

## Movie Titles that begin with "F"

50/50 \* 56 Up \* 500 Days of Summer \* 1480 \* 42 \* A Face In The Crowd \* Factotum \* Fahrenheit 9/11 \* Fahrenheit 11/9 \* Failure To Launch \* Fair Game \* The Family \* The Family Fang \* Family Man \* The Family Stone \* A Fantastic Woman \* Far From Heaven \* Far From The Madding Crowd \* The Farewell \* Farewell, My Queen \* The Farewell Party \* The Fast Runner \* The Father \* The Fault In Our Stars \* The Favourite \* Fed Up \* Femme Fatale \* Fences \* Fever Pitch \* Fifteen Minutes \* The Fighter \* Fighting With My Family \* Film Stars Don't Die In Liverpool \* Finding Forrester \* Finding Neverland \* Finding Your Feet \* Fire in the Blood \* Firewall \* First Cow \* The First Grader \* First Man \* First Position \* First Reformed \* The Five-Year Engagement \* Flags of Our Fathers \* Flash of Genius \* Flight \* Flightplan \* Florence Foster Jenkins \* Focus \* The Fog of War \* Food, Inc. \* Footnote \* For Your Consideration \* Force Majeure \* Ford V Ferrari \* Forgetting Sarah Marshall \* Forks Over Knives \* The Founder \* Four Brothers \* Four Christmases \* The 40-Year-Old Virgin \* Foxcatcher \* Fracture \* Francis Ha \* Frank \* Freaks \* Freaky Friday \* Free Guy \* Free Solo \* Freedom Writers \* Frida \* Friday Night Lights \* Friends With Kids \* Friends With Money \* From Hell \* Frontera \* Frost/Nixon \* Frozen II \* Frozen River \* Fruitvale Station \* Fuel \* The Fundamentals of Caring \* Funny People \* Fury \* The Future

**50/50:** Our local reviewer calls 50/50 a "laugh riot," and it is being advertised as a "laugh-out-loud hilarious comedy." If you see advance previews, you will see many, if not most, of the funny scenes. In my opinion, the film is not a laugh riot. It is better than that. It is a moving screen-play inspired by true events in the life of the author, Will Reiser. It is a powerful and moving story that may trigger a few smiles and a couple of chuckles, but far more memorable will be the heartfelt tears you may have to wipe away by the end. The movie deals with a rare and hard to pronounce cancer, but I never felt my emotions were being manipulated. It is warm without being maudlin, and it has an Academy Award worthy performance by the male lead, Joseph Gordon-Levitt. He is natural and believable and will never be accused of overacting. Seth Rogen plays his side kick, Angelica Huston plays his mother, and Anna Kendrick (*Up In The Air*) plays a sympathetic therapist. To go into the story could take away from the film if you should decide to see it. I am sure you can guess to what the odds in the title refer. Barbara liked this film as much as I did and I predict that it is 85/15 that you will be glad you took a chance on this film. OK, cancer sucks, but this film does not. **GRADE A-**

**56 UP:** (2012) This is the latest installment of Michael Apted's documentary project that has followed a group of Britons since they were seven years old in 1964. It began as a current-affairs program on television, and the first film was a 40-minute look at the lives of 14 children from different backgrounds. The documentary makers have checked in with the children every seven years, discussing their lives, their relationships, and their successes and failures especially with regard to the hopes and dreams of their younger selves. There have been a few dropouts along the way but the group remains remarkably intact. One woman, interviewed at 49, said she was not going to continue, but here she is a 56, still part of the group. She said that she has a sense of loyalty to the project even while she dislikes it. The participants are celebrities to people who have watched each installment over the last fifty years. One man, a cabdriver, tells an amusing story of being asked for his autograph. We both remember hearing about the study and Gary is sure that he saw one previous episode, but this is the first installment that I have seen. **56 Up** brings the viewer up-to-date by showing brief segments from earlier interviews. It is striking to see these remarkably verbal 7-year-olds suddenly become middle-agers talking about their grandchildren. Conceived originally as a study of the class system, it demonstrates that little has changed—the rigid class system of Great Britain is alive and well. Though a bit long at 2 hours and 24 minutes, it is a fascinating look at an interesting social experiment. **GRADE B**

**500 DAYS OF SUMMER:** We loved this well-written and creatively filmed romantic comedy. It is not, as the narrator hastens to point out at the very beginning, a love story. It is, however, a story that charmed and surprised us from the first words that appeared on the screen until the unpredictable but completely satisfying ending. Director Marc Webb's decision to show us a few of the 500 days that Tom and Summer spend together in random order was inspired. It isn't at all distracting but rather enhances the story-telling. Webb also included a musical number that could have been absurd but in his deft hands is delightful. Joseph Gordon Levitt plays Tom and Zoey Deschanel is Summer. We first noticed Levitt in *The Lookout* in 2007 but he has been acting in films and on TV since 1988 when he was 7 years old. We first noticed Deschanel, whose sister, Emily, stars in the TV series, *Bones*, in the movie *Failure To Launch* (2006). The movie wasn't very good, but she was memorable in the best friend role. Both are perfect in this quirky and enjoyable film. It opened here in Phoenix in only one theatre, but is scheduled to open more widely. We think you will like this one. **GRADE A-**

**1408:** (2007 film seen on DVD) Supernatural horror films may be our least favorite genre, but this one stars John Cusak, so we decided to take a look. Cusak plays a cynical writer whose books debunk the idea of ghosts, poltergeists, etc. A mysterious postcard advises him to "stay away from Room 1408," so of course he has to discover the location of the room and book a visit. The film is based on a Stephen King short story and, as horror films go, this is a pretty good one. Not good enough to convert us into horror fans, but good enough to recommend. **THUMBS UP**

**42:** (2013) The real life story of Jackie Robinson and his historic signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 is so inspiring that even a script which is a bit hokey at times couldn't keep us from enjoying this movie. With the cooperation of Robinson's widow, Rachel, Oscar winner Brian Helgeland (*L.A. Confidential*) wrote and directed the biopic. Chadwick Boseman is outstanding as the young Robinson. The actor has appeared in many TV shows, but this is only his second starring role in a feature film. The athletic Boseman did play Little League baseball, but later basketball took over his energies. He practiced for 4 months with major league coaches to be able to replicate Robinson's signature moves. Both the actor and the director obviously felt great responsibility to Rachel Robinson to portray her husband's story faithfully. And they did. The terrible discrimination and harassment that Robinson faced, not only from baseball fans and opposing teams, but even from his own teammates, would have destroyed a lesser man. Robinson, with the help of Branch Rickey, realized that it would take more courage to ignore the racism than to fight against it. The movie shows some stunning examples of the bigotry Robinson faced, but Helgeland didn't overdo that part of the story. I expected plenty of racism in the movie, but I was stunned by the volume of hate mail and death threats that Robinson received. Helgeland managed to make Jackie Robinson look like

the almost super-human hero that he was. Harrison Ford was terrific as Branch Rickey and Christopher Meloni appears as Leo Durocher. Lucas Black portrayed Pee Wee Reese, and the moment that he put his arm over Robinson's shoulder in a game against Cincinnati, was one of the movie's highlights. (That moment has been commemorated with a statue Brooklyn's KeySpan Park.) The movie title refers to the number Robinson wore on his Dodger's uniform. It is the only baseball player's number that has ever been retired--a fitting tribute to the gentleman who integrated the major leagues. **GRADE A-**

At Reese's funeral, Joe Black, another Major League Baseball black pioneer, said:

"Pee Wee helped make my boyhood dream come true to play in the Majors, the World Series. When Pee Wee reached out to Jackie, all of us in the Negro League smiled and said it was the first time that a White guy had accepted us. When I finally got up to Brooklyn, I went to Pee Wee and said, 'Black people love you. When you touched Jackie, you touched all of us.' With Pee Wee, it was No. 1 on his uniform and No. 1 in our hearts."

**A FACE IN THE CROWD:** (1957 Seen on DVD) This is one of Elia Kazan's best films and is as powerful today as it was in 1957 when it was made. Andy Griffith, in his first movie role, is Lonesome Rhodes, a good-old country boy who becomes a Television powerhouse. It is a brilliant tale of how power corrupts. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP** (Be sure you get the original 1957 version!)

**FACTOTUM:** This Independent Film Channel movie is an interesting character study of a man who isn't very interesting. All he does is get fired from jobs, drink copious amounts, and, when he's sober enough, write. It's a series of vignettes showing various events in the life of Hank Chinaski (Matt Dillon) who is the fictional alter-ego of author Charles Bukowski. (In the 1987 film, *Barfly*, Mickey Rourke played the author's alter-ego also named Chinaski) Dillon proves what a fine actor he is, but Gary thought he looked almost too good to be believable as a drunk. Lilly Taylor is a woman Chinaski lives with for a while, and Marisa Tomei is a barfly he spends a few days with. Both women are excellent. The film seemed incredibly slow-moving, and quite depressing. Some of the scenes are a bit humorous, but overall, it's quite dark. Dillon narrates between scenes, speaking author Bukowski's words. I've never read any of his work, but would be interested in hearing from anyone who has. In an interview, Dillon defined "factotum" as a person who has many jobs. The dictionary says it's "a person having many diverse activities or responsibilities, or, a general servant." **GRADE C+**

**FAHRENHEIT 9/11:** We decided to write our individual reactions to the film.

**Barb:** I laughed and I cried at Michael Moore's cinematic editorial. It also made me very, very angry with the Bush/Rumsfeld/Chaney gang. Gary and I went at 10:30 on a Saturday morning and were stunned to find a packed theater. When we left, people were already lined up for the next showing. We joined the audience in enthusiastic applause at the end of the film. Most of the facts Moore uses are not particularly new, but he skillfully weaves them into a damning indictment of the Bush administration. Yes, the film is slanted and propagandistic, "but, as the *Chicago Reader* review said, "...it is transparently so, unlike Fox News or CNBC." I suppose ardent Republicans will avoid the film and that is unfortunate. I agree with the *Boston Herald*: *If you want to be part of the national debate, Fahrenheit 9/11 is must-see cinema.* **GRADE A**

**Gary:** Barbara and I were delighted to see a crowd in the theater and when we exited even more waiting in the lobby to see this Michael Moore "documentary." "Fahrenheit 9/11" received both the first prize and the longest continuous standing ovation in the history of the Cannes Film Festival (25 minutes)--and it wasn't just because of French antipathy to America. This is a compelling and persuasive film. Michael Moore is a skilled filmmaker with a definite point of view. He is the man who targeted General Motors in *Roger & Me* and the NRA in *Bowling for Columbine*. Now he takes on an even larger target: the President of the United States. People's opinions of *Fahrenheit* will depend on their political affiliation -- the left wing will love it; the right will hate it or, more likely, refuse to see it. With my long-standing history as a liberal, I have no trouble awarding this film an "A." **GRADE A**

**FAHRENHEIT 11/9:** (2018) Written and Directed by Oscar winning filmmaker Michael Moore, this documentary is sobering and impassioned. Quoting from *New York Magazine*, it is "one of the most urgent films ever made." Barbara and I agree and were delighted when it opened widely. It is showing in more than twenty theaters in the Phoenix area but on the darker side, there were only three other people in the theater for the showing we attended. *Fahrenheit 11/9* (so titled for the date in 2016 when the Associated Press called the election for Trump) is not to be confused with *Fahrenheit 9/11* a Moore 2004 documentary. As you might expect, Moore tries to cover a lot. He takes a provocative and comedic look at the times in which we live. In his working-class everyman persona, he examines the current state of American politics and the ways our government is failing us. Some of the most effective scenes in the movie deal with a crisis in his home town: Flint, Michigan. He explores the origins of its ongoing water crisis where a corporate-friendly governor employed cost-cutting as an excuse to switch Flint's water supply from a clean source to the contaminated Flint River, tainting it with lead and other toxins which poisoned thousands of residents most of whom are African American. And Moore doesn't let the Democrats off the hook. Former President Barack Obama is spot lighted for some heavy criticism. But most of the movie is about the danger of losing our democracy. If our democracy is to be saved, people need to be aware of the danger and fight to save it. Don't put your faith in heroes. Get out there, organize, and don't sit at home on election days. **GRADE A**

**FAILURE TO LAUNCH:** Several critics have been hard on this film, calling it preposterous and completely unbelievable. Other critics say it's surprisingly well cast, and fresh and funny throughout. Their grades range from D to A-. While we agree that the film has no connection to reality, we were entertained by it. Leaving the theatre, I overheard two young women talking about how adorable Matthew McConaughey is. They're right. He is adorable as Trip, a 35-year-old man still living at home with his parents. (In his review, Richard Roeper said that McConaughey is so attractive and charming that he's the kind of guy who moves out of his parent's house at 15 because he's dating his teacher.) Trip's parents, Kathy Bates and Terry Bradshaw, hire Paula (Sarah Jessica Parker) to help them get their son out of the house. She attempts to do this by making him fall in love with her which, she says, will give him the urge to move into a place of his own. Zoey Deschanel is Kit, Paula friend and roommate. She's terrific, playing what Gary thought was a young version of Eve Arden. In fact, she is the most appealing character in the film. Bates is believable as Trip's mom, and Bradshaw is surprisingly good as Trip's dad, in spite of a rather embarrassing nude scene. As a light romantic comedy, we think the film is worth a B. **GRADE B**

**FAIR GAME:** "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa ." These words from George Bush's 2003 State of The Union Speech are thought to be the 16 words that took us into the Iraq war.

Whether the administration believed it, or whether they merely wanted to believe it, is open to debate. As far as Joe Wilson is concerned, it was a lie. He is the former Ambassador whom the C.I.A. sent to Niger in 2003 to gather intelligence on the rumored yellow cake purchase. He concluded that it could not have happened. In addition, the C.I.A. had credible intelligence that Saddam's nuclear weapons program had been disbanded years before. But that is not what the White House wanted to hear. When Wilson published an article declaring that the White House had misrepresented the facts, those in power took their revenge by leaking to a reporter that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a C.I.A. operative. Although it is against the law to divulge the identity of an operative, Karl Rove declared that Wilson's wife was "fair game." As a result, Plame's career was ruined and her marriage was almost destroyed. They both received hate mail and death threats from extreme right-wingers who refused to believe that the Iraq war was not justified. Ultimately, Scooter Libby, a Vice Presidential aide, took the fall and was convicted for divulging Plame's C.I.A. identity. George Bush commuted his sentence, but did not pardon him. This movie tells the story that was front page news for months. Naomi Watts plays Plame and Sean Penn is Wilson. Both are excellent. The movie ends with Plame's appearance before a Senate investigating committee, and we see the real Valerie Plame making her statement. I have no idea if the foreign scenes added for dramatic excitement are completely accurate, but they help make for interesting story-telling. **GRADE B**

**THE FAMILY:** What drove Barbara and me to the theater on opening day was the stellar cast, Robert De Niro, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Tommy Lee Jones plus a trailer making the movie look like a light hearted comedy. Making torture, mayhem, and murder seem light hearted doesn't come easy, but if anybody could pull it off it would be them. They didn't--at least not for us. As we nearly always do in recent years, we thought the cast was excellent, including two talented young actors (Dianna Agron and John D'Leo). The story sounds like it has promise. An ex-Mafioso (De Niro), who has apparently testified against the mob is in witness protection with his family and staying just ahead of a ticked off cast of mob characters. Unfortunately, we found the screenplay unworthy of the talents of the cast. The writer, director, and producer seem to be aiming for a dark off-beat comedy. At times, they succeed, just not enough to earn a high grade from us. **GRADE C**

**THE FAMILY FANG:** (2016) I never understood "performance art," but I was aware that it could have an effect on the viewers. I never thought much about the effects on the artists themselves until this movie. *The Family Fang* is about two children who were born to Caleb and Camile, a couple of dedicated and somewhat famous "experience artists." From an early age, Annie and Baxter eagerly participated in the performances designed by their parents. When as teenagers they became unwitting performers in one of their parents' staged "experiences," it wasn't fun anymore. The movie focuses on the devastating effect of having parents whose primary love is for their art. When we see the siblings as adults, Annie (Nicole Kidman) is an actress and Baxter (Jason Bateman) a writer, so, in a way, they are both artists. But overcoming the family's notoriety and their father's influence is not easy. One final event that may, or may not, be another "piece," brings the brother and sister together. It is through their discussions and videotapes of their early experiences with performance art that we glimpse the dynamic of the Fang family. Christopher Walken is perfect as the older Caleb Fang, a man so obsessed with the idea that art is life that he cannot truly see the people he professes to love. I was interested in a brief scene where two critics debate whether performance art is substantive or merely tricks and pranks, something the art world has been debating forever. *The Family Fang* is a decidedly weird movie, but Bateman is able to pull surprising things from his actors and from himself. (His first movie as director was 2013's *Bad Words* in which he also starred.) There were a fair number of people in our Monday afternoon audience, perhaps because our local critic gave the movie 4 stars. Gary and I agreed on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

**FAMILY MAN:** We have a suggestion: Rent the video of *Me, Myself, I* with Rachel Griffiths. The two movies have the same plot, but the British version has a lot more charm. (Although, if you like Tea Leoni as much as we do, you might want to see the movie just because of her. We did.) Now for the plot: Everyone wonders what their life might be like if they had made different decisions along the way. Family Man invites us into the life of Jack Campbell (Nicholas Cage). In 1987, Jack left his college sweetheart, Kate Reynolds (Leoni) to take a one-year internship at Barclay's Bank in London. He never came back to her. Thirteen years later he is a rich, dynamic executive with what he considers a "perfect" life. That is, until he wakes up one Christmas morning to find himself in New Jersey with a wife and two kids. He suddenly is living the life he might have had if he had never gone to London, and he has great difficulty adjusting to it. It is especially hard for him to accept his job as a tire salesman. Up to this point, we enjoyed the movie, but the ending was unsatisfying. The stock romantic ending seemed too predictable and totally lacking in creativity. We can't short the acting: Cage is good and Leoni is terrific. We also enjoyed Don Cheadle as a street-smart angel and Jeremy Piven as Jack's best New Jersey friend. If I hadn't seen *Me, Myself, I* first, I might have rated this movie a little bit higher. **GRADE: C**

**THE FAMILY STONE:** We both enjoyed this movie. Yes, it is predictable and sentimental, but that's not always a bad thing. The Stone family is made up of mom (Diane Keaton), dad (Craig T. Nelson) daughters Susannah and Amy (Rachel McAdams) and sons Everett (Dermot Mulroney), Ben (Luke Wilson) and Thad. Everett, the perfect son, brings his fiancée, Meredith (Sarah Jessica Parker) home for Christmas to introduce her to the family. They are not warm and wonderful to her, and Meredith feels distinctly unwelcome in the Stone home. Based on the trailers we saw, we were afraid that too much of the humor in the movie would rely on slap-stick. There is one scene toward the end of the film that does get a bit silly, but, in the context of the story, we didn't mind it. There are plenty of laughs, but we appreciated the fact that the story also has some touching and serious moments. Luke Wilson is good at playing the laid-back, stoner son; Parker is believable as an extremely uptight career woman; McAdams is as pretty and interesting as always, and the warmth between Keaton and Nelson is touching. In other words—the ensemble works. Claire Danes is also charming as Meredith's sister, Julie. The film was directed and written by Thomas Bezucha (*Big Eden 2001*). *The Family Stone* makes for an enjoyable Christmas movie. **GRADE B+**

**A FANTASTIC WOMAN (Una mujer fantástica):** (2017) This poignant drama about loss, prejudice and dignity comes from Chile and is a nominee for this year's foreign language Oscar. The film showcases Daniela Vega, a transgender actress and singer who makes an indelible impression in the leading role playing Marina. That Marina is transgender is not immediately apparent. She is a woman in love and planning a future with Orlando. That he is a generation older is immaterial until suddenly Orlando falls seriously ill and is rushed to a hospital where he quickly dies and leaves Marina alone to navigate grief and the indignity of prejudice. Suddenly Marina is treated with suspicion from the hospital staff and by detectives investigating the sudden death. Orlando's family arrives and treats her as an object of disgust. So Marina struggles for the right to be herself in a world that views her sexual identity as an aberration, a

perversion. Marina not only suffers the pain of losing a loved one, but she is unable to grieve satisfactorily when she's barred from his wake and funeral. Director and co-writer Sebastián Lelio creates a portrait of a transgender woman who thought she had found her place in the world fighting to remain or become a strong, forthright, and "*fantastic woman*". Tomatometer gave the film an impressive 93% based on 126 reviews. Barbara and I agree with the high praise. **GRADE B+**

**FAR FROM HEAVEN:** Julianne Moore is the perfect June Cleaver in this movie set in 1957 in Hartford Connecticut. Her Cathy Whitaker has bouffant hair and bouffant skirts and an ideal suburban life. Even the setting looks like a picture postcard for upper class affluence. Dennis Quaid is Frank Whitaker, but he is a Ward Cleaver with a big problem. He is fighting homosexual desires, something that surely occurred in the 1950s but was rarely talked about in polite society. Cathy is struggling to keep the family together, but she finds herself attracted to, of all people, her "Negro" gardener, Raymond. (Played by the impressive Dennis Haysbert--The President on TV's **24**.) At a party, someone comments that there are no race problems in Hartford because there are no "coloreds" there. This is said in front of several black waiters and maids. They are invisible to white Hartford society, but, when Cathy is seen in friendly conversation with Raymond, people are appalled--it shakes the very foundations of their social mores. Writer/Director Todd Haynes has recreated the picture perfect surface of 1950s life, but has introduced social problems that simmered under that surface. Quaid has a difficult role. Frank is full of self-hatred. He cannot make love to his wife, and he cannot resist "the love that dare not speak its name." Julianne Moore is, as always, splendid. The acting here is uniformly excellent and I was touched by Cathy and Raymond's love story. Gary gives the film a B, but I liked it a bit more and say B+. **GRADE B+/B**

**FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD:** (2015) This is the 4<sup>th</sup> version of Thomas Hardy's novel: 1915, 1967 with Julie Christie as the heroine Bathsheba Everdene, a TV movie in 1998, and now in 2015 starring Carey Mulligan. We never saw any of the earlier versions, but we both enjoyed this one. It's a love story about a young woman who inherits a prosperous farm and is determined to run it herself. She is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century feminist who feels she doesn't need a husband. Matthais Schoenaets, a sheep farmer, is the first man to propose marriage. Her second proposal is from Michael Sheen, and older wealthy neighbor. She turns them both down, but then falls for a dashing military man (Tom Sturridge) who turns out to be a cad. She marries him, but lives to regret it. The movie is not as melodramatic as it sounds, probably because of Mulligan's cool, confident performance. We first noticed her in *An Education* (2009) and have been impressed with her acting skills in two 2011 films, *Shame*, with Michael Fassbender, and *Drive* with Ryan Gosling. She was also impressive as Daisy Buchanan to Leo DiCaprio's *Gatsby* in 2013. I was equally impressed with Schoenaets, who imbues his character of Gabriel Oak with sex appeal and steadfastness. The movie is quite beautifully filmed and the scenes of farm work reminded me of how many jobs have been replaced by machines. Critics and audiences have given high grades to *Far From the Madding Crowd* and we agree. I liked it a bit better than Gary did. **GRADE B+/B**

**THE FAREWELL:** (2019) This film is about the cultural differences between China and America. In China, there is a preference for not telling older people if a disease has brought them close to death, because to not tell them is to protect them from the knowledge. Keeping the diagnosis secret allows the family to bear the burden of that knowledge. In the movie, which is based on "an actual lie," the person who has only months to live is a grandmother living in China. Her granddaughter, Billi, who has grown up in America, thinks her grandmother has a right to know the truth, but she is persuaded by her parents to keep the lie. The reason for the family get-together is for Billi's cousin's wedding, but everyone, except Nai Nai, as her grandmother is called, knows that the real reason is to see her before she succumbs to colon cancer. The actress playing Nai Nai is delightful if a bit bossy. She is happy that her two sons have come, one from America and the other, parents of the bridegroom, from Japan. She especially loves Billi and the two spend time together, Nai Nai dispensing kindly advice, and Billi keeping the lie. Nai Nai has orchestrated the wedding photos and planned the wedding banquet, and is thoroughly delighted that the whole family has come for the wedding. Now, you know the whole story. The rest of the 98 minute running time is taken up by speeches and singing at the wedding and several long scenes of Billi running in China, and walking and looking sad in New York. Gary and I didn't love the movie, but we liked it well enough to give it a B. **GRADE B**

**FAREWELL, MY QUEEN:** For the past couple of months we've been enjoying the old BBC TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs*, courtesy of Netflix. So we thought the idea of a movie about the French Revolution told through the eyes of royal servants would be interesting. I wish the movie had been as interesting as the idea. As it turns out, the servants and royal retainers had no idea what was going on outside the castle walls—no newspapers, no radio or TV and no internet in 1789. Therefore, a movie about people who are clueless as to what is going on is not only uninteresting, but boring. There was a lot of running around asking for information, but for us, that didn't make much of a movie. If I'd had access to a guillotine I'd have chopped a few heads just to get some action! The cast, headed by Diane Kruger as Marie Antoinette were all believable and the costumes were gorgeous. I suppose for some, the scene of the Queen bidding goodbye to her noblewoman lover might be touching, but we were unmoved. Our local reviewer praised the "sense of realism, even amid the fairy-tale setting" and he thought the dynamic between the women was subtle and engrossing. We can agree with "subtle," but for us, it was far from "engrossing." We really can't recommend this one in spite of glowing reviews from many professional critics. **GRADE C-**

**THE FAREWELL PARTY:** (2014/2015) This award winning and critically acclaimed subtitled foreign film out of Israel may be worth the effort it will take to find. It is set in a Jerusalem retirement home. With tongue in cheek, one critic declared it is "hands down the best euthanasia comedy ever made." It doesn't sound like the stuff of comedy and to be fare the movie is not a comedy. It is sprinkled with light-hearted and witty moments, and the trailer focuses on those, but it is really a thoughtful look at assisted suicide. And it celebrates not just the right to die, but the value of living. It is a 90-minute film cast with extraordinary talent, most with unpronounceable names and unfamiliar faces. A group of friends decide to "assist" one of the terminally ill residents who has nothing to look forward other than bed sores and intractable pain. Rumors spread and the group finds there are others in desperate need of their assistance. The film spends little time exploring the legalities of assisted suicide in Jerusalem, but does get into how much harder the "life and death dilemma" can be as it gets closer to home. When I think of films about assisted suicide, I think of a 1981 film starring Richard Dreyfuss, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* But there have been a ton of films and TV dramas on the same subject. Barbara and I liked this film, even though many would find the subject matter uncomfortable. **GRADE B**

**THE FAST RUNNER:** Although Barbara and I liked this film, we find it difficult to recommend to any but avid independent film buffs--or to anyone fascinated by cultural anthropology. It is the first film shot in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit peoples who live above the Arctic Circle. It was made with an Inuit cast, and a 90-percent Inuit crew. It is based on a story that is at least 1,000 years old and it records a way of life that still existed within living memory of many working on the film. It was shot with a high-definition digital video camera, sidestepping the problems that cinematographers have long experienced while using film in temperatures well below zero. Its script, compiled from versions of an Inuit legend told by eight elders, is a classic tale told in many cultures. The actors were so convincing that the film plays like a documentary. It has opened with high praise from many film critics and we give it well deserved **GRADE B**

**THE FATHER** 2020/2021 (On Amazon Prime) What a devastating movie! What a marvelous performance by Anthony Hopkins! No wonder he received an Oscar Nomination for Best Actor in a Leading Role. Devastating to be puzzled by things going on around you, and to think you are losing "all your leaves." Hopkins brilliantly portrays Anthony, a man beginning to doubt his own reality, and we did, until we realized that we were seeing things through Anthony's eyes. Hopkins is an actor at the peak of his considerable powers. Olivia Coleman is a loving daughter distraught at what's happening to her aging father. Anne grieves for her father even though he still lives. Anyone who has cared for an aging loved one would know what Anne is going through, but Coleman brings such humanity and sensitivity to the role that she is all daughters making the "terrible decision." No wonder, too, that she received an Oscar nod for her performance. I can only hope that no one has to make that decision for Gary and me, but if they do, I hope they can find a caregiver as loving and emphatic as the nurse taking care of Anthony at the end of the movie. Devastating, yes, but a movie you won't want to miss. **GRADE A**

**THE FAULT IN OUR STARS:** (2014) It's no surprise that the young-adult novel by John Green was adored by teenaged girls. It has an unbeatable combination: A teenage love story and a cancer story. The movie, which is directed by Josh Boone, is a lovely, well-acted tear-jerker. Critics usually dislike sentimental films, but they have been enthusiastic about *The Fault In Our Stars*. Their high marks are no doubt due to the outstanding performance by Shailene Woodley as Hazel Grace, a 16-year-old who has lived with cancer for three years. Woodley is luminous in the role. She meets Gus (Ansel Elgort) at a cancer support group, and their friendship quickly grows into love. Elgort is a charming young man who is fairly new to film. He and Woodley appeared together in this year's science fiction movie *Divergent*, also adapted from a wildly popular young adult novel. *The Fault...* gets everything right about being young and in love for the first time. It's definitely heartbreaking, but it is also sweetly romantic. There are even a few chuckles. Laura Dern and Sam Trammell (from the TV series, *True Blood*) are Hazel's sensitive and supportive parents, and Nat Wolf, as a friend who is a cancer survivor, supplies some of the lighter moments. Our audience was lacking in viewers of the male persuasion, but Gary did enjoy the movie and even asked for a couple of tissues at the end. I, of course, went through an entire package. We decided on a B+ grade. **GRADE B+**

**THE FAVOURITE:** (2018) The trailer didn't adequately prepare us for the serious nature of this movie. We were expecting a comedy, but instead got an historical drama involving Queen Anne and the two women who vied for her favor. Queen Anne ruled Great Britain and Ireland from 1702 until her death in 1714. Olivia Coleman is terrific as Anne, whose intellectual limitations and chronic ill health caused her to rely heavily on her ministers. She also relied on Lady Sara Marlborough, (Rachel Weisz) a childhood friend with whom she had an intimate relationship. The beautiful and intelligent Sara was, for a time, the power behind the throne. Anne was a pitiable woman who had 18 pregnancies only five of which were born alive and only one of those survived infancy. Her son died in 1700, two years before she became Queen, and, according the movie, she lavished her affections on a herd of pet rabbits. England was at war with France and much of the movie is concerned with the conflict between those who wanted to utterly subdue France and the party that wanted peace. By 1707, duchess Marlborough had been supplanted in the queen's affections by Abigail Masham, charmingly and rather calculatingly played in the movie by Emma Stone. Their battle for the affections of a childlike Queen take center stage in the film, as the two without power scheme to get what they can. As David Edelstein wrote in his *Vulture* review, *The Favourite* is not movie that's super-concerned with historical accuracy, but the three women did exist and are brought to unforgettable life by three talented actors. **GRADE B+**

**FED UP:** (2009) Sadly, not many have seen nor will see this informative, passionate, and troubling film. Why? Well first it is an educational documentary about our health. Second, it tells us things we would rather not think about, let alone act upon. How many are willing to spend an hour and a half on why our nation's obesity problem has been growing steadily worse and learning that what we thought we knew about food and exercise may be dead wrong. Many of our school cafeterias which thirty years ago were preparing healthy meals for our nation's kids using real food are now indistinguishable from fast-food joints. The film takes square aim at corporations and politicians who have made it easy for the citizenry to stuff its collective face with junk food and, even more damaging, sugar. Profiteering factory food corporations conspire to hook people on addictive ingredients they pack into their products. Narrated by Katie Couric, the film personalizes the problem by introducing us to individuals, many of them youngsters, who are struggling with their weight. It is heart breaking. The film is no longer being shown in theaters. Barb and I managed to avoid it when it was, but we finally got around to ordering it from Netflix. **GRADE A-**

**FEMME FATALE:** Some reviewers criticize Brian DePalma for favoring style over substance. It's true, as Gary said upon leaving the theater that DePalma never lets plot or plausibility stand in the way of a good scene. And this film is typical DePalma. His camera acts like the eye of a voyeur and is never happier than when clothes are being shed. Which happens a lot in this movie. Rebecca Romijn-Stamos is Laure Ash, a self-described "bad" girl. As the movie opens, she and her colleagues are taking part in a daring diamond heist at the Cannes Film Festival. I won't even try to detail the plot--you'd never believe it. Stamos certainly has the body of a femme fatale, although some criticize her "non-acting." We thought she was credible as a fantastically well-built femme fatale. Antonio Banderas and Peter Coyote also appear. The New York Times critic said: "But Mr. De Palma proves that, in the absence of insight or ideas, some amazing things are possible. It is possible, for instance, to be entranced by a movie without believing it for a second." While "entranced" might be a bit strong to describe our reaction to the film, we thought it was stylish enough to deserve a B. Also, it has an interesting twist at the end. Very Hitchcockian. **GRADE B**

**FENCES:** (2016) Featuring an all-black cast, *Fences* addresses the African-American culture in the 1950s set against a background of evolving civil rights and changing race relations. *Fences* was written by August Wilson, one of the most accomplished African-American

playwrights of the twentieth century. The play won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1987 Tony Award for Best Play. The source material is fundamentally unchanged in this powerful movie version which Wilson wrote before his death in 2005. Director Denzel Washington played the lead in a 2010 limited Broadway revival of the play but it took him six years to get the story to the big screen. Washington also plays the male lead in the movie. The female lead is played by Viola Davis. Both Washington and Davis won Tony Awards for their performances in the 2010 revival of the play and many in the excellent supporting cast also played in that Broadway revival. Some critics point out that *Fences* feels stagey. Of course it does and the same can be said about many modern film classics such as *Death of a Salesman*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, as well as every Shakespeare play ever made into a movie. An interesting comparison can be made between *Fences* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Both focus on tragically dysfunctional families. Both have male leads playing bitter patriarchs nearing the ends of their careers. Both have loving and supportive wives. And both have children struggling to find their way in life. *Fences* focuses on a black garbage collector named Troy Maxson, played by Washington, who has been so beaten down in life that his only hope for advancement is to move from the back of the garbage truck to the position of driver. It isn't a pretty picture. He has been subject to powerful sociological and economic forces that have held him back in life. Troy was the son of a sharecropper. In his youth he was a gifted athlete. He was a star in the Negro Leagues, but passed his prime before the color barrier in professional baseball was broken. Ostensibly he and his wife Rose (Viola Davis) have an ideal marriage, but as the story darkens we see the many cracks in that happy façade. The tension gives Davis an opportunity to show what many already knew. She is one of the greatest actors of her generation. Davis and Washington may give the Academy a face saving chance to soften the criticism that nominations in the lead and supporting categories have neglected black actors. Based on 109 professional reviews, *Fences* earned an impressive 94% on the Tomatometer. Barbara and I appreciated the film for its historical significance and powerful acting, but it had a far greater emotional impact on me than it did on her. Because of the darkness of the story I could not describe it as entertaining, but I found it gripping. The family tensions may be specific to African American history and culture, but they are as universal as Shakespeare. **GRADE A/B**

**FEVER PITCH:** This movie is a pure delight. It is guaranteed to make you smile from beginning to end. And laugh out loud quite often. Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon are a charming couple—you root for them to work it out. The problem in their romance is Ben's (Fallon) obsession with the Boston Red Sox. Lindsey (Barrymore) is absorbed in her career, but not to the level of Ben's addiction. There are many wonderful scenes and all the supporting actors, including the kids (Ben is an elementary school teacher), are terrific. When the Farrelly brothers started this film, they thought it would be about a fan dealing with his team's loss. But, as fate would have it, the Red Sox, down 3 and 0 to the Yankees in the American League Championship game, miraculously came back to win. They went on to win the World Series. This changed the end of the film, for the better, I think. I imagine the movie will play forever in Boston. We rank it up there with our favorite romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*. This is a departure for the Farrelly Brothers because it is family fare, unlike *There's Something About Mary*. The film is based on a novel by Nick Hornby. Other Hornby novels have given us *High Fidelity* (2000) and *About A Boy* (2002). Roger Ebert praised Hornby's books saying, "Their humor all begins in the same place, with truth and close observation. We know these people. We dated these people. We are these people." **GRADE A-**

**FIFTEEN MINUTES:** The title of this film is based on Andy Warhol's prediction that everyone in the future can expect to be famous for 15 minutes. It is ironic that a movie, which condemns our fascination with violence and celebrity, uses a great deal of violence to make its point. The filmmaker is also critical of the media's encouraging of that fascination. To demonstrate this, Kelsey Grammer plays the slimy host of a tabloid television "news" show. His character is a blatant caricature. Here's the gist of the story: Two men, one Czech and one Russian, arrive in the U.S. Oleg, the Russian, is movie-crazy and his first act in New York is to steal a video camera. Emil, the Czech, has a violent temper. He commits three brutal murders, and Oleg, who fancies himself a Russian Frank Capra, films each act. It doesn't take Emil long to learn some basic facts about American culture: We love celebrities and people will do anything to get on TV. (If you doubt that, watch the Jerry Springer show.) At one point, after watching a sleazy talk show, Emil says, "I love America. Nobody here is responsible for anything" He decides to kill a celebrity, plead mental incompetence, and then sell his videotaped story to TV for a million dollars. The celebrity he selects is Eddie Flemming (DeNiro) who is a somewhat famous NYPD Detective. Flemming, along with Jordy Warsaw (Ed Burns), a Fire Department arson investigator, are hot on the trail of the visiting killers. The pace is furious and much of the violence is effectively shown through Oleg's video camera. The film has been much criticized, but we thought it was frequently exciting, if somewhat implausible. We particularly liked Burns. **GRADE: B-**

**THE FIGHTER:** Good sports films are nearly always more about people than about the sport. I liked this boxing film a little better than *Barbara*, but I think we both agree that there are Oscar-worthy performances in this inspirational drama about a real life blue-collar boxing family. Micky Ward and Dicky Eklund were half-brothers and professional fighters who probably did as much fighting in a dysfunctional family as in the ring. Nearly every scene in the film, in or out of the ring, plays out like a boxing match. The word is that Wahlberg fought for years to get this film made and he is not only one of the producers, but is effective in his role as Micky Ward. There is sharp contrast between the stoic Wahlberg and Christian Bale brilliantly playing his motor-mouth, crack-addicted half-brother who is both his mentor and his millstone. Each compliments the other's performance. Inspired casting brings together one of the best acting ensembles of the year: Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale, Amy Adams, and Melissa Leo. Adams successfully shows her remarkable range after earlier playing a wide-eyed Disney princess in *Enchanted*. Here she convincingly plays Charlene, a tough-talking bar hostess who helps Ward break the crippling grip of his family and rise through the ranks for a title shot. Leo plays the big-hair, chain-smoking family matriarch. Her two marriages produced two boys and seven sisters who would make ideal candidates for a Jerry Springer episode. Leo may play a controlling stage-mom stereotype, but she doesn't allow that to stand in the way of a riveting performance that may earn her another Oscar. Is the film predictable? Of course. Is it worth seeing? Definitely! **GRADE B+/B**

**FIGHTING WITH MY FAMILY:** (2019) Neither of us are professional wrestling fans, and no movie is ever likely to make us one, but this film got 92% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, so we thought it was worth seeing. Gary does like "The Rock," though, so he was glad to see Dwayne Johnson in this one. The movie dramatizes the life story of Paige (Saraya-Jade Bevis), the youngest ever Diva of the World Wrestling Entertainment. Paige grew up in a wrestling family in Norwich, UK, in fact, wrestling was the family business. She and her brother Zak's dream was to someday star in the WWE. When she was selected and Zak wasn't it was devastating to both of them. Zak took a while to come to terms with the fact that he would never be a wrestling star outside of Norwich. Paige, without the support of her brother, initially floundered under the rigorous training schedule. She persevered, however, and became a star. *Fighting With My*

**Family** is based on Max Fisher's 2012 documentary *The Wrestlers*. It's unusual for a movie to be based on a documentary, but we can see why this universal story of perseverance and excellence became a film. Gary and I could identify with the performance aspect of professional wrestling and especially with Paige's performance anxiety, even though we thought it was a bit overdone. But, we won't be watching WWE events anytime soon. **GRADE B-**

**FILM STARS DON'T DIE IN LIVERPOOL:** (2017) Annette Bening is brilliant playing the role of the legendary Academy Award winning actress Gloria Grahame, a Hollywood femme fatale screen siren of the 1940's and 1950's. Barbara and I remember Grahame as being every bit as talented as the biggest stars in the studio system she worked in. In my opinion Annette Bening is one of the best Hollywood actors never to have won an Oscar, albeit she has been nominated for the coveted statue four times. The film focuses on the last years of Grahame's life and a May/December relationship with young British actor, Peter Turner. The affair began when she was 54 and he was 26. Grahame died three years later in 1981. The screenplay is based on Turner's 1986 memoir, *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool*. Bening's extraordinary performance elevated what could have been just an average movie. Jamie Bell was also excellent playing Peter Turner. Julie Walters, Kenneth Cranham, and Vanessa Redgrave had small supporting roles. Set mostly in England, there are flashbacks to times the loving couple spent in America. The film will probably have greater appeal to those who remember the work of Grahame. **GRADE B**

**FINDING FORRESTER:** Gus Van Sant has done it again. After *Good Will Hunting*, he follows it up with *Finding Forrester*, another student/teacher relationship film that will capture both your mind and your heart. What can I say about Sean Connery this has to be his best work yet. Connery is more than up to the challenge of playing a vulnerable and frightened man. His performance is filled with subtlety, humor, and warmth and is nothing short of brilliant. Connery is William Forrester, a man who wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning novel when he was 23 and never published another book. Now he is 73, living in a dilapidated building in the Bronx, watching the world from his window because he is afraid to go out. His window overlooks a basketball court and, as he watches the teenagers, they see him watching and wonder about the man behind the window. One curious boy, Jamal Wallace (Rob Brown) pays a visit to the recluse and an unusual friendship is born. Jamal is a remarkable 16-year-old: He has a superior mind, he is a gifted writer and he is also exceptional at the net. Those skills earn him a scholarship to an exclusive private prep school in Manhattan. Forrester becomes Jamal's mentor, encouraging and inspiring him. There is a moment in the film where I thought, "My Fair Hoop Man." It is a moment when Jamal realizes that he will never again be at home in his own neighborhood. Brown makes a memorable Jamal and he more than holds his own with Connery. What a pair they make! I liked Jamal's relationship with his friends and his family too--No stereotypes here, just living breathing people--people you'd like to know. (And I'll never again worry about starting a sentence with a conjunction. But I must be sure not to overdo it.) Gary agrees that *Finding Forrester* is an "A" film. Saying this, he now feels that we should have given *Good Will Hunting* an A+. **GRADE: A**

**FINDING NEVERLAND:** Johnny Depp is the playwright J.M. Barrie in this gentle and rather strange but ultimately touching movie. The movie opens in 1903 in a London theater as Barrie watches from behind the curtain as an opening night audience streams in. The play is a flop, much to the chagrin of Barrie and his producer, Charles Frohman (Dustin Hoffman). When Barrie meets the Davies family in the park one day, he is captivated by the four young boys and their widowed mother, Sylvia (Kate Winslet). Barrie always felt that he had grown up too soon, and he enjoys playing with the young boys. Their make-believe becomes the inspiration for his most famous play, *Peter Pan*. (One of the boys is named Peter, nicely played by Freddie Highmore.) The film frequently expands their make-believe into reality. For example, tied to a tree in the backyard, Barrie and the boys imagine they are on a pirate ship, and we see them on an actual ship. Barrie is married, so his infatuation with Sylvia and her sons is troubling to his wife. It is also troubling to Sylvia's mother (Julie Christie). I think Depp may be the best actor living today. He is so versatile that he totally inhabits his characters. He is equally believable as a flamboyant pirate (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) and a this shy Scottish playwright. The film is based on a play titled *The Man Who Was Peter Pan*, and the film was directed by Marc Forster. The low volume in our movie theater combined with the accents, made it difficult for Gary to hear much of the dialogue. For that reason, he can't grade the film, but I liked it enough to give it a B+. **GRADE B+**

(Note: The writer does take some liberties with the facts. In her review, Monahla Dargis (New York Times) tells us that in reality Barrie was homely and barely cleared 5 feet. She writes, *He met the five (not four, as in the film) Davies boys long before their father's death. Arthur died in 1907, after "Peter Pan" was mounted on the London stage. . . Barrie's devotion to the children was such that he might have altered Sylvia's will so that he could take stewardship of the boys. He did, and the tragedies continued: one son was killed during World War I, another was an apparent suicide. Years after Barrie died, the 63-year-old Peter . . . threw himself under a train, having long hated his connection with his namesake. For this man who did grow up, "Peter Pan" was, as he called it, a "terrible masterpiece."*

**FINDING YOUR FEET:** (2017) We must thank movieviewer Art S. from Indiana for alerting us to the delightful British movie. As Art said in his review (see Readers' Views) *The story line is predictable, but with such a great cast, one doesn't really mind.* The cast has some of England's best actors, including Imelda Staunton, Celia Imrie and Timothy Spall. (You may not know their names, but you will recognize their faces.) This movie is aimed at a senior audience, and Gary and I definitely qualify. The story is simple: When, after 35 years of marriage, Sandra (Staunton) discovers that her husband has been carrying on an affair for years, she goes to seek comfort from her older sister, Bif (Imrie) from whom she has been estranged for many years. At first, the sisters appear very different, but soon the similarities begin to appear. Bif persuades Sandra to join her dance class, and the recently divorced Sandra, finds her feet and her love of life. She also finds Charlie (Spall). Of course, there are the obligatory complications, both marital and medical, but in the end, Sandra takes a giant leap of faith. We agree with Art and the critic who said, *The terrific ensemble cast elevates some predictably lightweight material, generating a crowd-pleasing mix of laughs and poignancy.* For us, it was a B+ movie, although younger audiences might not be so generous. **GRADE B+**

**FIRE IN THE BLOOD:** (We streamed this 2013 movie from Netflix) This 83 min. documentary details how, from 1996 to 2003, Western pharmaceutical companies acted along with U.S. and European governments to keep low-cost, generic antiretroviral drugs out of reach for most people in third world countries and even many in Europe and United States. Drug pricing has always been a contentious issue and the majority of pharmaceutical multinationals have been zealous in guarding the prices to such absurd limits that those who live

beneath poverty lines have had no access to expensive drugs. Sadly, this has resulted in premature death to millions. **Fire in the Blood** is an infuriating documentary by Dylan Mohan Gray and I don't know how Barbara and I missed it when it was first released. We feel lucky that it is available for viewing on Netflix. A ruddy-faced Bill Clinton pops up in this shocking documentary about how greedy pharmaceutical companies tried to block access to cheap drugs to millions of AIDS sufferers in a bid to keep cashing in on shamefully inflated prices. Low-cost generic drugs are as safe and effective as the criminally expensive branded ones. I can't pretend that **Fire in the Blood** isn't a little upsetting, poignant and infuriating while showing how privileged people in the West simply didn't care about millions upon millions of people dying in Third World countries. But it is also the inspiring story of the improbable group of people who decided to fight back. Documentaries do not do well in theaters and this one was not seen by a lot of people. We liked it. **GRADE B+**

**FIREWALL:** There are plenty of holes in the plot of this thriller starring Harrison Ford, but, as Roger Ebert asks, "Need a thriller be plausible in order to be entertaining? I'd say that plausibility is a plus, but not totally necessary. If you care about the people involved, and the if the film does a good job of building tension, you will be entertained—especially if there are explosions and fisticuffs at the end. This one entertained us. Ford and Virginia Madsen play an upscale Seattle couple with two children. Ford is head of computer security for a large bank. Paul Bettany and his crew of thieves hold Ford's family captive in order to force the security chief to help them rob the bank. They don't want to put their hands on any actual money, but want Ford's computer expertise to wire transfer 100 Million dollars into an off-shore account. I think computers are fascinating and even exciting, but they usually don't make for exciting movies. However, here the director does a fair job of holding our interest through the technical stuff and rewards us with the requisite hand-to-hand combat at the end. Bettany is believable and chilling as a polite sociopath. We also enjoyed seeing Mary Lynn Rajsckub playing a character much like her Chloe in TV's *24*. Robert Patrick, Robert Forster and Alan Arkin appear in small roles. In an interview, Ford said he does all his own stunts. I wonder how much longer he can keep doing that. He must have suffered quite a bit of wear and tear on this shoot. Gary says B; I say B-. **GRADE B/B-**

**FIRST COW:** (2020) To say this independent film is incredibly slow may seem like an understatement to those who choose to rent it on *Amazon Prime* as Barb and I did. Critics loved it, and it received 95% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. Audiences were less enthusiastic at 56%. The writer (Jonathan Raymond) and woman director (Kelly Reichardt) teamed on another unusual movie. **Meeks Cutoff** (2010). I opened our review of that film with the following: *We're used to stories that have a beginning, middle and an end. Meek's Cutoff has only a middle.* See the full review of that film in the *Movie Views Archives*. **First Cow** is set in the Pacific Northwest as was **Meeks Cutoff**. The film opens in present day as a young woman walking her dog in the woods uncovers two skeletons. The story then flashes back 200 years to early 19th-century Oregon Territory. It is a simple story about friendship and survival in a harsh environment. One might also describe it as a tale of capitalistic hustle on the frontier. Two gentle souls trying to get by in the wild frontier come up with a "get rich quick" scheme that boils down to stealing milk from a rich man's cow in order to bake tasty pastries that they sell to prospectors. The rich man, played by British actor Toby Jones, owns the only cow in town. Be warned that many scenes are shot in very little light. Barely seeing shadowy figures in the dark might work on the big screen, but on a TV it can be frustrating. I give the film a slightly higher grade than Barbara. **GRADE C/C+**

**THE FIRST GRADER:** (2010) This is a wonderful story—and it's true. Kimani N'gan'ga Maruge was a Mau Mau freedom fighter in the war for Kenyan Independence. The Mau Mau Uprising was a military conflict that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The movement was violently repressed by the ruling British government and failed to capture widespread public support, but It has been argued that the conflict helped set the stage for Kenyan independence in 1963. Maruge's wife and two children were killed by the British Military, and he was imprisoned and tortured for years. When the Kenyan government announced free primary education for all in 2002, he went to his local school and to get the education he was denied as a boy. He was 84. The teacher in charge of the school turns him away at first, but she is unable to resist his story and his fierce desire to learn to read. Despite opposition from parents, she accepts him into first grade. (Maruge currently holds the Guinness World Record for the oldest person ever admitted to primary school.) Oliver Litondo plays Maruge with great dignity. He and Naomie Harris as Teacher Betty, bring this true story to life. Both actors are outstanding, and the young school children are adorable. While it is true that, in the words of Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly*, "**The First Grader** plays more like a teaching tool than a dynamic drama," we liked it anyway. Gary was especially moved by the story and he gives the movie a higher grade than I. **GRADE A-/B**

**FIRST MAN:** (2018) Our local critic gave this film 4½ stars out of 5 and it received 88% from 228 critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, so there was little question whether Barbara and I would see this movie about Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon. I was also aware that Oscar winning director Damien Chazelle was on board. He received widespread recognition in 2016 for writing and directing the musical film **La La Land**, one of the highest-grossing musicals of all time. It also received a record-tying fourteen Oscar nominations, winning six including Best Director and making him the youngest winner ever in that category. Ryan Gosling, who starred in **La La Land**, reunites with Chazelle to play Neil Armstrong in **First Man**. He is, as always, excellent in the role. I told Barbara as we left the theater that giving the film less than an "A" would be tantamount to sacrilege. It was a difficult movie to make. When dealing with historical events in which people already know the outcome, you need something to create drama. The task is complicated by a leading character that publicly seems almost devoid of emotion and is a man of very few words. In truth, he was a hero in space, but not a very appealing or sympathetic person on the home front. Barb was a bit put off by the overuse of hand held cameras. In this film there were many situations where a hand held camera was very effective, but there were also times when a steady-cam would have worked better. There was one oversight that may have a negative impact on **First Man**. You may remember that one of Armstrong's most famous achievements was planting the American flag on the lunar surface. It was an act of historic significance at a time of government crisis and national chaos. It brought genuine American pride when the country most needed it. I don't know why but director Chazelle left that salient fact out of the film. It has caused a bit of controversy and led to a refusal by some patriotic moviegoers to see the film at all. We did like Claire Foy playing Armstrong's wife, mostly stuck at home worrying about Armstrong. But she made the most of a thin script. Barb and I were two of six hundred million people who watched the first moon walk on TV. We were hoping for better. **GRADE B-**

**FIRST POSITION:** (2011/2013) We watched this documentary on DVD from Netflix. It follows six young dancers from around the world as they prepare for one of the most prestigious ballet competitions in the world--The Youth America Grand Prix. It is a competition for young ballet students between the ages of 9 and 19, and one of the world's leading proving grounds for new talent. Most major dance

companies and schools pay close attention to who fares well in the annual contest. Each year, thousands of dancers enter, but only three hundred make it into the finals, held in New York City. You get to know six of the dancers and follow their journey to the finals. It's always a thrill to see young people who have worked so hard compete for jobs and scholarships, but you feel bad for those that don't do well in the competition. The subject is clearly near and dear to the documentarian heart. The director, Bess Kargman, studied ballet when she was younger, and when she heard about the Grand Prix competition, she was inspired to make *First Position*. Lisa Schwarzbaum (*Entertainment Weekly*) commented that each of the young dancers "is a wonder of self-imposed discipline in service to art." We agree with the *Variety* critic who called it "touching (and) enormously satisfying. We think this is a documentary that you will enjoy. Pictured is a 16-year-old from Columbia named Joan Sebastian Zamora. **GRADE B**

**FIRST REFORMED:** (2018) Will God forgive us for destroying his creation? That's the question that haunts the reverend Mr. Toller (Ethan Hawke). Toller is a minister in a church with a miniscule congregation but one that has historical value. And a gift shop. We learn that his son died while stationed in Iraq--"a war with no moral justification." It was his family's tradition to join the military and he can't forgive himself for encouraging his son to enlist. He mourns the death of his son by drinking and ignoring his deteriorating health. When a young, pregnant parishioner, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), asks him to talk with her husband, he agrees. Michael (Philip Ettinger), is an environmental activist and a father-to-be who doesn't want to bring a child into this dying world. When Michael commits suicide it provides a new focus for the minister's own guilt and depression. He becomes obsessed with climate change and the fact that the church refuses to do anything about it. Ethan Hawke is remarkable as Toller. He always chooses interesting material, and this movie is nothing if not interesting. Paul Schrader, who wrote the screenplay for *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, wrote and directed *First Reformed*. It does have a corrupt oil man, a big public event, and a mystical sequence, but the film's setting is unforgetting in its starkness. It's not an easy film to watch and probably won't be popular. However, Gary and I are glad we saw it. **GRADE B+**

**THE FIVE-YEAR ENGAGEMENT:** (2012) I'm a pushover for a good romantic comedy and this is a very good one. It was co-written by Jason Segal and director Nicholas Stoller and the dialogue is funny throughout. (The two men collaborated on another movie we enjoyed, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*.) Both are good at creating funny, touching and real stories. They also provided good parts for a lot of talented actors, and many of the laughs come from minor characters. Segal stars as Tom, who proposed to Violet (Emily Blunt) a year after meeting her. However, the wedding day keeps getting postponed. Life keeps getting in the way. They are a lovely couple and we know they are perfect for each other, but we realize that their path to the altar will not be without twists and turns. The first turn comes when Violet gets the chance to do her post-graduate work in Psychology at the University of Michigan. Tom agrees to give up his job and travel from San Francisco to Ann Arbor. In California, he was a chef, but in Michigan he is only able to find a job in a deli. Making sandwiches, no matter how delicious, is not the career Tom had in mind. At the University, we meet Violet's goofy post-grad colleagues and her boss, played by Rhys Ifans, who looked so bizarre in *Notting Hill*, but looks rather normal here. Meanwhile, Violet's sister, Suzy (Alison Brie) who got "knocked-up" at Tom and Violet's engagement party by Tom's best friend Alex (Chris Pratt), gets married and produces two adorable children. There is a very funny scene toward the end of the film where Suzy and Violet discuss relationships in front of the two youngsters while using Elmo and the Cookie Monster voices. The two kids are fascinated by the voices and we laugh at the words. My favorite lines from that scene are, "There are no perfect cookies. Sometimes you just have to pick a cookie and bite into it." We enjoy Jason Segal and can't say enough good things about Emily Blunt. The supporting cast is uniformly excellent, but Mimi Kennedy and David Paymer are standouts as Tom's parents. We both enjoyed **The Five-Year Engagement**. **GRADE A-**

**FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS:** I remember thinking, when I finished reading James Bradley's book on which this film is based, that it was one of the most powerful and moving books I ever read. Often such a reading experience is followed by a disappointing film experience. Not so with *Flags Of Our Fathers*. As Barbara and I left the theater, Barbara commented, "He really knows how to tell a story." She was referring to Academy Award winning director Clint Eastwood. The film deals with one of the bloodiest battles in WWII and arguably the most inspiring photo ever snapped, the flag raising on Iwo Jima. It was a photo that may have changed history dramatically. There are no blockbuster stars in *Flags*, but many skilled actors who play their roles flawlessly. Ryan Phillippe, playing a Navy corpsman, and Adam Beach, playing a troubled marine struggling with survivor guilt, deserve special praise for their portrayals. The film skillfully cuts back and forth between the horrors of battle on Iwo Jima and a flag waving public relations tour designed to raise desperately needed money for the war. The American people needed heroes. The men chosen to be those heroes felt overwhelming guilt assuming that role. There have been many important war movies coming out of Hollywood. I think we must add *Flags Of Our Fathers* to that list. **GRADE A-**

**FLASH OF GENIUS:** It's hard to resist a David and Goliath story. This film is based on the true story of Robert Kearns, a college professor and inventor who, in the late 1960s, invented and patented the intermittent windshield wiper. He called it the "blinking eye." When he took it to the Ford Motor Company, he thought they were going to help him manufacture the wiper. Instead, they stole it. The film details his efforts to get recognition for his invention. No one thought he could get the case to court, let alone win against the auto giant. He gave up his marriage and, for a time, his emotional stability, but he did prevail. Greg Kinnear is terrific playing Kearns who was a flawed but determined man. We lauded his performance in *Ghost Town* in the last issue, and this multi-layered performance is another example of Kinnear's skills as an actor. Lauren Graham (*The Gilmore Girls*) plays Phyllis Kearns, and Alan Alda appears as a lawyer who works for Kearns but resigns from the case when the professor refuses a settlement offer. This is an earnest film and it does a good job of articulating the legal argument, but the court case lacks the universal appeal of *Silkwood*, or *Erin Brokovich*. Stephen Holden of the *NYTimes* said, "It has the tone and texture of a well-made but forgettable television movie." And Roger Ebert, who gave the film 3 stars, says "*Flash of Genius* tells this story in faithful and often moving detail. If it has a handicap, it's that Kearns was not a colorful character, more of a very stubborn man with tunnel vision." We don't think this will be a popular film at the box office, although we liked it enough to give it a solid B. **GRADE B**

**FLIGHT:** The camera and audiences love Denzel Washington and when he is on screen it is hard not to be fascinated. If you saw the previews for this R-rated drama, you know it is about a veteran airline pilot who saves the lives of over 100 people with miraculous handling of a badly disabled plane. The trailer hints that even though he performed spectacularly, there may be some questions raised about his sobriety during the controlled crash. What you are not told in the trailer and you may want to know, is that the film is primarily

about the power of addiction. It is Washington's movie and in my opinion he is terrific from beginning to end. He is ably assisted in supporting roles by heavy star power. That includes Don Cheadle, John Goodman, and Melissa Leo. John Goodman is especially memorable bringing a few smiles to an otherwise very serious film. Robert Zemeckis, director, has brought us many impressive films, e.g., *Romancing the Stone*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Cast Away*. Barbara and I liked this film from the nail biting opening through the heartbreaking consequences of addiction and think it is well worth seeing. **GRADE B+**

**FLIGHTPLAN:** In her last movie, Jodie Foster spent most of the time in a *Panic Room*. In this movie, she spends most of the time in panic mode as she frantically searches a jumbo jet for her missing six-year-old daughter. At one point, she begins to question her own sanity, because everyone insists her daughter was never on the plane. Foster is very good at playing a woman on the edge. She is equally good when she gets tough with the "bad guys." Foster has the help of a sympathetic sky marshal played by Peter Sarsgaard. Sean Bean plays the flight captain who, at first, tries to help her in the search, but eventually comes to believe that Foster is delusional. Foster manages to maintain tension throughout the film, but, unfortunately, there are some major holes in the plot. I didn't really think about the holes until after the movie, but Gary was bothered by them even as he watched. I won't explain the plot problems because I don't want to give anything away, but they were the reason for our grade of C+. However, we think that Foster deserves at least a B+ for her performance. **GRADE C+**

**FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS:** (2016) In 2007 we saw a terrific play titled *Souvenir*. It was based on Florence Foster Jenkins, a coloratura soprano who loved to sing but had no rhythm, no diction and only a tenuous hold on pitch. Earlier this year, we saw a French film (*Marguerite*—B-) that was loosely based on Jenkins. Today, we saw Meryl Streep portray the deluded singer with uncanny accuracy. As one critic rightly said, "Streep can play anything, even someone without a trace of talent." Florence Foster Jenkins was a phenomenon. She had been a child prodigy pianist and even played for Rutherford B. Hayes in the White House when she was 8 years old. When an injury ended her career as a pianist, she turned to singing. With a fortune inherited from her father, she gave recitals and also sponsored other singers whenever she could. She formed the Verdi Club in 1917 as a way to offer young musicians paying jobs. In 1944 she gave a concert at Carnegie Hall that was sold out. 2000 customers were turned away, and the \$2.40 tickets were scalped for as much as \$20. By then, Jenkins was 79 years old and her voice, such as it was, had deteriorated, but she sang with complete confidence. Her obvious love of music and her personality were infectious and she received generous applause. In spite of the unwitting hilarity her singing generated, Jenkins was pleased with the concert, at least until she read the unflattering reviews. Hugh Grant plays the singer's common-law husband, St. Clair Bayfield, with his usual charm. Her Carnegie Hall accompanist, Cosmé McMoon, was played by Simon Helberg, better known as Howard Wolowitz on TV's *The Big Bang Theory*. It should be noted that Florence had her fans: Cole Porter was among Lady Florence's (as she preferred to be known) most devoted fans, attending her recitals whenever possible and even writing a song for her. He was, however, careful enough of Madame's feelings to repeatedly pound himself in the foot with his own cane while listening to her perform, thus preventing him from bursting out laughing; The late David Bowie named Jenkins' infamous recording *The Glory of the Human Voice* as one of his 25 most treasured vinyl possessions. "She had, and was blissfully unaware of, the worst set of pipes in the world of music," Bowie admirably wrote of the album. Gary and I urge you to stay through the credits for the movie's curtain call which has interviews with the three stars and photos of the real Florence Foster Jenkins. Perhaps it is because we saw the story for the third time that we can't grade the movie higher than a B. Those seeing it for the first time will probably grade it higher. **GRADE B**

**FOCUS:** (2015) When I think of films about con artists, *The Sting*, *The Grifters*, *House of Games*, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* quickly come to mind. *Focus*, starring Will Smith, may not rise to that level, but it's not bad. Never boring, I can easily recommend it for an entertaining couple hours of razzle-dazzle, smoke and mirrors and a few laughs. As expected there are a lot of twists and turns in the plot. With con movies, the audience should expect to get conned as frequently as the "marks." Will Smith has been lifting weights to add muscular sex appeal to his charismatic personality. Barb and I have followed his career since we first noticed his talent in the 1993 film *Six Degrees of Separation*. Matching his appeal on screen is the beautiful Australian actress Margot Robbie, playing his apprentice. She becomes nearly as adept at gamesmanship as he. One of the drawbacks of con artist films is that you know you are being conned, so you stop taking things at face value. You rather like being fooled, but you get defensive and start doubting the reality of every twist and turn. If you find this kind of film appealing, I think you will find it worth your effort to seek out the film either on the large screen or small. **GRADE B**

**THE FOG OF WAR:** (2003 Release) This 2003 documentary received rave reviews from nearly all the critics. It is an extraordinary film that you may never have an opportunity to see. If you have the opportunity, I implore you not to miss it. The film is condensed from over 20 hours of interviews that director Errol Morris had with Robert McNamara. McNamara was Secretary of Defense during both the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. But it is beautifully interspersed with historical film footage from the periods being discussed and by supplementary interviews. The New York Times critic writes, "If there's one movie that ought to be studied by military and civilian leaders around the world at this treacherous historical moment, it is *The Fog of War*." I can only hope you have an opportunity to see this remarkable film. Barbara enjoyed it a bit less than I did and gives it a B. **GRADE: A-/B**

**FOOD, INC.:** This is not just a good movie. It is an important movie. As a retired teacher, I would like to make it required viewing. But if memory serves, making reading or viewing required is often counter-productive. I must face the reality that most of our readers will not have an opportunity to see this brilliant documentary in a theater and very few will take the time to rent it. After all, who would go out of their way to see an enlightening and at times infuriating exposé of our nation's food industry? Why should we care that a few increasingly powerful corporations put profits ahead of consumer health and the safety of workers? It could be uncomfortable seeing a bright-eyed two-year-old playing in the surf only to learn that twelve days later he was dead after eating burgers contaminated with E. coli. And then to learn that staggering sums are being spent trying to prevent any attempts to enforce sanitation and safety standards. These few comments don't begin to cover the depth or breadth of this important film. Barbara and I both feel that going the extra mile to see *Food, Inc.* will not only make you and your family healthier, but make the world a little better place in which to live. **GRADE A**

**FOOTNOTE:** This film is from Israel and was a nominee for this year's foreign-language Oscar. It is, of course, in subtitles. Set in the world of Israeli academia, two eccentric professors (father and son) have dedicated their lives to Talmudic Studies. The son seems

successful and is the recipient of many awards. After decades of pouring over the Torah, the father's research amounted to little more than a footnote when a competitor's chance discovery and rapid publication rendered his labors moot. The setup is slow, but creative camerawork and the introduction of an interesting moral dilemma held Barbara's and my attention. For me, having worked for decades in academia, I was keenly aware of the vicious dynamics of academic competition. At its core this movie is a tragic tale of father-son discord. There is a little humor sparingly sprinkled through the film, but if you are one who appreciates only entertaining movies and especially if you demand Hollywood endings that resolve issues, you may want to pass over this one. **GRADE B-**

**FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:** We enjoyed this latest film to come from the creative minds of Christopher Guest and Eugene Levy. However, we think it isn't as good as their previous efforts, and it's appeal is more limited. In this film, Guest and Levy satire the movie industry. Actors, Agents, Directors, Producers, Writers, Studio Publicity hacks, Studio Heads and TV Entertainment and movie review shows, all come in for their share of ridicule. All the regulars make an appearance. Catherine O'Hara is particularly effective as an aging actress who is playing the lead in the movie that Guest is directing titled *Home For Purim*. Harry Shearer (**A Mighty Wind**) is O'Hara's husband in *Purim*, and Parker Posey is her estranged daughter. All three are excellent at portraying earnest actors who efforts are slightly off kilter. When all three learn that there is media buzz about their possible Oscar nominations, they become part of the Oscar frenzy that pervades Hollywood as the Academy Award season approaches. Fred Willard and Jane Lynch play the hosts of a TV Entertainment show and they are terrific. Jennifer Coolidge is a dim-witted producer, and John Michael Higgins is the dim-witted studio publicity guy. Gary thought that Levy's talent agent was the best characterization of all. If you are a movie buff, you will probably enjoy **For Your Consideration**. There are some very funny bits and a lot of talented comedians present. **GRADE B-**

**FORCE MAJEURE:** (2014) Not only was this film a critical favorite at this year's Cannes Film Festival, it has also been selected as the Swedish entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards. Foreign Language films are not universally loved, even by film buffs. As we left the theater I commented to Barbara that taste for Foreign films is a little like the acquired taste for scotch. We liked this film, but those not prepared for the different pace might be less impressed. A Swedish family travels to the French Alps to enjoy a few days of skiing and spend some precious time with each other. A young father, mother, and two pre-teen children look to be the epitome of a happy Swedish family. And perhaps they are at this point. The most spectacular scene in the film comes early. During a pleasant lunch on the outside deck of a mountainside restaurant, a roaring avalanche bears down on the numerous diners who speculate at first that it must be a controlled event to make the slopes safer. But as the avalanche gains momentum it no longer looks like a controlled event and soon there is panic. The Swedish family may never be the same again. But this is not a traditional disaster movie. The anticipated disaster fails to occur, but the family dynamic is shaken to the core by quick decisions that are made and gender role expectations that may lead both partners to question the very basis of their relationship. The cinematography is breathtaking and the acting is outstanding. There isn't much humor except for one very funny scene that provides a kind of comic relief. We liked this insightful story and can recommend it to those who have the acquired taste for foreign films. **GRADE B**

**FORD V FERRARI:** 2019) I know why some people go to NASCAR races for the crashes. Otherwise, it's boring to watch cars going round and round. Only Christian Bale could make driving a car around a track interesting. Bale and the stunt drivers make this movie exciting and give you some inkling of what goes into driving a race car. I'm not forgetting Matt Damon. The friendship between Bale and Damon is the heart of **Ford V Ferrari**. In 1963 Henry Ford II, hearing that the legendary Italian car company was going bankrupt, tried to buy it. He didn't succeed. Ford, (Tracey Letts) decided to invest in a race car that would beat Ferrari and win at Le Mans. That grueling 24-hour race is hard on cars and their drivers, but the rewards of winning are spectacular. In order to achieve his dream, Ford hires a famous race car driver turned race car designer, Carroll Shelby (Damon). Ford told Shelby that he would be in charge, but Shelby had to battle corporate interference at every turn. Ken Miles (Bale) was the driver Shelby wanted, but he was considered "difficult" and not in the "Ford image." Ford lost at Le Mans that year, and Shelby bet his car company that Miles would win at Daytona and be Ford's driver at Le Mans the next year. In 1966 three Ford cars finished first, crossing the finish line together. Jon Bernthal appears as Lee Iacocca, who got the idea of promoting a winning race car, the GT40. Director James Mangold had to recreate the Le Mans racetrack of the Sixties, since it no longer existed. We agree with *Rotten Tomatoes* who said in their description, "**Ford v Ferrari** delivers all the polished auto action audiences will expect -- and balances it with enough gripping human drama to satisfy non-racing enthusiasts." Gary and I decided on a grade of B+, and that's the highest we've ever graded a car-racing movie. **GRADE B+**

**FORGETTING SARAH MARSHALL:** If you enjoy romantic comedies that combine raunchy humor with a sweetness of spirit, then you'll enjoy this movie. Produced by Judd Aptow, it has all the ingredients of his previous hits, **The 40-Year-Old Virgin**, **Knocked Up** and **Superbad**, so you can expect some adolescent humor and some nudity—in this case, full frontal male nudity. The film's star, Jason Segel from TV's *How I Met Your Mother*, is also the screenwriter, and he has penned a story about how a man recovers from a sorrowful break-up. Segel's Peter has been with his TV star girlfriend, Sarah (Kristen Bell from TV's *Veronica Mars*) for years, and when she dumps him for a rock star, he is devastated. Convinced to take a vacation to get away from reminders of Sarah, he goes to a luxurious resort in Hawaii, only to find that Sarah and her boyfriend are staying there. (Russell Brand is a Brit TV personality and he is hilarious as Aldous Snow, Sarah's new love.) Two Aptow favorites, Paul Rudd and Jonah Hill play, respectively, a stoner surfing teacher and a waiter who worships Aldous Snow. The gorgeous Mila Kunis (TV's *That 70's Show*) is a hotel hospitality hostess who helps Peter forget Sarah. Especially funny are scenes from Sarah's CSI-type TV show in which Billy Baldwin appears as her detective partner. We are also treated to bits from the puppet rock opera, *Dracula*, that Peter has been working on for years. It all adds up to a lot of fun. Michael Phillips (*Chicago Tribune*) says that this film is proof that "all raunch is not created equal." Both he and Richard Roeper gave the film favorable reviews. However, if you're offended by nudity and rather crude humor, you might want to skip this one. We enjoyed it and give it a solid B. **GRADE B+**

**FORKS OVER KNIVES:** Could the advice gleaned from a not very exciting documentary save your life...or at least improve or extend it? In my humble opinion, this persuasive documentary could do just that. It focuses on the research of two food scientists who effectively argue that despite broad advances in medical technology, the popularity of modern processed foods has led to epidemic rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and many other health problems. I suspect that they are "preaching to the choir" for most people willing to spend time with this film are those who are already somewhat informed and receptive to the message. The message

will not be welcomed by the meat and dairy industry, but the evidence is compelling. One critic put it like this, "Movies are like food. There are popcorn films that entertain you and spinach movies that are good for you. *Forks Over Knives* is a spinach flick." **GRADE B+**

**THE FOUNDER:** (2016) Ray Kroc would say that it was persistence that enabled him to turn a hamburger stand into the world-wide juggernaut that McDonalds has become, but this movie makes it clear that ruthlessness also played a part. At one point, Kroc says that if he saw a competitor drowning he'd put a hose in his mouth. Now that's ruthless. Michael Keaton was the perfect choice to play Ray Kroc. His energy fit right into Kroc's personality. The real founders of McDonalds, the McDonald brothers, were played by John Carroll Lynch and Nick Offerman. The brothers were the ones who invented the fast delivery that made McDonalds unique, but Kroc was the one who had the vision to take the franchise business global. Our sympathies were with the McDonald brothers who, after Kroc agreed with a handshake to pay them an annual 1% of profits, never saw a dime of royalty dollars. Not a great movie, but it was interesting. However, it may have told us more about Kroc than we cared to know. **GRADE B-**

**FOUR BROTHERS:** This movie teaches a valuable lesson: Don't visit Detroit in the winter. Our local reviewer compared this film to *The Sons of Katie Elder* and called it "Katie Elder with a mean streak." The plots are similar: four brothers try to find out the truth behind the death of their mother. In this modern version, the setting is urban, and the mother adopted all four boys: two of the brothers are white and two are black. Mark Wahlberg takes the John Wayne role as the oldest brother who has recently been released from prison. When asked if he was going straight, he replies, "straightish." Wahlberg is terrific in the role—the shot of him walking across a frozen lake toward the end of the film is perfect. (It's hard to think of him as Marky Mark posing in his Calvin Kleins.) Andre Benjamin, Tyrese Bibson and Garrett Hedlund are the other three brothers and they are all fine. The urban setting demands a killer who has politicians and police officers on his payroll and Chiwetel Ejiofor fills that bill beautifully. Of course, there is a conspiracy, but the Mercer brothers are determined to get the truth. And they do. Terrance Howard appears as a sympathetic cop and Fionnula Flanagan is the murdered mother, who we see at the time of her death and in flashbacks. This movie is violent with lots of gunplay and one car chase, but as a revenge flick, it is reasonably satisfying. We both decided on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

**FOUR CHRISTMASSES:** It is hard to believe, but there are five Oscar-winning actors in this mediocre Christmas story. The two leads are played by Vince Vaughn and Reese Witherspoon with Robert Duvall, Sissy Spacek, Jon Voight, Mary Steenburgen, Dwight Yoakam, and Tim McGraw in supporting roles. With one of my favorite comedians, Vince Vaughn, how could the film miss? Well it doesn't miss entirely; it misses just enough to make it hard to be enthusiastic. Brad (Vaughn) and Kate (Witherspoon) are products of divorce and families they would rather avoid every Christmas. They manage to accomplish this by telling the families they are spending Christmas vacation as volunteers doing "good works," while in fact they sneak off to some exotic vacation spot. But this Christmas their deceit is exposed and they feel forced to spend time with each of the four parents. Then things get a little crazy and a little vulgar with a lot of over-the-top slap stick. There are a few laughs and a feel-good ending, and, because Barbara and I like Vince Vaughn, we grade this film slightly higher than the average critic. **GRADE C+**

**THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN:** Barbara suggested that I might be better qualified to review this film than she. I will need to ruminate on how to interpret that. Although we certainly give this adult comedy a thumbs up, neither of us felt it quite lived up to the hype and to our high expectations. We love the work of the talented Steve Carell who plays the loveable and sympathetic virgin. He is supported by equally talented actors like Catherine Keener and Paul Rudd. To tell you much about the plot would assume you did not read the title. There are, of course, many funny scenes. In fact one may prove to be as memorable as the tooth-drilling scene in *The Marathon Man*. The scene involves an incredibly hairy chest and a waxing process. If you see it, you should know that it was done in one take because it was for real. The film builds to a touching and creative end and we both give *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* a "B." **GRADE B**

**FOXCATCHER:** (2014) This is a chilling true-crime drama with powerful performances that are likely to be recognized in the next Academy Award Ceremony. Steve Carell, playing so far against type you may have trouble believing it is really him, is nearly unrecognizable in make-up that took three hours to apply for every day of shooting. Carell is brilliant playing John du Pont of the powerful and wealthy du Pont family. He is backed up by extraordinary performances from Channing Tatum and Mark Ruffalo. John du Pont was an eccentric and mentally unstable multi-millionaire who used some of his considerable fortune to set up the Foxcatcher National Training Center, a world-class athletic facility to train the country's top wrestling talent. Tatum and Ruffalo play brothers who were both Olympic Gold Medal-winning wrestlers and intent on winning more gold in the 1988 Summer Olympics in South Korea. Tatum is brilliant playing a talented athlete with a perpetual frown and painfully inarticulate speech who has felt like an underachiever for much of his life. Ruffalo, who never turns in a bad performance, plays the more friendly and compassionate older sibling. The film is slow-paced, but ultimately spellbinding. It is made even more so knowing it is based on actual events. As we left the theater, Barbara and I ran into two of our Movie View readers who liked the film as much as we did. **GRADE A-**

**FRACTURE:** Despite less than glowing reviews, Barbara and I wanted to see this film because of the cast. It is hard for me to ignore a film starring Anthony Hopkins and we both see Ryan Gosling as a talented rising star. And even though his role is small, good old reliable David Strathairn never turns in less than a great performance. The trailer made the screenplay look witty, riveting and maybe a little scary. It isn't exactly a "whodunit," so much as a "howdidedunit?" Hopkins plays a genius who plans a perfect crime as revenge against his wife who is having an affair with a hostage negotiator. The screenplay is often cleverly credible, but can quickly move to disappointingly incredible. It is hard to imagine a beautiful house remaining in pristine condition after the police conduct several presumably thorough searches for a murder weapon. It would be criminal to reveal anything more about the plot in case you decide to see this in a theatre or wait for the DVD. I rate this film marginally higher than Barbara. **GRADE B-/C+**

**FRANCIS HA:** (2012) In lesser hands this movie about what happens when dreams are confronted by reality might go unnoticed by critics and moviegoers. However, with the wonderful and charming Greta Gerwig in the title role and Noah Baumbach at the helm, it is a rare delight. It is shot in black and white and, although Gerwig and Baumbach share writing credits, it has the feel of improvisation—much like the life of its title character. Francis wants to be a dancer, but languishes as an apprentice in a modern dance company. She shares an apartment with her very best friend, Sophie, and they like to talk about the dreams they had when they left college and arrived in New York. When Sophie decides to move in with her boyfriend, Francis is set adrift. Although Francis and Sophie's

relationship is not sexual, they do love each other, and when Sophie leaves it's like a divorce. Gerwig invests Francis with optimism and charm as she tries and often fails to find her way--gamely charging ahead in spite of mostly self-created obstacles. You have to admire her spirit and when, at the end of the movie, it looks like she will find her way, we are happy for her. **GRADE B+**

**FRANK:** (2014) This is one weird movie! Our local critic called it "endearingly odd," but to us it was just "odd." Jon is a would-be song writer with a boring job. An attempted suicide gives him the chance to substitute at the keyboard for a strange band led by a man who always—and I mean *always*—wears a huge paper-mache head. When Jon becomes a band regular, things get even weirder. The other band members seem devoted to Frank, and they all seem to be moments away from being institutionalized. They are not very welcoming to Jon, but he gradually takes over the management of the group. When, after many months of rehearsal, Jon books them into the popular South by Southwest (SXSW) exhibition, he feels the band is on the verge of becoming famous. But "famous" may not be what Frank really wants. The results are disastrous for all concerned. Michael Fassbender is terrific. He manages to make the huge-headed Frank into a living, breathing character. Maggie Gyllenhaal, who has never shied away from an offbeat role, plays a theremin in the band. (The theremin is an electronic musical instrument controlled without physical contact by the thereminist.) She is dangerously hostile to Jon and alarmingly attached to Frank. The character of Frank is based on a character played by Chris Sievey, and the keyboard player in one of his bands co-wrote the screenplay based on a fictionalized version of events. The critical reaction to this movie confirms my theory that when critics aren't sure of what the movie is trying to say, they assume it is profound, and give it high praise. The movie had some good scenes and I suspect that the character of Frank, if not his music, will linger in my memory. **Frank** is definitely not for the casual moviegoer. **GRADE C**

**FREAKS:** (2019) The first thing that drew me to this film was the title. The most memorable movie I ever saw was a 1932 cult classic with the same title. I wondered if this film was a remake. It is not. The genre is Science Fiction, Horror, Mystery, Suspense, & Fantasy. Barbara and I usually avoid science fiction, but we decided to gamble the 104 minutes runtime in hopes we might be pleasantly surprised. We didn't love the 2019 **Freaks**, but we didn't hate it either. Kept inside the house by her father, 7-year-old Chloe lives in fear and fascination of the outside world, where "*abnormals*" create a constant threat - or so she believes. Chloe, initially appears to be an ordinary kid, understandably obsessed with the Mr. Snowcone ice-cream truck that she sees other kids frequent from her window. The film's success rests on the awesome performance by Lexy Kolker, who was seven when the film was shot. The filmmaker puts the audience inside Chloe's head, presenting a child's-eye view of a world gone mad. While Chloe lives in isolation, she's enchanted by the images of suburban sunlight that she sees through the cracks, and by the ice cream truck outside run by a man named Mr. Snowcone (Bruce Dern). Chloe gradually reveals an ability to influence others telepathically. Though it wasn't a film we would normally see, we found it very watchable. **GRADE B-** (Anyone more tolerant of this genre would grade it higher.)

**FREAKY FRIDAY:** This remake of a 1976 movie works because Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan do such an outstanding job. Curtis is Tess Coleman, a psychologist with a private practice. She is a widow with a teenaged daughter, Anna (Lohan), and a young son. Tess and her daughter have those typical mother/daughter conflicts complicated by the fact that Tess is about to get married again. Two mystical fortune cookies (don't ask!) cause mother and daughter to exchange bodies: Tess has to go to high school and live in her daughter's shoes for a day, and Anna has to handle her mother's clients and the wedding plans. Yes, it's another one of those body exchange plots, but this one is very enjoyable. Curtis has a skilled comic touch and we were impressed with how well Lohan (**The Parent Trap** remake-- 1998) handled her role. Mark Harmon plays Tess's fiancée and Harold Gould is an amusing grandfather. The movie is funny and surprisingly tender and we both think it deserves a B, or maybe even a B+. **GRADE B+**

**FREE GUY** 2021 Can an Artificial Intelligence creature (Ryan Reynolds) find love with a real live woman (Jodi Comer)? The answer is No, but it takes 2 hours to find out. Reynolds is a guy with a sunny disposition named Guy. He works as a bank teller in a strange world where a bank robbery seems to take place every day. It becomes apparent that Guy is a NPC in a violent open-world video game called Free City. (The term NPC refers to characters controlled by the game-master or referee rather than by another player.) When he meets Comer's avatar (she is a player) he falls in love and decides to become the hero in his own story, ushering in the concept of AI. Comer is suing the owner of Free City because he stole the design that she and her best friend (Joe Keery) created. There are a lot of amazing special effects in the movie, and for the first hour that was it. Gary and I were considering leaving, but it started to get better when we fully understood the concept, and when the movie focused on real people. But there were still some eye-boggling effects in the second half. (Gary said that the second hour was better than the first, but that the bar wasn't very high.) I am a Reynolds fan and I find his self-deprecating humor amusing, so I liked it better than Gary did. I even liked the corny Disney-like ending. First hour was a D. Second hour was a B for me. Sounds like a C, doesn't it? Gary doesn't think so. **GRADE C/D**

**FREE SOLO:** (2018 Oscar Winner for Best Documentary Feature) I can see why Academy voters selected **Free Solo** as the best documentary. By comparison, every other documentary probably felt tame. Let me say at the outset that anyone who climbs mountains without ropes is crazy, but Alex Honnold almost made me see the idea behind it. It's all about performance, and to be the best at what you do. Honnold was the first person to ever free solo climb Yosemite's 3,000 ft high El Capitan wall. With no ropes or safety gear, he completed arguably the greatest feat in rock climbing history. It was sobering to see all the free solo climbers who have died while climbing. I sympathized with his girlfriend, especially when he said he didn't feel any obligation to her to maximize his life. At the end of the movie, Alex said that some kid watching **Free Solo** would make a more treacherous climb, but that it probably wouldn't be him. I hope he does quit while he's ahead, I really do hope so. **GRADE A**

**FREEDOM WRITERS:** This is a true story about a devoted teacher in a "bad" school with "bad" students who resist learning, so you can guess pretty much where the film is heading. But we found the story inspiring and passionate, and the journey well worth the effort. Perhaps it because our own teaching background made us identify more strongly than the professional critics, but we found ourselves thoroughly engrossed in the story. Not that the professional critics didn't like the film, they did. It is just that Barbara and I liked it even better than the "B" given by most critics. Two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank was terrific in the leading role and a first-rate supporting cast was lead by Patrick Dempsey, Imelda Staunton, Scott Glenn, and a host of young actors playing kids who had experienced more life than they should have at their age. Any movie with a serious message about education is bound to be compared with predecessors

like *Lean on Me* (1989), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *To Sir With Love* (1967), and the grandfather of them all, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). We think *Freedom Writers* compares favorably with the best. **GRADE A-**

**FRIDA:** Selma Hayek will surely get an Oscar nomination for her stunning portrayal of Frida Kahlo, the brilliant painter who was married to Diego Rivera--twice. This movie tells the story of their love affair: two remarkable people who were destined to be together, but not necessarily faithful to each other. When she was a young girl, Frida was severely injured in a bus accident. She survived her many injuries, but suffered through over 30 operations and a lifetime of pain. Still, she managed to live an extraordinary life. She met Rivera when she was a teenager, and their tumultuous relationship makes a captivating story. The two artists were philosophical communists, and their political affiliations caused many problems. Ed Norton appears in a small role as Nelson Rockefeller. Rockefeller hired Rivera to paint a mural for the Rockefeller Center and then tore it down because the artist put Lenin in the painting. Julie Taymor has directed the film with great flair, using Frida's paintings in a most creative way. (Taymor is famous for bringing *The Lion King* to the Broadway stage.) The film is a visual delight, and Hayek and Alfred Molina, who plays Diego Rivera, are perfect in their roles. Geoffrey Rush disappears into his role as Leon Trotsky, and Ashley Judd is memorable as Frida's partner in a sensuous tango. We give this film an enthusiastic **GRADE A**

**FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS:** In 1988 Odessa, Texas, high school football isn't the biggest thing in town--it's the only thing. When the team wins, the town loves Coach Gaines (Billy Bob Thornton); when the team loses they put For Sale signs on his front lawn. Thornton is believable and restrained as a coach who cares about his players as much as he cares about winning. Director Peter Berg (TV's *Chicago Hope*) frequently uses handheld cameras to vividly depict the speed and violence that is the game of football. The scenes on the field are as good as those in *Any Given Sunday*. Berg is a talented director and I look forward to his next film. Derek Luke is the team's star running back and when he is injured in the first game of the season the town sees it's hopes of a State Championship limp off the field with him. Luke impressed us in *Antwone Fisher* and continues to impress us here. The centerpiece of this film is football, and we get only rare glimpses into the off-field life of the players and the coach. Tim McGraw plays the father of one of the players--a man whose single accomplishment in life was being on a State Championship team when he was in high school. Now he is a drunk who bullies and humiliates his son both on and off the field. We enjoyed seeing Jay Hernandez (*The Rookie*) and also thought that Lucas Black, who plays quarterback Mike Winchell, was especially good. I like any movie about sports, but I like football movies the best. While I wouldn't put this gridiron movie at the top of my list, I thought it was very good. Gary and I both give it a B+. **GRADE B+**

**FRIENDS WITH KIDS:** How wonderful to see a comedy that relies on witty dialogue rather than bathroom humor to get laughs. And there are lots of laughs in this exploration of the effect that having kids has on friendship, love and marriage. Jason (Adam Scott) and Julie (Jennifer Westfeldt) are two long-time platonic friends who have never found the person with whom they want to spend their lives. When their married friends start having kids, Jason and Julie notice the strain it can put on a marriage. Since Julie's biological clock is ticking, and Adam wants to have children eventually, they decide to have a child together without any messy romantic entanglement. They plan to share the child jointly and each one will continue to look for "Mr. or Ms. Right." Since this is a romantic comedy we know exactly where it's going, but getting there is great fun. Credit must be given to writer/director Jennifer Westfeldt. She has written lines that fit each character perfectly, and often feel spontaneous and unscripted. She directed with a sure hand and was a delight as Julie. She has also cast the movie beautifully with Maya Rudolph/Chris O'Dowd and Kristen Wiig/John Hamm as Jason and Julie's married friends. We were pleased to see Adam Scott who we have liked ever since first seeing him in TV's *Party Down*. He is terrific here and this should do wonders for his career. Reviews have been mixed. One critic didn't like the movie because he thought the concept of two friends sharing a baby was ridiculous. I think he was taking it too seriously. Ridiculous is, and always has been, the stuff of most comedies. We were both delighted with *Friends With Kids* and think it might be one of the best comedies we will see this year. **GRADE A-**

**FRIENDS WITH MONEY:** This movie is a bit like life. If your expectations are too high, you may be disappointed. It's another one of those non-linear, episodic movies with no discernible story line. It's just a series of glimpses into the lives of four friends: Jennifer Aniston, Frances McDormand, Catherine Keener, and Joan Cusack. Cusack and her husband are wealthy, Aniston is poor, and the other two couples are well off. Interestingly, the wealthy couple seems to be the happiest. Maybe money can buy happiness. I did think that Aniston was a bit young to be friends with the other women, and the movie never explains how they all came together. It's clear that they have been friends for a long time. My favorite character was Jane ( McDormand). She had just turned 43 and was tired of everything. Mostly, she was tired of washing her hair. Plus, she was annoyed by almost everything: the driver who steals her parking place and the people who cut in front of her in line, for example. However, all the characters were interesting to me and I was sorry when the film was over. I would have liked to see more of them. Gary commented afterwards at what a good actress Aniston is. She is believable here as a teacher who left her job and now works as a maid, cleaning other people's houses. The film was written and directed by Nicole Holofcener, whose two previous features were also studies of women and their relationships: *Walking and Talking* (1996) and *Lovely and Amazing* (2001). The wonderful Catherine Keener was in both of those films. Gary liked *Friends With Money*, although he gives it a B, while I have to say B+. (I think it's probably a gender thing.) **GRADE B+/B**

**FROM HELL:** We rented this DVD because Ebert & Roper touted it as an under-appreciated film. Ostensibly a story of Jack The Ripper, it is really about Inspector Abberline (Johnny Depp), the policeman in charge of the case. Abberline is an opium addict whose drugged sleep brings visions of crimes yet to happen. His Sergeant calls them his "intuitions." Abberline's investigation of the murders and mutilations lead him to the highest reaches of London society and to the secret society of the Freemasons. We were once again impressed by Depp's skill as an actor. Heather Graham is Mary Kelly, one of London's "unfortunates" who is being stalked by The Ripper. Ian Holm is Sir William Gull, a famous physician/surgeon who gives some assistance to Abberline. In fact, the identity of Jack The Ripper was never discovered, but a website indicates at least 21 suspects. The screenplay for *From Hell* was written by Terry Hayes and Rafael Yglesias, and is based on the graphic novel (i.e. comic book) by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. It advances one theory of the Ripper's identity. The real star of the movie is the dramatic and stunning direction by the Hughes brothers--Allen and Albert. They demonstrate an incredibly skillful command of the moviemaking art with this moody and violent movie. The film was shot on location in the medieval streets of Prague and has the look of Victorian London. If you can tolerate murder most bloody, then by all means take a look at *From Hell*. **Thumbs Up**

**FRONTERA:** (2014) We went to this limited-release movie after hearing from Movie Views reader Marylee G, AZ. (Read her comments in Readers' Views.) This is Michael Berry's feature debut and in it the director tries to tell both sides of the story of illegal immigrants crossing the border, or "frontera," from Mexico into Arizona. While some have criticized the movie as too simplistic with too little tension, we quite liked it. The cast is outstanding. Michael Pena is a hard-working Mexican who, unable to support his growing family, decides to try for a job in the United States. Eva Longoria, in a part which is a polar opposite to her *Desperate Housewives* persona, plays Pena's pregnant wife. Ed Harris is a retired sheriff whose ranch is situated on the Mexican border. His real-life wife, Amy Madigan, plays the rancher's wife, Olivia, a woman who is sympathetic to the Mexicans trying to find a better life here. When some teenagers with rifles, probably inspired by the infamous Minutemen, decide to shoot at illegals instead of cacti, it results in a tragic accident to Olivia. Her death starts the story in motion. Harris inserts himself into the investigation in spite of protests from the current sheriff, played by Aden Young who has impressed us in the TV series, *Rectify*. Before the film comes to a satisfying end, we have seen "coyotes" take horrible advantage of people trying to enter our country, but we have also seen how easy it would be for terrorists to cross illegally from Mexico into the U.S. Some criticized the movie as "too earnest," but we liked that about it. We also thought there was plenty of tension. At the very least we applaud Berry's willingness to tackle a problem that is especially relevant to us here in Arizona. **GRADE B+**

**FROST/NIXON:** If you can remember the 1977 televised Frost/Nixon interviews, this film will hold a special appeal for you. If you are too young to remember the Watergate scandal, the film will be a valuable glimpse of our nation's history. The screenplay is based on the award-winning London and Broadway play, which starred the same actors who play the leads in this film: Frank Langella as Richard Nixon and Michael Sheen as David Frost. It would be impossible for me to characterize their performances as anything but brilliant. The film was directed by the always-gifted Ron Howard (Opie). While *Frost/Nixon* is not a documentary, and it is impossible to know how much of the film's relationship between the two leads is fictionalized, it seemed to both Barbara and me that the essence of the people and the period was accurately captured. And the film is so much more than the interview. The drama of the buildup and the behind the scene struggles made the film a joy to watch. Barbara and I give *Frost/Nixon* high marks. **GRADE: A**

**FROZEN II:** (2019) I never saw the original, but I liked the movie more than I expected to. The songs were quite good, and the story appealed to me. Idina Menzel voices Elsa and Kristen Bell voices Anna, and they are both exceptional singers. I was especially taken by the Olaf, the comic snowman. Josh Gad was excellent giving Olaf a voice. We saw this over the Holidays, and I asked everyone to write a one sentence review of the movie. Here they are: John (my son)--"It held my attention." Brianna Durham (almost 13)--"It was very good and had a lot of adult concepts and morals, and it was better than the first one!" Amanda Durham (almost 11)--"I loved it and it's really good and I want to see it again." I couldn't have said it better myself! Barb gives it a B+. **GRADE B+**

**FROZEN RIVER:** We have been Melissa Leo fans ever since she appeared on TV's *The Young Riders* in 1990. She has finally gotten a starring role worthy of her skills as an actress. The story is set near a little-known border crossing on the Mohawk reservation between New York State and Quebec. The time is a few days before Christmas, but this is no syrupy Christmas story. It is grim reality. Ray (Leo) and her two sons live in a dilapidated mobile home. Her husband has left with all their spare cash, and her job in the Dollar Store isn't enough to put food on the table, let alone finance her dream—a new double-wide. Meeting a young Mohawk woman, Lila (Misty Upham) sets Ray in a dangerous direction. What Ray does to feed her family is not pretty, and yet we understand why she was willing to take such a chance. The story is tense, but low-key and Leo and Upham are both excellent. Stephen Holden of the New York Times says, "Ms. Leo's magnificent portrayal of a woman of indomitable grit and not an iota of self-pity makes *Frozen River* a compelling study of individual courage." Gary had a bit of trouble getting involved with the characters and would give the film a B. I was more involved and say B+. **GRADE B/B+**

**FRUITVALE STATION:** (2013) In the early morning hours of New Year's Day 2009, a 22-year-old unarmed black man named Oscar Grant was shot by a Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer in Oakland's Fruitvale train station. Dozens of people witnessed this and several of them recorded the incident on their cell phones. Those video went viral the next day. *Fruitvale Station* fictionalizes the events of the day leading up to Grant's murder painting him in, some contend, an overly positive light. But, as Kyle Smith said in his recent *Harper's* article, "Even had Grant been the worst man in the Bay Area. . .he should not have been shot in the back by a cop while lying face down on a subway platform." Michael B. Jordan is terrific as Grant. When we first saw him in TV's *Friday Night Lights*, we were certain we would see a lot more of this gifted young actor. (He previously starred in *The Wire*, which we did not watch originally but are now watching on DVD.) Jordan's portrayal is sympathetic even in those scenes that show Grant's disturbing tendency to become aggressive. The scenes that show Grant with his young daughter, charmingly played by the adorable Ariana Neal, are especially sympathetic. Oscar-winner Octavia Spencer is memorable as Grant's loving mother. We also thought that Melonie Diaz did a fine job as Grant's girlfriend. *Fruitvale Station* is the feature-length directorial debut of Ryan Coogler, who won the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award earlier this year at Sundance, as well as the Best First Film award at Cannes. Coogler doesn't agree with critics who charge him with an unrealistic portrayal of Grant. Although he admits to inventing a couple of scenes, he said that, in his research, he discovered that Grant was "always trying to keep people around him happy. Oscar was known for being the life of a party and a people pleaser." Coogler tried to show him in that light. The result is a powerful film. One we will not soon forget. **GRADE A-**

**FUEL:** (Seen on DVD) This is a 2008 documentary on the real costs of our dependence on oil and a plug for practical alternative sources of energy. Therefore, it has been seen by only a tiny percentage of people who could benefit from seeing it and is likely to die in the can. Forgive me if I am a little pessimistic. *Fuel* was made by Joshua Tickell who you may remember as the young man who bought an old diesel-powered Winnebago van, painted it with sunflowers, and took it on a two-year tour of the U.S. He powered his "Veggie Van" on biodiesel fuel made from the grease collected from fast food restaurants along the way. His film is informative and, in my opinion worth renting. **GRADE B+**

**THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CARING:** (2016/2020--*Netflix*) The movie was based on a novel titled *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*, which I read last year. The book was OK, but the movie was better--much better. It's a story about a teenaged boy with advanced muscular dystrophy, confined to a wheelchair, who goes on a road trip with his caregiver where both learn something from

the people they meet along the way. It's a story that critics usually disdain but audiences enjoy. Paul Rudd is the caregiver with a family tragedy that has caused him to retreat from life. One of the critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* said, "The pleasures of Rudd overpower the programmatic elements." We did not feel that way at all, because Craig Roberts was exceptional as Trevor, the boy whose fondest wish was to "pee standing up." He also had a wicked sense of humor. Roberts and Rudd made a pair that was difficult to resist. The writing was sharp and funny, but also tender when the moment demanded tenderness. The people they met along the way were excellent and credit goes to the actors who made those brief roles memorable. It was a wonderful afternoon "at the movies." Gary and I agree on a grade of A. **GRADE A**

**FUNNY PEOPLE:** This film is being billed as a more grownup Judd Apatow comedy and stars Adam Sandler as George Simmons, a successful comedian who learns he has a deadly blood disease. The serious stuff is, indeed, grownup; the comedy tends to be less so. If you took all the F words and the penis jokes out of the film, it would be about half as long. It does have some funny bits, though, and Sandler is excellent. Starring with Sandler is a newly thin Seth Rogan. He is a struggling comic who does Improv gigs at night—without pay—and works at a deli by day. Simmons hires Rogan to be his assistant and write some jokes for him, but what he really wants Rogan to be is a friend. Because Simmons isn't a very nice person, he is sorely lacking in the friend department. Simmons biggest regret is the girlfriend who got away, and, now that he's sick, he tries to reconnect with her. Leslie Mann, Apatow's real-life wife, plays that role and her two children are played by her real daughters. The movie must have been a boon for comics, because Apatow used many of them to play themselves. Sandler, who has quite a good voice (remember *The Wedding Singer*?) also sings a bit. The mixture of seriousness with comedy may bother those who like Sandler's screwball roles the best, but I'm sure they will like the film. Gary and I, who prefer him in his more serious roles, liked the film, but think it isn't nearly as good as *Spanglish*. We recommend you rent that movie, if you haven't already seen it. **GRADE B-**

**FURY:** (2014) I can think of three compelling reasons you should see this fictionalized film: (1) You love Brad Pitt and would never miss one of his films, (2) You love bloody battle scenes and would never miss a war film, (3) You are really bored, and live in a small town where *Fury* is the only film playing. I can also think of three compelling reasons for not seeing this film: (1) You hate Brad Pitt and never want to see another of his films, (2) You hate blood and violence and never want to see another war film, (3) You live in a city where you have at least a dozen films you haven't seen to choose from. Barbara and I hope most of our readers fall between these extremes, as do we. Although we are not fond of blood and gore and macho movies that romanticize war, we are fond of Brad Pitt and we have admiration for film making excellence. This film is set in April, 1945, just a few weeks from when the war with Germany was over. Pitt plays a battle-hardened army sergeant who commands a Sherman tank striking at the heart of Nazi Germany. The film is a reminder, if you need one, of the horrors of war. At this point in the war, the men knew the Germans would ultimately lose, but they also knew Hitler was desperate and had ordered S.S. soldiers to execute German women and children who would not fight his enemy. Though I doubt it was the filmmaker's intent, the movie leaves you with a visceral understanding of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Professional critics have generally written positive reviews. The film scored 80% on Rotten Tomato's Tomatometer with audiences giving it an even stronger 90%. *Fury* is a well-acted war drama with rich performances by Pitt and a strong supporting cast. War films often do not have a plot in the traditional sense. Rather they are made up of a series of scenes designed to immerse the viewer in the horror of war. Ear splitting chaos is occasionally broken with quiet moments of waiting or sometimes pillaging. There are scenes that give us an understanding of how even the most timid young man with almost no training can be turned into a killing machine. I can't say this is a film Barb and I enjoyed, but is a film we are likely to remember and appreciate for its excellence. **GRADE B+**

**THE FUTURE:** This is an odd-ball movie, but that's not necessarily bad. We tend to like odd-ball moves and we were enthusiastic about Miranda July's first effort, *You and Me and Everyone We Know*. In our review of that one, we said it was either "the oddest movie you've ever seen or the most unique and charming movie you're ever likely to see." *The Future* is every bit as odd, but it's a bit lacking in the charm department. As Steven Rea said in his *Philadelphia Inquirer* review, it's "odder and darker than July's first feature." The movie introduces us to Sophie (played by July who both wrote and directed) and Jason (Hammish Linklater, from TV's *The New Adventures of Old Christine*). They are both 35, both passively content with their life together, and both stuck in a comfortable rut. They even look a bit alike. They have shaken themselves out of their ennui to experiment with adult responsibility by adopting a cat. But, the cat they've adopted has been injured and they can't take it home from the cat hospital for thirty days. That means they have thirty days to start acting like adults: To start doing something with their lives. It's sort of a Peggy Lee *Is-That-All-There-Is* moment. They each set out on a journey of discovery, only they don't really discover that much. Along the way we viewers experience a talking cat, a talking moon, and Jason literally stopping time. Actually, those things aren't quite as odd as they sound. The stopping of time sequence is quite charming. One critic called the film a "meditation on mortality and loneliness," and I think that's accurate. Gary had difficulty hearing much of the film for the characters, who are living a muted life, speak in rather muted tones. He doesn't feel he can grade *The Future*, and I'm a bit on the fence. I enjoyed its quirkiness and its seriousness, but don't feel I can recommend it except to the most ardent of independent film buffs. **GRADE B-**