoyed this movie, but I confess that I had trouble keeping my eyes open--you really miss a lot when you close your eyes at a subtitled movie! Actually, I was enjoying it, but fatigue overwhelmed me. Gary says it's worth a B+. I wouldn't rank it quite that high but it wouldn't be fair of me to give it a grade. **GRADE B+**

CLOSING ESCROW: Christopher Guest is a genius at mockumentary, and it's obvious that the directors of this real estate comedy admire his work. What makes a Guest film so good is that he takes real-life elements of a situation and exaggerates them just enough to be both hilarious and believable. In the uneven *Closing Escrow*, the writer/director chose a situation that is fraught with humor: home buyers working with realtors. Unfortunately, he often exaggerates too much and loses the humor along with the realism. We can't fault the acting—it's uniformly good. Also, some of the characters are truly funny. But, too often, the writing goes over the edge. Bruce Thomas, who played the UPS guy in *Legally Blonde* is particularly good as a realtor who spends hours working with a couple only to have them decide to stay where they are. Having been a realtor for a couple of years, I could empathize with his frustration. We saw the film at its first showing in Phoenix and the projection operator was unable to fit the film to the screen. Not only was it off-center, it was very dark. We were told it was on a DVD, not on film. I hope they can figure out how to fit the image to the screen and brighten it up for subsequent viewers. **GRADE C-**

CLOUD ATLAS: There has been much discussion among the critics as to what this movie is all about. Our local critic called it "a map to confusion." Roger Ebert borrowed Churchill's comment about Russia and applied it to the movie: "it is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Gary thinks that it is similar to a Rorschach test: what a viewer sees has a lot to do with his or her underlying thought processes. I can only tell you what meaning I got from it by paraphrasing some of the lines in the movie. First and foremost, I think it was showing us that the crimes and kindnesses of today give birth to our future. This theme is repeated several times. I also think the movie was trying to illustrate that we are connected to others, past and future. Another message concerns the importance of seeking the truth no matter what the cost. ("Soylent Green" is people!) Finally, the movie believes that love is real and transforming. The filmmaker tries to make these points by interweaving several stories from the past, the present, and the future. One technique he employs is to use the same actors in different roles in each story. It is fun to see Tom Hanks as an evil ship's doctor in the 19th Century, an angry writer in the present and a survivor in the future. Halle Berry is also excellent in many different roles, as are Hugh Grant, Jim Sturgess, Jim Broadbent, and others. I was particularly taken with Doona Bae in her role as Sonmi-451, a Replicant in a future world who sparks a revolution. It is an ambitious film and many will find it too enigmatic for their taste. We will be very interested to hear our readers' views. Gary's natural antipathy to science fiction and his inability to hear some of the dialogue made it impossible for him to grade the movie, although he does think that the makeup and costuming deserve an Oscar. I was frequently puzzled but always interested. By the end of the film I was quite moved. **GRADE B** (After the movie was over I told Gary that I could see it again. His comment? You'll have to go alone.)

CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA: (2015) Barbara and I were drawn to this film drama by two talented actors we both admire, Juliette Binoche and Kristen Stewart. We were also influenced by our local critic's glowing review. Professional critics liked the film considerably better than typical audiences polled by *Rotten Tomatoes*. It is my hypothesis that people in the entertainment industry, including professional critics, often have a soft spot for movies or plays about the considerable stress that is part of the performing arts. Examples range from *Sunset Boulevard* to *The Artist* and *Birdman*. This film was written and directed by a French filmmaker, Olivier Assayas. The story is about an international actress at the peak of her career who is asked to perform in a revival of the play that made her famous twenty years earlier. In the original work she played an alluring young woman who eventually drove her boss, Helena, to suicide. In the revival she is asked to play the role of the older Helena while a young Hollywood starlet is cast in the role that two decades earlier made her a star. Kristen Stewart plays Binoche's personal assistant. We don't see the actual rehearsals or scenes from the final play, but rather, we

see the story mostly played out in lengthy rehearsal of dialogue and seemingly endless discussion between the actress and her assistant. You are often not sure of who is talking: the actors or the characters they are playing. This was intentional and was a plus but I am sorry to say the film fell short of our high expectations. I can't give it higher than a "C". Barb goes a little higher. **GRADE C/C+**

COACH CARTER: Movies based on a real-life inspirational coach aren't new, but they are almost always satisfying. This film tells the story of Ken Carter, a businessman in Richmond, California, who became a high school basketball coach in an inner-city school. It was a school where only 50% of the students graduated and very few graduates ever went to college. The job of coach paid only a \$1500 stipend, but Carter threw his heart and soul into the work. He was determined that his "boys" would graduate and go to college. He taught them much more than how to play basketball. Samuel L. Jackson is memorable as Coach Carter, and it is moving to watch as he changes the lives of the boys who play for him. We particularly liked Rob Brown (*Finding Forester*) and Rick Gonzales (*The Rookie, Old School*). The star of the team, Junior Battle, is played by a tall young man named Nana Gbewonyo who has no other film credits, but who was a basketball star in both high school and college. We enjoyed the film and were quite moved by the story. The basketball scenes looked authentic and were quite exciting. I think it's a good solid B movie, but Gary gives it a B+. **GRADE B+/B**

COAST TO COAST: (1980-seen on video) Richard Dreyfuss and Judy Davis travel across the country to attend their son's wedding in Los Angeles. They are on the verge of a divorce, and the trip forces them to reevaluate their marriage. It's worth watching just to see Dreyfuss and Davis. **THUMBS UP**

COBB: (Seen on video) Two hours and seven minutes is long for a movie about a truly nasty man. We can see why it was not popular at the box office. But many people think Ty Cobb was the greatest baseball player of all time and Tommy Lee Jones is surely one of the greatest actors of all time. Jones brings Ty Cobb to life in this movie. If you like baseball, and you like Tommy Lee Jones, it might be worth a look. **THUMBS UP**

CODA: (2021 Barbara and I saw this unusual movie at a local theater.) The title, **CODA**, is the acronym for Child of Deaf Adults. The movie is a witty and heartwarming coming-of-age comedy-drama. In its world premiere at the Sundance Film festival it wowed audiences and it won all four of the top prizes: the grand jury prize, the audience award, the directing prize for Sian Heder, and a special jury prize for the ensemble cast. Sian Heder also wrote the screenplay. Even though females make up 50% of movie audiences, it is unusual to find a woman both directing and writing films in Hollywood. **CODA** centers on a mostly deaf family speaking in ASL (American Sign Language). Subtitles are used for those scenes. The only hearing member of the family is Ruby, a seventeen-year-old high-school senior. She also works on the family's struggling fishing boat for several hours every day before school. As the only hearing member of her family, she is the radio operator on the family fishing boat, translator when needed, and dealmaker at the local fish auction. Ruby is nicely played by Emilia Jones. Emilia stands tall at 4'11". She took ASL lessons for nine months before filming started. Born in London, Emilia has been acting since she performed in *Shrek the Musical* on the London's West End when she was 8 years old. There are many reasons to see **CODA**, not the least of which is Marlee Matlin, the only deaf performer ever to have won an Academy Award. She won the Best Actress Oscar for her work in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). In this film she plays Ruby's mother and as always, is a joy to watch. When Ruby joins her high school's choir club, her tough-love choirmaster sees potential in the young girl. He encourages her to develop that potential by enrolling at a music school. Ruby soon finds herself torn between obligations she feels to her family and the pursuit of her own dreams. The family is largely mystified, and even a little hurt, by her interest in an activity they can't possibly appreciate. I must warn you that you may need a handkerchief to get through the end of this touching film. But I never felt manipulated because the storytelling was so well executed. I think one of the reasons the storytelling seemed so sincere was the casting of deaf actors in the deaf character roles. Another example of Heder's effective choices was to allow the hearing audience some insight into the deaf experience by cutting the sound midway through one of Ruby's performances. It took me awhile to get into this movie, but because the ending is so powerful and because it is such unusual subject matter, I must give it a high grade. **GRADE A**

(Gary's note: If you try to research **CODA**, you should be aware that there is a 2020 film with the same title starring Patrick Stewart and Katie Holmes about a concert pianist who suffers from performance anxiety late in his career.)

COFFEE AND CIGARETTES: I have an idea about the meaning of this film: If you drink enough coffee and smoke a sufficient number of cigarettes you are guaranteed to have many boring conversations. The best scene in this black and white film written and directed by Jim Jarmusch supports my point: The scene between Alfred Molina and Steve Coogan is funny and interesting, but they are drinking tea, not coffee. We also liked the scene with Cate Blanchett in a dual role, and I did think Steve Buscemi's theory on Elvis was funny. But I thought most of it was tedious. Jarmusch has spent years working on this film. He produced three previous short films with the same title. Each film features one of the scenes from the current film. The 1986 version consisted of a scene between Roberto Benigni and Steven Wright. In 1989 the scene was with Joie Lee, Cinque Lee and Steve Buscemi and, in 1993, Jarmusch filmed the scene between Iggy Pop and Tom Waits. We don't recommend that anyone make a special trip to a theater for this one. If you're at all interested in it, we suggest waiting for the video/DVD. Critics have been quite divided on this one. Ebert gave it a B, the Chicago Tribune gave it a C+. E Online gave it an A-, and the S.F. Chronicle gave it a D+. I'd have to say C-. Gary liked it a bit better than I, and because of some very good scenes, he says C. **GRADE C-/C**

(Jarmusch must have a lot of friends that are willing to work with him. Here is a complete cast list: Roberto Benigni, Steven Wright, Joie Lee, Cinque Lee, Steve Buscemi, Iggy Pop, Tom Waits, Joe Rigano, Vinny Vella, Vinny Vella Jr., Renee French, E.J. Rodriguez, Alex Descas, Isaach De Bankole, Cate Blanchett, Meg White, Jack White, Alfred Molina, Steve Coogan, GZA, RZA, Bill Murray, Bill Rice and Taylor Mead.)

C'MON C'MON: 2021 (Right now, available only in theaters) This black-and-white Indie film was well received by critics, earning 94% on Rotten Tomatoes. Writer/Director Mike Mills brings to the screen a heartwarming story of a radio journalist and documentary filmmaker Johnny (Joaquin Phoenix) who, after a family emergency, is left in charge of his precocious nine-year-old nephew, Jesse (Woody Norman). You may remember Joaquin Phoenix for his Oscar winning role playing the Joker in a movie that won him a Best Actor Oscar. Woody Norman is a young English actor who has charmed many fans with his cuteness. He is perfectly cast in this movie.

The unexpectedly thrown together pairing of Johnny and Jesse leads to a relationship that changes both their lives. It is a story about listening-really listening-to what other people say. Mills and his crew conducted hundreds of interviews with a wide variety of children, tapping into their hopes and fears for the future. These were real kids and not actors. Their unscripted interviews provide some of the best scenes in the movie. We found **C'mon C'mon** to be a deeply moving story about the sometimes difficult connections between adults and children. I liked the film a little better than *Barb*, but we were both impressed with the chemistry between Phoenix and Norman. **GRADE A-/B+**

COLD IN JULY: (2014) This mystery, suspense, drama opens on a balmy Texas night in 1989. Keep in mind that Texas is a state where people who need killin' are often accommodated. It is an old-fashioned film reminiscent of a Sam Peckinpah thriller. While cautiously investigating suspicious noises, Richard Dane puts a fatal bullet through the head of a low-life burglar. Dane is skillfully played by Michael C. Hall who is coming off a very successful seven year run of *Dexter* on TV. Things get complicated when it looks like the burglar's ex-con father, Ben, will avenge his son's death. Ben is played by veteran actor Sam Shepard. Just when we think we know where the plot is taking us, plausible but surprising twists throw us off balance. As the tension builds, the film gets a huge boost from the entrance of Joe Bob, a wisecracking cowboy detective played by another veteran actor, Don Johnson. It would be unfair to give away too much of the plot, but I will say that the film held Barbara's and my attention to the very end. We were prepared to give the movie a much higher grade had one loose end not been overlooked. Some loose ends are intentional and some can be forgiven. But we felt this one was unintentional and unforgivable. If you see the film and want to discuss it, e-mail us. **GRADE B**

COLD MOUNTAIN: This somber story of love and war is overly long at 155 minutes. We both thought it would have benefited from a judicious cutting. Ada (Nicole Kidman) and Inman (Jude Law) are together only briefly before Inman leaves to fight for the South in the Civil War. They've shared only one kiss, but it must have been quite a kiss, because for the rest of the movie, Inman tries to get back to Cold Mountain and to Ida, and Ida waits for Inman to return. That would be tedious if it weren't for the supporting characters--and I do mean "characters." Philip Seymour Hoffman is terrific as a preacher who Inman meets on the way back home. Giovanni Ribisi and Natalie Portman are also characters who figure in Inman's adventures. We particularly liked Eileen Atkins as a mountain woman who helps Inman. Back in Cold Mountain, Ida, whose father has died, is having a hard time running the family farm. But then, Rugy (Renee Zellweger) appears on the scene and things pick up quite a bit. Brenden Gleeson is memorable as Ruby's fiddle-playing father. Oh yes, there is a scene at the beginning that illustrates the horror of war. It helps to justify Inman's deserting the army--something that was punishable by death. The movie shows much of man's inhumanity to man--too much, I think, for a love story. I did enjoy looking at Jude Law's handsome face. I can understand waiting a long time for him. We would have liked it better if Ada and Inman hadn't taken themselves quite so seriously. I felt the same way about the lovers in Anthony Minghella's previous film, *The English Patient*. He does photograph beautiful movies, though. **GRADE B**

COLD PURSUIT: (2019) This is a Liam Neeson revenge movie that pales in comparison to 2008's **Taken**, the movie that plunged Neeson into his career as a revenge killer. It can be satisfying to see the evil guys get killed, because, after all, they needed killing. In **Cold Pursuit**, Neeson drives a snow plow in a mountain town. When his son dies from a heroin overdose, and his wife (Laura Dern in a throwaway role) leaves him, his first thought is to kill himself. But, when he learns that his son was killed by a drug kingpin, he decides to kill those responsible. And he does. Mixed in with the extensive body count is some dark humor, as if that makes the blood-letting OK. Tom Bateman played Viking, the oh so evil drug lord, with a quirky menace. There also was a precocious kid in the mix, that allowed Neeson to show his gentler side. The movie got a respectable grade from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, and comments range from "an enjoyable time-killer" and "a bloody good time, to "drab and pointless." One critic thought the movie was "a borderline-spoof of the genre as a whole." Gary and I gave **Taken** a B- and **Taken 2** a C. We decided on a C- for **Cold Pursuit**. **GRADE C-**

COLD SOULS: (2009) This tragicomedy is sort of a 21st Century **Faust**. Paul Giamatti, playing himself, is an actor rehearsing for the title role in a New York production of **Uncle Vanya**. It isn't going well. When he sees an ad for "soul storage," he investigates and finds a high-tech company that claims to have found a solution to human suffering. By deep-freezing souls, claims the company, they can give their customers a life free from fear, doubt, and worry. He tries being soul-less for a while, but then rents the soul of a Russian poet. When that has its downside, he tries to get his own soul back, but it has been put into a talentless Russian actress. Getting his soul back requires a trip to St. Petersburg. It's all quite strange and metaphysical, but we did enjoy it. **GRADE B**

COLETTE: (2018) Gary and I saw Zoe Caldwell as Colette in an Off-Off Broadway production many years ago, so we were looking forward to this movie. Unfortunately, we thought this gorgeously photographed bio-pic was strangely boring, especially the first half of the movie. Keira Knightly is as gorgeous as the settings and costumes, and she tries her best to bring life to the movie. That she succeeds at all is testament to her considerable talents. Dominic West is fine as Colette's husband, Willy, the man who took credit for the *Claudine* books that he all but forced his wife to write for him. He liked to refer to their work as collaboration, but it was much more like the writer and editor relationship. The only thing we remember from the stage production is that Caldwell bared her left breast as part of a Music Hall production, and Knightly did not disappoint. The story is told in a linear somewhat old-fashioned way, and perhaps if the writers had employed a different style we would have been more engaged. Flash backs and flash forwards would have helped, I think. Director Wash Westmoreland's most recent film was **Still Alice** in 2014, and it earned numerous awards for its star, Julianne Moore. **Colette** might win awards for its star because Knightly is wonderful, but I'm afraid we were a bit underwhelmed. **GRADE B-**

COLLATERAL: Tom Cruise makes a sensational hired killer. And that salt and pepper hair is a winner! When we first meet Vincent (Cruise) getting into a taxi driven by Max (Jamie Foxx), he seems like a very cool, nice guy. Boy, are first impressions wrong. Vincent is in town to dispatch five witnesses in the trial of a notorious drug lord. Vincent commandeers Max and his taxi for the evening, and what follows is a very unusual buddy movie. **Collateral** is a character-driven thriller and that makes it unique and compelling. Gary thought the first half of the movie was just about perfect. However, some of the final chase scenes strained the boundaries of credibility and reduced what he thought was an A movie to a B+. Michael Mann keeps the tension high throughout and both Cruise and Foxx are equal to the task. A frantic nightclub scene that is shot with handheld cameras crackles with energy. But, as is often the case with that technique, it's also rather confusing. I couldn't always tell who was shooting at whom. But Cruise has a move in that scene that is

terrific! Jada Pinkett Smith is beautiful and believable as the prosecuting attorney in the drug case. Irma P. Hall has a nice cameo as Max's ailing mother, and Javier Bardem is very nasty as Felix, the drug kingpin. **GRADE B+**

THE COLOR OF PARADISE: We don't recommend that you go out of your way to see this Iranian film. It can't compare with last year's *Children of Heaven*. Although the photography is outstanding and serves as a travelogue of the Iranian countryside, the story is pure melodrama. The story is of a blind boy and the difficulty his father has dealing with his care. The father was most unsympathetic--partly because of the script and partly because of his amateurish acting. The boy was very good and a look at the school for the blind he attended was quite interesting. His grandmother and two sisters were also nicely played. **GRADE: C-**

COME EARLY MORNING: (2006 release seen on video.) Ashley Judd, in one her best performances, is Lucy, a cement contractor by day and a boozier by night. She has a fear of intimacy that is directly related to the emotional baggage she inherited from her family. When Cal (Jeffrey Donovan), a newcomer in town, tries to have a dating relationship, she doesn't know how to act and eventually drives him away. It is a poignant character study, sensitively written and directed. **THUMBS UP**

COMEDIAN: C "Dying is easy; comedy is hard." This quote has been attributed to many famous actors, and it accurately reflects the main idea of this documentary--comedy is hard. We learn this as we watch Jerry Seinfeld working the comedy clubs trying out new material. In spite of his success, he is still overcome with performance anxiety. During the documentary, Seinfeld interacts with other comedians such as Chris Rock, Garry Shandling, Bill Cosby, Jay Leno and a young aspiring comic named Orny Adams. We could identify with the feelings of the comics as they stand in the wings waiting to be introduced, wondering "Why am I doing this?" Based on the conversations between comics, stand up comedy seems to be an addiction. However, the first 10 or 15 minutes of the film were irritating. The background music was so loud that it was difficult to hear the people talking. Plus, the filming seemed amateurish--grainy and jittery. I also thought the film lacked dramatic flow and wasn't particularly revealing. Orny Adams is the only one who seems to honestly put his arrogance and insecurities on display. Interesting at times, but a mediocre documentary. **GRADE C**

THE COMEY RULE (2020 on *Showtime* and *Hulu*): Emmy winners Jeff Daniels and Brendan Gleeson star as former FBI Director James Comey and President Donald J. Trump in this two-part event series that tells the story of two powerful men, whose strikingly different personalities, ethics and loyalties put them on a collision course. Part one (1 hour long) follows the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails and their impact on the election. Part two (2 hours long) is an account of first months of the Trump presidency - where allies became enemies, enemies became friends and truth depended on what side you were on. Gleeson had Trump down pat and confesses that he didn't want to do it as a cartoon. *The Washington Post* said that "While never completely convincing, he does impart the right mix of ignorance, arrogance and malevolence. We thought Gleeson was terrific, as was Daniels. The Guardian said: *Democrats are likely to quibble over its sympathetic portrayal of Comey in the TV miniseries, while Republicans may dismiss it as anti-Trump propaganda.* "The Comey Rule is a horror film," wrote Laura Miller on the Slate website, "and the monster is Donald Trump." The drama is based on Comey's 2018 memoir *A Higher Loyalty*. **GRADE B+**

COMING HOME: (2015) Yimou Zhang is an esteemed director in China. We saw his 1991 film, *Raise The Red Lantern*; and I still remember its powerful visual images. *Coming Home* is a bittersweet love story. It also recounts the toll exacted on one family by the Cultural Revolution. In 1966, China's Communist leader Mao Tse-tung launched the Revolution in order to reassert his authority over the Chinese government. It lasted until 1976. *Coming Home* begins the seventies, when Yu and her daughter Dandan are told that Yu's husband has escaped from prison. The local government committee warns them not to see or talk to him, and to report him if he tries to make contact. He does make contact, and his wife prepares to meet him. The daughter, however, was only three when her father was arrested, and she doesn't know him. She is a dancer and is desperate to dance the lead in the ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*, and, believing it will help her career, notifies the authorities. He is captured and taken back to prison. Three years later, the Cultural Revolution is over and he is released. At last, he is coming home. But Yu has suffered psychogenic amnesia and she does not recognize him. Once again, Zhang uses powerful visual images to tell the simple but heartbreaking story. I must confess that occasionally I wanted the actors to move a bit faster. Must be the American in me. The movie is decidedly not political, but A. O. Scott, the *New York Times* critic sees the film as a metaphor for recovering from the Cultural Revolution. He writes, *Peace, this movie suggests, comes at the price of memory. Recovering from catastrophe and forgetting about it may amount to the same thing.* Not many, I fear, will seek out this quiet yet compelling story. Ads have compared it to *Dr. Zhivago*. That is a stretch, but if you like beautifully photographed and acted movies, Gary and I recommend this one. **GRADE B**

THE COMMUTER: (2017) After seeing two atmospheric and slow-moving movies that engage your senses and your mind, I decided to take in some mindless entertainment. After leaving this movie, however, Gary and I agreed that "mindless" doesn't work for us. This Liam Neeson thriller was certainly not one that engaged our minds. Neeson, although a bit geriatric for this kind of role, does have a particular set of skills. In *The Commuter* those skills seem to be surviving a fist fight where one punch would be enough to incapacitate a normal man. Neeson plays a former NYPD cop who now sells insurance and commutes from the burbs every day. One particularly bad day he meets a woman on the train who gives him a task and offers a substantial reward. He is to find the one person that doesn't belong on the train and put a GPS tracker in his or her bag. The mysterious woman was nicely played by Vera Farmiga and Gary commented that her scenes were the most interesting. Too bad there were only two scenes between Neeson and Farmiga. The ridiculous plot depends on miraculous coincidences with cell phones and a lot of killing. Oh, and a CGI train crash that was so excessive that it was laughable. The only thing I can say for this movie is that it kept me awake. If you like Liam Neeson and his special skills, we suggest you see the original 2008 *Taken* and avoid *The Commuter*. **GRADE D**

THE COMPANY: (2003 release seen on video.) The plot is almost non-existent, but the ballet scenes are beautiful in this Robert Altman directed film. Neve Campbell is a young dancer who is poised to be a principal performer, and Malcolm McDowell plays the artistic director of the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago. For anyone who loves ballet. **THUMBS UP**

THE COMPANY MEN: It is a story that needs to be told and the timing is excellent. Corporate downsizing causes three men, played by Ben Affleck, Tommy Lee Jones, and Chris Cooper, to lose their jobs. When a person loses a job in an economy that makes it difficult, if

not impossible, to find another, that person loses not only an income but also self-respect. Both Barbara and I liked the film, in spite of the fact that it focused on three corporate executives and only subtly dealt with the thousands of lower paid workers who were crushed by downsizing. One critic observed that the message might be "Greedy, scum-sucking corporate parasites are people too." Sorry. That is far too cynical and the three leads do turn out to be very sympathetic. We have come to expect the fine acting of Jones and Cooper. But Ben Affleck, who has frequently been harshly dealt with by critics, is terrific in this role. Supporting roles played by Craig T. Nelson, Kevin Costner, Maria Bello and Rosemarie DeWitt are also outstanding. The film is set in 2008, but the economic problems fueling the story are still very much with us. Barbara and I agree that this is a film many of our readers will want to see. **GRADE B**

THE COMPANY YOU KEEP: (2012) What a cast! Robert Redford, Susan Sarandon, Julie Christie, Chris Cooper, Shia LaBeouf, Nick Nolte, Sam Elliot, Terrence Howard, Richard Jenkins, Stanley Tucci, Anna Kendrick, Brendan Gleeson and other recognizable faces. These famous faces are the real reason to see *The Company You Keep*. I guess when director Redford calls, everyone answers—and the answer is "yes!" This directing effort isn't up there with the famous actor's best, but it tells a story that resonated with us because we remember the days when people actively protested the Vietnam War. We remember the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and we remember that some protestors became dissatisfied with peaceful protest and turned to violence. This movie is about a group called The Weather Underground whose goal was to overthrow the government. They bombed several government buildings and banks and once robbed a Brinks armored car resulting in the death of three people. In Redford's movie, several members are accused of robbing a bank and killing a guard. The FBI has been searching for them for thirty years. The movie opens with a suburban housewife (Sarandon) preparing to turn herself in when she is apprehended by the FBI. An ambitious reporter (LaBeouf) is able to discover the identity of Redford's character as one of her alleged accomplices. Redford goes on the run after depositing his 11-year-old daughter with his brother (Cooper). The resulting chase by both the reporter and the FBI takes several unusual turns—turns that we didn't always find convincing. Peter Travis (Rolling Stone) wrote, "Right-wingers have their panties in a bunch misreading Robert Redford's *The Company You Keep* as a celebration of the Weather Underground." That is not Redford's message. He is, however, interested in how the idealism of the sixties became corrupted by groups like the Weather Underground. The film also points out that conditions today aren't that much different than they were in the sixties, but that it is, perhaps, the absence of a draft that keeps most young people paying more attention to Facebook than to politics. Although the movie and its outstanding cast held our interest, we can't give it a top grade. **GRADE B/B**

COMPLIANCE: This movie is based on an actual 2004 event that took place at a McDonald's in Mount Washington, Ky. For Barbara and me, this ninety minute film may go down as the most memorable, gripping and disturbing film of the year. That is partly because when we were in college, we both studied the social psychology research of behavioral scientist Stanley Milgram who ran experiments at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to do so by an authority figure. In this film Sandra, a middle-aged manager at a fast-food restaurant, receives a phone call from a police officer accusing one of her employees, Becky, of stealing money from a customer's purse. The officer requests the cooperation of Sandra in the detention and search of Becky. Thus begins a chilling nightmare that involves the excessive and prolonged invasions of a young woman's privacy and leading to sexual humiliation. Once it begins, there is the air of inevitability that makes us contemplate profound questions about compliance and human behavior. By the end of the ordeal we would like to take refuge in the comfort that this must have been an aberration, a singular event. Then we are slammed with the information that 70 similar deceptions occurred in the United States in the prior decade. Powerful performances and sensitive direction make the film footage so believable that you may think you are watching a documentary. Sadly, I fear that none of our readers will have an opportunity to see *Compliance* on a large screen. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was scheduled into only one small theater for a one week run in Phoenix. Try Netflix. **GRADE B+/A-**

CONCUSSION: (2015) I may never watch football in quite the same way after watching this movie. Will Smith is Dr. Bennet Omalu, a brilliant Pittsburgh pathologist, who in 2002 discovers a brain anomaly in a former Steeler who died young and troubled. The anomaly was later called CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy. It derives from repeated concussions, and football players can experience a concussion on any given Sunday. Smith uses his considerable charm to tell the story of the doctor who took on the NFL to expose the effect that repeated concussions have on football players. It was not Omalu's intention to destroy the NFL, but he felt that players should know the possibility of lasting injury from contact on the football field. Gugu Mbatha-Raw plays the young woman who becomes Dr. Omalu's wife, and she is as lovely as she was in 2013's *Belle*. Albert Brooks adds some humor in the role of the coroner of Allegheny County. There are stories on the web that Sony altered the movie to avoid NFL protests, but I thought the movie presented some damning evidence that the NFL went to great lengths to deny that the game might be injuring players, even though they knew better. In 2011, seven former NFL players, including Scottsdale's Jim McMahon, sued the NFL for failing to properly treat them for concussions. Two years later there were more than 4,800 named player-plaintiffs in 242 concussion-related lawsuits. Gary thinks the film should have given the NFL credit for no longer allowing head to head contact, but some might say that was too late with too little. A theatre usher we spoke to after seeing *Concussion*, said he believed the NFL should design new concussion-proof helmets. That will help. An NFL executive in the movie worried what would happen if even 10% of mothers decided to not let their sons play football. Will Smith talked about that. He said in an interview that he wouldn't prohibit his son from playing football but he would do everything in his power to convince him that it wasn't a good idea. Gary and I will be watching the Cardinals on Sunday, but I'm afraid the memory of *Concussion* will have an effect on us. We give this one high marks—higher than some of the critics. **GRADE A**

CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND: Since I rate this film slightly higher than Barbara, I volunteered to do the review. The film is based on a 1984 Chuck Barris book humorously titled *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind: An Unauthorized Autobiography*. With that title, it is impossible to know what in the film, if anything to take seriously. It plays a little with your mind, as one would expect in a screenplay by Charlie Kaufmann (Being John Malkovich, Adaptation). Chuck Barris, creator of TV fare like *The Dating Game*, and *The Gong Show* also claims to have killed 33 people as a CIA operative. George Clooney who directs as well as takes a major role in the film wisely leaves room for considerable interpretation. Sam Rockwell perfectly inhabits the role of Chuck Barris. Drew Barrymore is well cast as Barris's girlfriend, Penny, and Julia Roberts and George Clooney fill out a talented cast. Rutger Hauer is memorable in a cameo role. The film is well acted, well directed, thought provoking, and I think, a lot of fun. **Grade: B/B-**

CONFESSIONS OF A SHOPAHOLIC: This movie is adapted from a series of popular books by Sophie Kinsella. I read one of the books and although I can't remember much about it, the book was enjoyable while I was reading it. I suspected that the movie would be the same. I was wrong. It was definitely forgettable but I didn't enjoy watching it. The movie tried desperately to be funny, but came off as merely desperate. The screenwriters were apparently unable to duplicate the charm of the books. They relied far too much on pratfalls and slapstick to make up for the lack of clever dialogue. Even Julie Hagerty, so funny in those Airplane movies, couldn't help. I hoped that I would at least enjoy the fashions, being something of a shopper myself, but I thought the clothes were bizarre. Some of the combinations reminded me of the clothes worn by Betty on TV's Ugly Betty, and they are supposed to look awful. Isla Fisher, who plays the shopaholic, is undeniable cute, but she needed better material to shine. Joan Cusack and John Goodman played Fisher's parents and they were both way over the top. The only actor who played it straight was Hugh Dancy as Fisher's boss and love interest, and he came off looking the best. Gary really disliked this movie and said that whatever grade I gave it, he would be two grades lower. If I say D+, that makes his grade G+ (?). The only reason that we went to this one is that we were desperate to see a movie, and there's not much out there this time of the year. We should have stayed home. **GRADE D+**

CONFIDENCE: Ed Burns and Rachel Weisz make a pretty good pair of grifters in this year's version of that all-time great confidence-game film, *The Sting*. Of course, it can't compare to that great Newman/Redford film, and it isn't as good as David Mamet's *The House of Games* either. The plot is well crafted and it looks great, but, as Roger Ebert said in his review, you don't care much about the people. It's interesting to follow the twist and turns of the plot, but not particularly involving. We thought Burns was appropriately cool under pressure, and we very much enjoyed Dustin Hoffman's sleezy crime boss. This is the second film we've seen recently with Rachel Weisz (See our review of *The Shape of Things*). She is both beautiful and skilled--we hope to see a lot more of her. Andy Garcia appears as Gunther Butan, a Federal Agent hot on the trail of Jake Vig (Ed Burns), and he does his best to create a unique character, with limited success. The ubiquitous Luis Guzman plays a cop in the film--half as smart and twice as crooked as the criminals he arrests. The theater was cool and our Phoenix weather was over 100°, so it was a reasonably pleasant afternoon. **Grade B-**

CONNIE AND CARLA: This film received mixed reviews from the professional critics. Roger Ebert says the plot is creaky and the jokes laborious. The Chicago Tribune says it is pleasurable but uneven, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution gives the film a B+ and calls it uproarious. It also received mixed reviews in our household. I thought the corny situations and lame script were only worth a C. Gary liked it quite a lot and gave it a solid B. ***Connie and Carla*** is a take-off on ***Some Like It Hot***. (One critic referred to it as "Some Like It Warm.") Connie and Carla are two mediocre singers whose ultimate goal is to star in dinner theater productions. Debbie Reynolds is their idol. When they witness a mob hit, they run away from Chicago to Los Angeles where they hide out as drag queen performers. Since all they do to impersonate drag queens is to slather on layers of makeup, wear outrageous wigs and pitch their voices a bit lower, they really aren't all that hidden. Surprisingly, they become stars--the darlings of the mostly gay audience in West Hollywood. Nina Vardalos of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* fame is Connie and Toni Collette, looking remarkably different from her usual movie persona, is Carla. In ***Some Like It Hot*** Tony Curtis, as a woman, falls in love with Marilyn Monroe. In this movie, Vardalos, impersonating a man impersonating a woman, falls in love with David Duchovny, a man trying to come to terms with his drag queen brother. The musical numbers were the best things in the movie and I was impressed with Collette's ability to handle the production numbers so convincingly. She does make for a scary-looking drag queen, though. **GRADE B/C**

THE CONSPIRATOR: It was more than thirty years ago when Robert Redford made his directorial debut with *Ordinary People*. For that, he won an Academy Award for Best Director. Since that early success in the director's chair, his efforts have been met with mixed reviews. ***The Conspirator*** is a historical drama. It deals with a slice of history that nearly everyone knows a little about, but few know much more than the superficial high points. Based on a true story, Redford brings us the aftermath of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth. It was a turbulent time and there were enormous political pressures for swift and harsh punishment to anyone connected to the crime. Instead of a movie about Abraham Lincoln or John Wilkes Booth, this film focuses on the role of Mary Surratt who owned the boarding house where the conspirators frequently met. The role of Surratt is beautifully played by Robin Wright Penn. James McAvoy flawlessly plays a Civil War veteran and young lawyer assigned to defend Surratt before a military tribunal rather than a trial by jury in a civilian court. The legal and philosophical questions raised in the film forces one to see parallels in the post 9/11 aftermath. I feel sure that this film will draw criticism, but Barbara and I were so drawn into the compelling story and excellent acting that we are willing to forgive weaknesses. **GRADE B+**

THE CONSTANT GARDENER: Based on a novel by John Le Carre, this film is an indictment of the pharmaceutical companies that test their new drugs on the disadvantaged people of Africa. When the testing doesn't go well, it's easier to alter the test results than it is to take the drug back to the laboratory and improve it. The drug companies are aided by governments—in this case, the British government. Justin Quaye (Ralph Finnes) is a medium-level government official living in Kenya. His wife, Tessa (the beautiful Rachel Weisz), is murdered at the beginning of the film, and we learn the particulars of her death along with Justin. We do not know just what Tessa was doing in Africa, but it gradually becomes clear that she had discovered a conspiracy that was killing people. Justin believes that to honor his wife he must uncover the conspiracy. It takes a while to get into the meat of the story, but eventually it becomes quite gripping. Bill Nighy, so amusing as the aging rock star in *Love, Actually*, makes a very proper, and thoroughly evil, bureaucrat. Danny Huston (*The Aviator*, *21 Grams*) appears to be Justin's friend, but proves to be duplicitous. Finnes is wonderfully sympathetic as a man who has doubts about his wife's fidelity but eventually discovers just how courageous and noble she was. The film has some wonderful photography of Kenya, some fine acting, and a strong point of view. A.O. Scott, of the NY Times said, "The movie shows a willingness to risk didacticism in the service of encouraging discussion." He believes that would be annoying "if (Fernando) Meirelles were not such a skilled and subtle filmmaker and if his cast were not so sensitive and sly." **GRADE B+**

THE CONTENDER: The performances are the best things in this political drama written and directed by Rod Lurie. Joan Allen as Senator Laine Hanson is certain to get an Academy Award nomination. President Evans (Jeff Bridges) has nominated Senator Hanson to fill the vacant office of Vice President. Gary Oldman is Rep. Shelly Runyon a conservative Republican who is determined to sabotage the liberal Senator's confirmation. He so inhabits his character that if I hadn't known it was Oldman playing the part I would never have recognized him. He, too, is a cinch to be recognized at award time. There is a terrific lunch meeting between Hanson and Runyon. We also liked Jeff Bridges as a Clinton-like president who is obsessed with ordering food from the White House Kitchen. It was nice to see

him with a good haircut for a change. Sam Elliott is Chief of Staff and Christian Slater is a freshman representative who allies himself with Runyon but proves to be more principled in the end. Napoleon is quoted in the film as saying that a leader needs both pettiness and greatness-pettiness in order to get into power and greatness to lead. Both qualities are evident in the politicians depicted in *The Contender*. Lurie wrote this film for Allen and he refused to do the film with anyone else in the lead role. I thought a couple of the plot elements lacked credibility, so I settled on a grade of B+. I would, however, give the performances an A. The plot devices didn't bother Gary—he thought it was a solid A movie. **GRADE: B+/A**

CONTAGION: This movie is billed as an action/thriller, but there really isn't much action and nothing that I'd call thrilling. There is, however, a lot of interesting material about how quickly a disease can spread, especially when it is a virus that spreads by merely touching something an infected person has touched. The film introduces some compelling human stories: Marion Cottillard is a World Health doctor who is kidnapped and held for ransom—the ransom being a supply of vaccine for a village in China; Matt Damon, a man whose wife (Gwyneth Paltrow) and stepson die from the disease, struggles to keep his daughter safe; Kate Winslett is a CDC doctor who succumbs to the deadly virus; Lawrence Fishburne is a CDC doctor who comes under investigation by Homeland Security; Elliott Gould is a research doctor who disobeys an order to shut down his research and destroy his samples; and Jennifer Ehle is a researcher who tests a promising vaccine on herself. Hovering on the fringes of the medical community is Jude Law, a blogger who believes the government is in bed with the drug companies. Law touts a homeopathic remedy to his millions of followers and makes a tidy sum while doing it. With this many stories, and stars, it's easy to see why none of them has much screen time, and none of the stories reaches the "thriller" category. But you do get a good idea of the science behind vaccine development and an overview of what might happen to our way of life if a deadly virus spread exponentially killing millions of people worldwide. The scientific elements in the story make it seem more like a documentary, and Gary felt that none of the stories was dramatic enough to pull him in. We were reminded of the 1995 film, *Outbreak* about the Ebola Virus starring Dustin Hoffman, which relied on more drama and less science. While *Contagion* may not frighten the average moviegoer as much as the idea of vampires, it might make them wash their hands more often. I know we both did so as soon as we got home. I was more intrigued with the overall view than Gary was and I rate the movie a bit higher. **GRADE B/B-**

CONTRABAND: (2012) I was in the mood for a mindless thriller and I like Mark Wahlberg, so we took a chance on this one. For us, it was just so-so. Wahlberg plays a former smuggler who, to protect his brother-in-law, Andy, from a drug lord, heads to Panama to score millions of dollars in counterfeit bills. He hires out on a container ship captained by J.K. Simmons, playing something less than his usual "good guy." Ben Foster is Wahlberg friend, who turns out to be more of an enemy. There are lots of bad guys here. Notable among them is Giovanni Ribisi* who plays the evil drug lord who is after Andy. Kate Beckinsale is Wahlberg's wife. Everyone acquits themselves well and there are some tense moments, but to really enjoy this kind of film, you have to be willing to suspend a lot of disbelief. A lot! Neither of us was caught up enough in the story to handle all the complications, coincidences and incredulities. **GRADE C**

CONVICTION: Justice prevails, but its wheels move slowly. So does this movie up until the end. *Conviction* tells the story of Kenny Waters who was sentenced to life in prison for murder in 1983 on the basis of two witnesses and on crime scene blood evidence—blood evidence which eventually freed him. His sister, Betty Ann, was so completely convinced of his innocence that she spent the next 18 years working to get his conviction overturned. A high school dropout, she graduated from college, went to law school and passed the bar exam, all so that Kenny could have a lawyer who truly cared about proving him innocent. Along the way she had the help of Barry Scheck of The Innocence Project. Upon gaining his freedom in 2001, Waters is quoted as saying, "Sisters are the best things in the world. Always take care of your sisters. They'll take care of you." In telling this true-life story, director Tony Goldwyn does his best to keep things moving, showing flashback scenes to Kenny and Betty Ann's troubled childhood. Hillary Swank was the perfect choice to play the crusading Betty Ann. She has the dramatic intensity to make the character believable. Sam Rockwell gives an inspired performance as Kenny, a man who had some behavior issues but was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted. One of the emotional highlights of the film is when the original crime scene blood evidence is discovered—evidence that the authorities claimed had been destroyed—and DNA testing exonerated Kenny. But even that compelling evidence did not result in his immediate release. As I said, the wheels move slowly. For me, the most powerful statement in the film was when Betty Ann told Kenny's daughter, now a grown woman, that if Massachusetts had had the death penalty, her father would be dead. There is no better argument against the death penalty than that there have been 261 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the United States since 1989. In spite of terrific acting and a few emotional moments, the film never quite rose to the level of great filmmaking. We give it a solid B. **GRADE B**

THE COOLER: Bernie is a loser. So much a loser that he works as a "cooler" for the fictitious Shangri La casino in downtown Vegas. All he has to do is touch a roulette wheel to make it come up on house numbers. If he stands behind a player at the crap table, the shooter is sure to lose. His presence at a Blackjack table guarantees the dealer will get a Blackjack. But then something extraordinary happens. Bernie falls in love with Natalie, a Shangri La cocktail waitress, and his bad luck evaporates. This is good for Bernie, but bad for his boss, Shelly (Alec Baldwin) who doesn't want to lose the best cooler in the business. Baldwin is remarkable as the old-school casino manager who is being threatened by younger men who want to remake the Shangri La. Shelly is a contradictory combination of cruelty and sentimentality, and Baldwin is totally credible. It is a notable performance. Of course, William H. Macy is perfect at bringing the nebbishy Bernie to life. His Howdy Doody grin is a wonder to behold. Maria Bello (she played a doctor on TV's *ER*) is wonderful as Natalie and she and Macy make the surprising love story believable and touching. Paul Sorvino is very good in a brief appearance as a washed-up singer. This is quite a story and we thought it was beautifully directed and acted. The film is rated R for nudity, language and violence, and there's quite a bit of all three. But if that doesn't bother you, be all means see *The Cooler!* (Did I mention that it's also quite funny?) **GRADE A-**

CORIOLANUS: Shakespeare is regarded by many as the greatest writer in the English language. Others go out of their way to avoid the bard. So if you are one who loves Shakespeare's and you are not a purist who abhors plays filmed in modern dress, you may find this film well worth your time. In his first film as a director, Ralph Fiennes casts himself in the leading and title role of Coriolanus, the name given a revered and feared Roman General. It has been 400 years since Shakespeare wrote this gut-wrenching tragedy. Automatic weapons replace swords while cell phone cameras, TV broadcasts, and other modern technology remind us that the setting

is not ancient Rome. But even though technology and dress may be different, politics and human nature will look familiar. Coriolanus is a play rarely seen and probably not one of his best, so I don't think this would be a good introduction for anyone not well acquainted with Shakespeare. Barbara and I agree that Fiennes did an outstanding job in his directorial debut. We were also impressed by the supporting cast which included Gerard Butler, Vanessa Redgrave, Brian Cox, and Jessica Chastain. **GRADE B-**

THE COUNSELOR: Sometimes even a star studded cast, a legendary director, and a Pulitzer Prize winning author fail to put together a good movie. Ridley Scott, director, gave us *Thelma and Louise*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *Alien*. Cormac McCarthy wrote the book *No Country For Old Men* on which the Academy Award winning film was based. Michael Fassbender plays the title role and is backed up by an impressive cast: Penelope Cruz, Brad Pitt, Javier Bardem, and Cameron Diaz. There are many other actors you would likely recognize in cameo roles. Many individual scenes play well and may even be quite memorable. Sometimes they seem like they would work well as acting exercises, but they don't hold together to make a good movie. As we were leaving the theater, I commented to Barbara that someone confused ambiguity and obfuscation for profundity. She pointed out that it was McCarthy's first film script, but offered the hope that it might be his last. You may have deduced a lack of our enthusiasm for *The Counselor*. **GRADE D**

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO: The classic tale of love, betrayal and revenge, written by Alexandre Dumas, is retold here in a gloriously old-fashioned style. No attempt has been made to update the story or to add any glitzy special effects. And that's the way it ought to be. It reminded us of the movies we used to see as kids, except better photographed and better acted. James Caviezel (Frequently) is the perfect hero. He is equally good as the bitter imprisoned Edmund Dantes, and as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo. Guy Pearce (Momento, L.A. Confidential) is easy to loathe as the evil Mondego--the man who betrayed his friend. James Frain, as Villefort the villainous prosecutor who sent Dantes to prison, is a proper weasel. The love of Edmund Dantes's life, Mercedes, is played by an actress named Dagmara Dominczyk whom we had never seen before. Richard Harris is wonderful as an imprisoned priest--the man who teaches Dantes to read and write and, oh yes, to wield a sword with devastating effect. This is great fun. We recommend it. **GRADE B**

THE COUNTERFEITERS: Winner of this year's foreign-language Oscar, this fact-based drama from Austria demonstrates that not all the good stories from WWII have been told. The engaging and ethically provocative screenplay is based on a memoir by Adolf Burger who is now 90 and living in Prague. He was part of the world's largest counterfeiting operation, which was set up by the Nazis to destabilize the economies of Great Britain and United States. The operation was staffed by concentration camp prisoners. The lead is ably played by Karl Markovics who portrays a master forger and a skilled artist who learned before the war he could make more money by printing money than by making conventional art. As a Jew in a concentration camp he would never have survived without his unusual skill. But the film also explores his human side, which makes for a moving film experience. Both Barbara and I thought this was a well made film. **GRADE B+**

COUNTRY STRONG: If you're a fan of country you'll enjoy the music in this one. But, if country music isn't your thing and you like a story with a captivating plot line and well-developed characters, you probably should skip this movie. Gwyneth Paltrow is Kelly Cantor, a singing star whose career is in decline. She has been in and out of rehab for the last several years. Her last concert in Dallas was a disaster, resulting in a fall that caused a miscarriage. Tim McGraw plays Kelly's husband and manager who encourages her to begin a three concert tour ending with a triumphal return to Dallas. On the tour we see Kelly fall off the wagon several times, relationships are hinted at, but rarely developed, and McGraw doesn't sing. He mostly looks depressed over his wife's sad condition. There is a nice scene when Kelly visits a young cancer patient, but for the most part, the movie is nothing more than a buildup to the Dallas concert. That concert doesn't disappoint, though. Gwyneth Paltrow proves she has country music chops and she puts on a good show that is almost worth the wait. She does do a great job on the title song. For us, though, the standout in *Country Strong* is Garrett Hedlund who plays a young singer-song writer who became close to Kelly when she was in rehab. (And yes, "close" is a euphemism.) He travels with the tour and we hear him sing quite a few times. Hedlund is a 26-year-old actor from Scottsdale, AZ who has had great success since he graduated from high school and went to Los Angeles to be an actor. He has landed significant roles in *Troy*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *Four Brothers*. We were surprised, however, that none of his credits involve singing, nor is music mentioned in his bio. We thought for certain he was a budding country music star. There is a barely developed All-About-Eve plotline involving a cute young singer (Leighton Meester) who is hired to open for Kelly, and she and Paltrow have a good scene toward the end of the movie. After a slow beginning, the movie picked up for Gary in the second half and his grade gradually reached C+. Because of the music, I can agree with that. **GRADE C+**

COUPLES RETREAT: You won't find many surprises in this film, but there are a few chuckles. Both Barbara and I like Vince Vaughn and we decided to give this couples comedy a try in spite of the lack of enthusiasm from the professional critics. In a director's chair for the first time is Peter Billingsley (Remember the cute kid, Ralphie, in *A Christmas Story*?) Four Midwestern couples get a bargain rate on a tropical island vacation only to learn that couples therapy is a mandatory part of the package. This provides an opportunity for a few laughs and a few groans, but, if you like Vince Vaughn and Jon Favreau, a pleasant couple of hours. We thought the ensemble cast brought energy to a predictable script. Even the French guru (Jean Reno) and the "over-the-top" yoga instructor who was a Fabio look alike brought a few smiles. There will be no Academy Award nominations coming from this film, but we think it has enough in it to recommend a slightly above average grade. **GRADE C+**

THE COURIER 2021 (Available for streaming on Prime Video for \$19.99 rental, but for the first time in over a year Barbara and I went to a real theater with a large screen. We were the only people there.) Based on a true story, *The Courier* is a suspenseful, old-fashioned British spy thriller. It may be low-key on action, but the tension will get your pulse racing. Benedict Cumberbatch plays an unassuming British businessman who ferried secrets between Great Britain and the then-Soviet Union during one of the greatest international conflicts in history: the Cuban Missile Crisis. The movie is brutally honest about the decidedly unglamorous side of spying. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 is significant because it was the closest we've ever come to a nuclear war. If it were not for the events dramatized in this film, we could be looking at quite a different world today. Oleg Penkovsky was a Russian willing to betray his country to stop a nuclear holocaust. He was brilliantly played by Merab Ninidze who was born in the USSR in 1962. That was the same year as

the Cuban Missile Crisis. Penkovsky provided crucial intelligence that gave the U.S. a strategic edge that helped end the conflict between the U.S. and the USSR. For me it was an A movie. Barb thinks we give too many A's. **GRADE A/B+**

THE COVE: Let me start with a little honesty. The Cove is an award winning and heartbreaking documentary that almost no one will see. That is just a harsh reality that documentary film makers face. They are often as skilled and passionate as the makers of more popular films, but their passion, dedication, and skill is rarely rewarded with a large audience. This well made documentary is about the slaughter of dolphins and I confess that the memory of this film will forever change my attitude toward a multi-billion dollar industry that has entertained me in the past. If you were born before 1960, your image of dolphins was probably influenced by a popular TV show, Flipper. Flipper was an intelligent, playful, and lovable bottlenose dolphin played by five lovable dolphins that had been captured and trained by Ric O'Barry. Flipper was so popular around the world that it directly (or indirectly) led to the enormous popularity of shows using trained dolphins. There is now an enormous demand for healthy unblemished dolphins. So how could this lead to the barbaric slaughter of thousands of dolphins every year? That is the story Ric O'Barry would like to spread. He and a large filming crew risked jail time and possible physical retaliation to make a documentary that sometimes plays like a spy thriller. Barbara and I agree on an above average grade. **GRADE B**

COWBOYS, 2020/2021 (on Hulu) Parents often have difficulty when their child feels he or she is in the wrong body. In the movie's case, it's a young girl named Josie that thinks she was meant to be a boy. Her mom, Sally (Jillian Bell), thinks it's just a phase, but Josie's father, Troy (Steve Zahn) believes her and begins to treat her as a boy. Troy is, I think, Bi-Polar and one scene indicates that he is also an alcoholic. Troy and Sally are separated, but not yet divorced, at the film's opening, but when Josie cuts her hair and says she wants to live with her dad, things come to a climax. Sally threatens to call the police, and Troy, who already had spent some time in jail, told Joe/Josie that he would come for him and to be ready. The preamble is told in flashbacks combined with scenes of father and son in flight. There is a horse involved, hence the title.) Troy has a poorly formed plan to get them to Canada, but things rapidly deteriorate, especially when he loses the medicine which keeps him relatively stable. Ann Dowd (Aunt Lydia on the *Handmaid's Tale*) plays a sympathetic detective who searches for the girl whom the police believe has been kidnapped. We applaud Ann Kerrigan for directing this sensitive movie about gender identity, but Gary and I were not enthusiastic about Kerrigan's writing. The script should have been better. Zahn and Bell are excellent and Sasha Knight, so credible as Joe/Josie, is trans-generated in real life. The movie is certainly watchable, but we find it difficult to understand the high grades it got from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*. The film did well on the festival circuit, because it's that kind of movie. However, we saw many places where the script resorted to unrealistic dialogue and melodrama, and we can't give it a high grade. We agree with the critic who said it was too "happy ever after." **GRADE C+**

COWBOYS & ALIENS: First I must explain my dilemma. Since I was a small boy I have loved cowboy movies, but I am put off by most alien movies. Still, the creative juxtaposition made me curious and the casting of Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford was enough to take Barbara and me to the theater the day the film opened. O.K., it is a little gimmicky, but as one critic put it, "you get two "B" movies for the price of one." The setting is 19th century Arizona so there is plenty of beautiful rugged landscape. Daniel Craig stars and in a better than average opening scene wakes up wounded with no memory of who he is or how a strange metal bracelet he can't remove got onto his wrist. After being introduced to a requisite number of old west stereotypes, the town is predictably attacked by familiar looking aliens in weird flying machines. There are a fair amount of chuckles in the film and if you can get past the unlikeliness of massive fast-moving aliens being killed with mostly light old west weaponry, you may actually enjoy *Cowboys and Aliens*. We did and so did regular readers Lee and Diane U from Cave Creek, AZ. In spite of any reservations, we agree on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

THE CRADLE WILL ROCK: The Cradle Will Rock was a labor of love for Writer/director Tim Robbins. People interested in theater will appreciate the historical value of the subject matter. The Federal Theater Project was part of Roosevelt's WPA, and produced plays all over the country from 1935 until 1939. This movie tells the story of a musical/drama that was directed by Orson Wells and produced by John Houseman. The Cradle Will Rock was mounted in 1937, when the Federal Theater Project was already in trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee@-- accused of having communists working for the project. Budget cuts forced theaters to close, and when the actors and audience came to the theater on opening night, they were denied entry. Houseman was able to find another space, and lead the entire crowd down the middle of the street to the new theater. One mistake Robbins made was to try to tell too many stories. He included Nelson Rockefeller's conflict with Diego Rivera over a mural, and Mussolini's efforts to get money for his war effort by selling great works of art. I think many moviegoers will be puzzled as to what it's all about. In addition, Robbins used a lot of motion shots which can be difficult to watch, and he was overly fond of overlapping dialogue. However, we did talk about it afterwards, and that's a good sign. We saw the film with our niece, Kate Jordan. She liked it better than we did and would give it a B. Gary votes for B- and I can only go as high as C+. **GRADE C+/B-**

CRASH: "In any other city, you brush past people. In L.A. nobody touches. Sometimes we crash into each other just to touch." Don Cheadle, an LA detective, speaks these opening words. He is a passenger in car that has been rear-ended on a freeway. This movie introduces many characters whose stories overlap in sometimes surprising ways. Director Paul Haggis (screenwriter for *Million Dollar Baby*) keeps the viewer totally involved as he shows us the many ways that we form snap judgements about people based on race. LA is truly a melting pot and race relations are a tricky business in that sprawling city. In addition to Cheadle's detective, we meet his Hispanic partner & lover (Jennifer Esposito), a racist cop (Matt Dillon), a rookie cop (Ryan Phillippe), a district attorney (Brendan Frazier) and his angry wife (Sandra Bullock), two car-jacking young black men, an upscale Black television director (Terrance Howard) and his beautiful wife (Thandie Newton), a Persian storeowner, and a Korean couple. One of the tag lines for the film is: *Moving at the speed of life, we are bound to collide with each other*. It is the collisions of these lives that keep us engrossed. None of the people are all good or all bad. Each one is prejudiced in his/her own way. As are we all. The New York Times reviewer found the film to be crudely manipulative, while Peter Travers of Rolling Stone thought that despite its preachy moments, the film is a knockout. We agree with Travers. This is one of the best films of the year. **GRADE A**

CRAZY/BEAUTIFUL: The plot of this teenage romance is pretty standard: Two high school students from opposite sides of the tracks fall in love. Nicole (Kirsten Dunst) lives in the Malibu Hills with her Congressman father and wicked stepmother, while Carlos (Jay Hernandez) spends two hours getting from his home in the barrio to Pacific High in Malibu. He is a good student and hopes to enter the Naval Academy and become a pilot. She hates high school and cuts class most of the time. She is suicidal and totally messed up. He

lives with his mother, studies hard and is upright in every way. She wears almost nonexistent crop tops and has that Meg Ryan "I'm too cool to comb my hair" hairstyle. What distinguishes **Crazy/Beautiful** is the script. Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi are credited with the writing, and it is much better than average. According to Roger Ebert, the story, which has an appealing toughness, would have been even tougher "if the studio hadn't toned it down to get the PG-13 rating." But even a good script doesn't guarantee success. You have to have actors capable of bringing the story to life and making the viewer care. Fortunately, Dunst and Hernandez are more than equal to the task. Dunst is probably the best of the very young actors working today. She was outstanding in *Virgin Suicides*. The handsome Hernandez is a newcomer to the screen, but I expect we will see more of him in the future. Bruce Davison plays Nicole's clueless father and Lucinda Jenney is Courtney, the stepmother who has given up on Nicole, has an effective scene toward the end of the film. **GRADE B+**

CRAZY HEART: Jeff Bridges is at the top of his game in this film, but he has been at the top of his game since his first major film role in 1971's *The Last Picture Show*, for which he earned an Oscar nomination. Barbara and I have watched him nail nearly every role he has played for nearly 40 years. In **Crazy Heart** he plays Bad Blake who has had some success as a country music songwriter and singer, but who seems to be nearing the end of his professional career in an alcoholic haze. He has sunk to performing in bowling alley bars where he can barely afford drinks to satisfy his insatiable need for booze. His personal life is a train wreck too. Failed marriages, failing health, failed finances, and a son who refuses to talk or see him after his two-decade absence. It all sounds ugly, but it's not. It is a delightfully quiet little film that brings back memories of another movie we loved: *Tender Mercies*. That film starred Robert Duvall, who also plays a role in this film. Supporting roles are ably played by the enormous talents of Maggie Gyllenhaal and the always interesting, though uncredited, Colin Farrell. It is an independent film, so it probably will not get wide distribution, but we think *Crazy Heart* is worth extra effort to find. **GRADE A-**

CRAZY RICH ASIANS: (2018) Critics seemed to love this film. It received 93% from 176 reviews counted on Rotten Tomatoes. Audience scores were also high--92%. Barb's witty observation was that they must like "dreck." We were underwhelmed at best. One of the things the movie had going for it was an all-Asian cast. It has been twenty-five years since Hollywood released a film that told an Asian-American story with Asians in all the leading roles. That was **The Joy Luck Club** in 1993. Hollywood should be commended for making and releasing this film. But making a film with an all-black, all female, or all Asian cast must also be supported with a good screenplay, good directing, and dialogue that makes characters complex and interesting. For us **Crazy Rich Asians** was a mix of old rom coms and tired clichés. Casting was good and the movie was filled with beautiful people. A description of the plot makes me think the story had potential. A young Asian-American woman travels to Singapore to meet her boyfriend's family, and is surprised when she discovers they are one of the country's wealthiest families and that her boyfriend is one of its most sought-after bachelors. Perhaps we are being too hard on the film. A girl sitting next to Barb let out an irritating high-pitched laugh several times in nearly every scene. As I remember we never found an incident worthy of a chuckle. **GRADE C-/D+** (We couldn't decide.)

CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE: Since Shakespeare, romantic comedies have relied on coincidence, hidden identities and people in love with people who are in love with someone else. It's true of this movie, but it all works in an enjoyable fashion. This is largely because of a superior cast and directors who, in the words of our local critic, "treat the absurd and the (relatively) profound with equal gravity." Steve Carrell is adept at playing nice guys who find themselves in difficult, though often funny, situations. In **Crazy, Stupid Love**, he is Cal, a nice guy who is trying to move on after his wife of 25 years (Julianne Moore) tells him she wants a divorce, and that she slept with a guy (Kevin Bacon) from her office. Meanwhile, his 13-year-old son is in love with the family's 17-year-old babysitter who, in turn, has a crush on Cal. By chance, Cal meets Jacob (Ryan Gosling looking oh, so cool), a practiced womanizer who beds a different woman every night. Jacob takes Cal under his wing and tries to turn him into a more mature version of himself. And it works---sort of. Jonah Bobo is excellent as Cal's son, and Marisa Tomei has a funny bit as a woman Cal meets in his womanizing phase. Analeigh Tipton is worthy of mention as Jessica, the babysitter and Emma Stone is delightful as one of Jacob's conquests. If you can accept the coincidences and the implausible plot twists that are romcom staples, you'll have fun with this one. **GRADE B**

CREED: (2015) In 1976 **Rocky** took the nation by storm, and Philadelphia has never been the same. There's even a statue of Rocky Balboa in Logan Square. I normally don't care for prize fight movies, but I loved **Rocky**. We've even seen numbers 2, 3, and 4, but we finally had enough and skipped numbers 5 and 6. But **Creed**, although essentially *Rocky 7*, has elements of the original story: a young unknown fighter gets his chance at a title fight. But, like the original, the movie is more than merely a fight story. It's the story of a young boy, the illegitimate son of a famous father, who learns to own the Creed name. He also earns love and respect, and, in the process, gains a family. Michael B. Jordan is wonderful as Adonis Johnson, but we would expect nothing less from the actor we first noticed in TV's *Friday Night Lights*, and later amazed us in **Fruitvale Station**. The 28-year-old Jordan wasn't alive when **Rocky** burst upon the movie scene, but he says he binge-watched the original and the subsequent six films to prepare for his role as Apollo Creed's son. Rescued from juvenile detention by Apollo Creed's widow (Phylicia Rashad), he lives an affluent life in Los Angeles, but he wants to be a fighter. He moves to Philadelphia to convince Rocky Balboa to be his trainer. Balboa considers himself out of the fight game, but the young man is persistent and the Italian Stallion finally gives in. Stallone is surprisingly laid back as an aging former champion. We thought he was terrific. Tessa Thompson is alluring as the love interest, but the movie truly belongs to Jordan and Stallone. And when the familiar "Rocky" music plays toward the end of **Creed**, it's a stirring reminder of everything we loved about the original movie. **GRADE A-**

CREED II: (2018) I usually avoid prize fight movies but remembering how much I liked the **Rocky** movies and that we both enjoyed **Creed** (2015-see Archives for our review) enough to give it an A-, I wanted to see this film. Michael B. Jordan and Sylvester Stallone do not disappoint, but this one is a bit too predictable to give it our highest grade. Dolph Lundgren, who appeared as the Russian fighter who killed Apollo Creed in **Ricky IV**, is back, but not as a fighter. This time he has a son, Victor Drago, who challenges Creed to a championship match. Creed retains his title as World Champ on a technicality, but he is a broken man. Rocky could not be in his corner for the first fight, but it is no surprise that he retracts Creed to fight Drago, who is a bigger and stronger opponent. Tessa Thompson and Phyllis Rashad are back and there's even the birth of a baby. They really did pull out all the stops for this one, but, for me, it didn't have the magic of the **Rocky** movies and paled by comparison to **Creed**. I doubt that we'd bother with *Creed III*. But, for Jordan and Stallone we have to at least give this movie a passing grade. I say B-, but Gary says B. **GRADE B-/B**

CRIP CAMP: 2020 (*Netflix*) Down the road from Woodstock there was Camp Jened, a ramshackle summer camp directed by Larry Allison, where disabled teenagers found the bliss of being "normal" teens. The freedom from constraints that they found there led many of them to become powerful leaders in the Disabled Right Movement of the 70s and 80s. Judith Heumann, a veteran of Crip Camp, was the driving force that eventually led to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability, but the road to that Act was strewn with difficulties. It took determination and fierce dedication by disabled people to take a bill, originally signed by Nixon but never enforced, to 1990 and the ADA. Through protests and sit-ins organized by Heumann, they finally were successful in bringing disabled people their full rights as citizens. Heumann is recognized internationally as a leader in the disability community, and has produced significant contributions since the 1970's to the development of human rights legislation and policies benefiting children and adults with disabilities. Barack and Michelle Obama are executive producers of *Crip Camp*--one of the most powerful, educational and moving documentaries in recent years. It's not always easy to watch but it is illuminating and rewarding. **GRADE A**

CRITICAL THINKING (2020) Based on a true story, *Critical Thinking* focuses on a dedicated teacher who inspires an unlikely group of Latinx and Black teens to become National chess champions. The story takes place in the late 1990's at the Miami Jackson High School in Florida where many students are from financially deprived homes and live in crime-ridden neighborhoods. Heavy issues, such as gang violence, alcoholism, and abusive homes, are somewhat softened with humor. John Leguizamo, American actor, stand-up comedian, producer, playwright and screenwriter stars as a teacher and coach of the ragtag chess team. He also makes his film directorial debut with this movie. *Critical Thinking* has a racially diverse cast (Latino, African American and white people) representing the working-class and middle-class. Barb and I wanted to like this film more than we did, possibly because we had so recently viewed a brilliant series about chess on Netflix: *The Queen's Gambit*. (reviewed in this issue of Movie Views.) **GRADE B-**

CROSSING OVER: (2009 release seen on DVD) Harrison Ford is an immigration officer with a heart in this look at the perils and tragedies of illegal immigration. It is set in Los Angeles and tells several different stories: A Korean family, a Mexican immigrant mother and son, an actress from Australia, an orphaned little girl from Nigeria, and two Middle Eastern families. The lightest of the stories involves a musician (Jim Sturgess) who is an atheist Jew from Great Britain pretending to be devout. Although not without fault, we found it intriguing and worth watching. **THUMBS UP**

CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON: Gary said that only the spectacular scenery kept him from giving this movie a grade of F. He was exquisitely bored with all of it. So many critics have put this film on their ten best lists, that I expect we are missing something. It does have style and the charisma of Chow Yun Fat. It also has unbelievable (and I mean that literally) and beautifully choreographed martial arts sequences that go on and on and on. The flying leaps reminded me of *The Matrix*, so I was not surprised to learn action scenes in *Crouching Tiger* were designed by Yuen Wo-Ping, whose credits include *The Matrix*. The Chinese value an extremely low-key style of acting. While this can be effective sometimes, it doesn't capture your emotions to watch people sit still and talk to each other--interminably--with virtually no facial expression. And the subtitles don't help convey any nuances. I confess to enjoying the scene where a slight young woman destroys a gang of World Federation type goons. It was also interesting to see two women face off with swords. The young love story had its moments, but I can't give this one more than a C- for enjoyment. It does deserve a B for the beauty of the filming. The film was directed by Ang Lee who also directed *The Ice Storm* and *Sense and Sensibility*. **Grade C/D-**

THE CROUPIER: The setup in this film is more interesting than the payoff. Too many loose ends dilute the effectiveness of the ending. Jack (Clive Owen) is an unpublished writer working as a croupier in a London casino. He prides himself on never gambling, yet he is addicted to watching people gamble, especially to watching them lose. He is the ultimate observer--even to the point of observing himself. Jack narrates his own story and refers to himself in the third person. While he never plays any games of chance, he routinely, takes chances with his life. His job at the casino gives him the idea for a novel about a croupier named Jake, and before long the fictional Jake has become Jack's alter ego. Soon Jack is doing things he would never do--things that Jake would do. When he agrees to be the inside man on a plan to rob the casino, he is acting as Jake. (We could never understand exactly why the robbers needed him. That is one of the loose ends.) We liked the mood of the film, the inside look at a casino, and Owen. We also liked Alex Kingston (from TV's *ER*) who played one of the women in his life. **GRADE B**

CRUELLA 2021 (Seen in a real theater.) The two Emmas, Stone and Thompson, are beautifully over-the-top in this backstory of how Cruella came to be the woman she was in the original Disney hit *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. From 1961, we have seen the character in numerous films, books and parodies. *Rotten Tomatoes* has questioned why its title character needed an origin story, but went on the call it a "dazzling visual feast." It is, and the costumes are fabulous. The makeup and settings rival Disney's animation. Even the dogs are adorable. Thompson borrowed a lot from Meryl Streep's character in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Streep stopped short of murder however, and the Baroness does not. Cruella starts out as an exceptional child called Estrella, but when her mother dies, she feels responsible and vows to be a successful designer. Until she grows up, she is a successful pickpocket in the *Oliver Twist* story. Her two colleges in the thieves ring "arrange" to get her a job with the Baroness, a famous designer. We are then treated to a *Cinderella* story in which Estrella suffers all manner of indignities. When she catches the eye of the Baroness, Estrella seems on her way, but the Baroness despises competition, and that's where the movie takes a dark turn. And a long turn. At over 2 hours, it seemed to us interminable. I enjoyed it more than Gary, who only liked one scene and he saw that in the trailer! In an interesting note, Glenn Close, who played the first live-action Cruella DeVil in *101 Dalmatians* (1996) and *102 Dalmatians* (2000), serves as executive producer for this movie. I thought Emma Stone was incredibly good and her hairdo may be an inspiration to some, but I can't give this movie more than a B-. Gary says that, while he can appreciate the acting of the two leads, for his enjoyment he can only give it a C. **GRADE B-/C**

CRY BABY: This 1990 film (seen on video in 2005) is interesting because it was directed by John Waters and stars a relatively young Johnny Depp. It is a parody of *Grease*, with Depp playing "Cry-Baby," a "juvenile delinquent who has the ability to shed just one tear. Amy Locane is Allison, a "square" good girl who has decided she wants to be bad and falls hard for "Cry-Baby." Patricia Hearst and

David Wayne play the parents of Wanda, one of Cry-Baby's gang. Wanda is played by porn star Traci Lords. Like all Waters' films, it is way over the top and quite amusing and the 50s music is lots of fun. For historical interest, we give it a **THUMBS UP**.

THE CUP: (A 1999 release seen on video) This sub-titled film about Tibetan monks living in India was a hit at Sundance this year. The story is an interesting blend of the sacred and the secular. The simple plot revolves around the young monks' efforts to watch the World Cup matches on television. The director, Khyentse Norbu, is a lama who is recognized in his culture as the third incarnation of a leading nineteenth century lama. In this, his first film, he also proves to be a capable filmmaker. He gives us a humorous and gentle glimpse of monks as "real" people. **THUMBS UP**

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON: I loved this movie. So much so, that in spite of its 2 hour and 47 minute running time, I didn't want it to end. It captivated me the entire time. Benjamin Button (Brad Pitt) was born under unusual circumstances: Born with the look and the body of a man in his 80s, he grew younger as he grew up. For Benjamin, the clock of time ran backwards. The film is adapted from a 1920 short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and is an example of how important good writing is to good filmmaking. The film is beautifully photographed, and the technical aspects, while impressive, never detracted from our involvement. Director David Fincher did a marvelous job of making the unbelievable believable. Pitt is wonderful in the role and we also like Tilda Swinton as Benjamin's first love and Cate Blanchett as his last. Although several different people were used to portray Benjamin, the face was always Pitt's. And what a face it is! The Boston Globe critic thought that the movie "Wasn't about anything more important than Pitt's very handsomeness, which. . .is a wonderful subject for study." He got the handsome part right but I think he missed the larger message. The film is about life and its impermanence. It's about learning to appreciate both the perfections and the imperfections of each stage of life. The film is a touching love story and a reminder to us all that, like Benjamin, we cannot stop the clock of time. Lynn W., AZ, a Movie Views reader, also loved the film. She said for her it was a definite A. It is for me, too. Gary agrees. **GRADE A**

CYRANO: 2021 (Prime rental \$5.99) Peter Dinklage is a Cyrano for the ages. Everyone who sees this movie can't argue with that statement. And yet, I wonder why Joe Wright made it a musical. The songs didn't add much except for the letter-writing scene, which was creative. Gary liked the final scene, but he said he would like to see Dinklage in a non-musical version of the classic Rostand play. Wright stuck closely to the original story, which has been made into a film at least 7 times. Steve Martin and Daryl Hannah starred in a modern adaptation in 1987 titled *Roxanne*. Haley Bennett did the honors as Roxanne, although Gary said he'd always thought of Roxanne as a brunet. (Guess he's partial to brunets!) I used to be a singer, and even I found myself cringing when I heard another song begin. I admit to fast forwarding through several musical numbers. But I have to congratulate Wright on the casting of Peter Dinklage. He is the best thing in *Cyrano*. **GRADE B-**

CYRUS: Barbara and I are always delighted when a summer movie gem comes along in what is traditionally a time for "slasher," "thriller," and "horror flicks." Cyrus is an off-beat edgy romantic comedy that, in our opinion, does not have a weak scene in it. Three flawed characters are beautifully played by John C. Reiley, Marisa Tomei, and Jonah Hill. Reiley plays John, a pathetic, but sort of loveable, 8-years-divorced man who is still emotionally dependent on his former wife played by Catherine Keener. Tomei plays Molly, who is a perfect match for John, except for a still attached umbilical cord to her 21 year-old son, Cyrus, played by Hill. The tug-of-war for Molly's affections could be played for broad humor, but the director wisely chooses restraint and goes for honesty over slapstick. The film had a limited release, but we are hoping that word of mouth will lead to wider release and a long successful run. I hope you love this film as much as we did. **GRADE A-**