

Movie Titles that begin with “P”

Paddleton * Pain and Glory * The Painted Veil * Palm Springs * Panic * Panic Room * Pan's Labyrinth * Paper Clips * Paper Hearts * Parasite * Pariah * Paris Je T'Aime * Parker * Particle Fever * The Party * Pass Over * Passchendaele * The Passenger * Passengers * Passing * The Past * Paterson * The Patriot * Patriot's Day * Pavarotti * Pawn Sacrifice * Pay It Forward * Peace Officer * The Peanut Butter Falcon * The Peanuts Movie * Pearl Harbor * Penguins * People Like Us * A Perfect Getaway * The Perfect Storm * The Perks of Being a Wallflower * Permanent Midnight * Persepolis * Personal Shopper * The Phantom of the Open * The Phantom of the Opera * Phantom Thread * Philadelphia * Philomena * Phoenix * Phone Booth * The Pianist * Pieces of April * Pieces of a Woman * Pig * Pirate Radio * Pirates of The Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl * Pirates of The Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest * Pitch Perfect * The Place Beyond The Pines * Plan B * Please Give * Poetry * Point Break * The Polar Express * Pollock Portrait of a Lady on Fire * Possession * The Post * Potiche * The Power of the Dog * A Prairie Home Companion * Pray Away * Precious * The Prestige * Pride * Pride & Prejudice * Prime * The Princess Diaries * Prisoners * Private Life * The Private Lives of Pippa Lee * The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio * The Producers * Prophet's Prey * Project Nim * Prometheus * Promised Land * Promising Young Woman * Proof * A Prophet * The Proposal * The Proposition * Prozac Nation * The Public * Public Enemies * Punch Drunk Love * The Pursuit of Happiness * Pussy Riot * Puzzle

PADDLETON: 2019 (Netflix) I know what attracted Ray Romano and Mark Duplass to this script: It's a tour de force for two actors. They are together on screen almost all the time. The two men, Andy (Romano) and Michael (Duplass) are stuck in ordinary jobs and are neighbors. Andy lives in the apartment above Michael. They have invented a game called “paddleton” that is sort of like racquet ball, and they play it against an abandoned drive-in movie theater. The dialogue, written by Duplass and Alex Lehmann who directed the movie, is very naturalistic, and the two actors, as Gary commented, are very good at making the lines sound natural. Their friendship is suddenly altered when Michael is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Michael wants to regain control of his life and his death, and that is difficult for Andy to accept. At one point Michael says, “I'm the guy who's dying.” Andy replies, “I'm the other guy.” I think it's equally hard to be the other guy. The movie is an unflinching look at friendship and dying and many people will not like that. If you're not afraid of the subject, you will be treated to two incredible actors doing their thing. It starts slowly but builds to a shattering ending.

GRADE B+/A-

PAIN AND GLORY: (2019) In his new film, Pedro Almodóvar ruminates on memory, love, regret and cinema. Just how autobiographical is *Pain and Glory*? Almodóvar initially insisted that the drama bore no relation to his own life. “I'm trying to convince myself I'm talking about a character,” he eventually conceded, “but deep down I know I'm talking about myself.” Antonio Banderas plays Salvador Mallo, a celebrated director, in his later years. Mallo suffers from many ailments and has almost become a hermit. He doesn't make films anymore. (Almodóvar and Mallo do have one thing in common: They believe that life without filmmaking is meaningless.) Mallo spends his time remembering his life as a child with a mother whom he adored. When one of Mallo's earliest films is shown in a Madrid cinema retrospective, he reconnects with the lead actor from that film. He wasn't pleased with the actor's performance at the time, and they haven't spoken since, but time has a way of healing old wounds. He agrees to let the actor perform a one-act play that he has written about an old lover. We have enjoyed Almodóvar's films ever since our nieces urged us to see *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in 1988. I remember *All About My Mother* (1999) because it introduced us to Penelope Cruz, who plays the memory of Mallo's mother in this film. In the final scene, you realize that Cruz is actually in the movie within the movie. I also remember being especially moved by *Talk To Her* (2002) *Pain and Glory* has been called Almodóvar's masterpiece, and Gary and I believe it is a film worth celebrating. **GRADE A**

THE PAINTED VEIL: This is an old-fashioned movie, and I don't mean that in a bad way. It's a story taken from a Somerset Maugham novel, and the tag line—*Sometimes the greatest journey is the distance between two people*—says it all. The love story is set in China in the 1920s. Walter Fane (Edward Norton) is a bacteriologist working for the British government in Shanghai. His bored frivolous wife, Kitty (Naomi Watts) doesn't love her husband. She married him to escape a domineering mother. When Fane discovers that his wife is having an affair, he takes her with him on a medical mission to a small village devastated by Cholera. Norton is excellent playing a rather cold, clinical man and Watts is splendid as a young woman who learns to care for something besides herself. The scenery is gorgeous. Toby Jones, who played Truman Capote in the recent film, *Infamous*, is very entertaining as a British civil servant who has become acclimated to life in China. We were delighted to see Diana Rigg as a wise Mother Superior, although we didn't recognize her at first. And I'm always happy to see Liev Schreiber, here playing the “other man.” This is the third adaptation of the Maugham novel, and the personal project of Ed Norton. He and Watts are listed as Executive Producers. **GRADE B**

PALM SPRINGS: (2020 available for streaming on either Hulu or Amazon Prime.): Streaming services are throwing lots of money at original productions and they don't follow the same rules as traditional Hollywood films. That's good news for movie-lovers, and makers of quirky indie comedies like *Palm Springs*. This movie might be described as a sci-fi romantic comedy with creative roots in the *Groundhog Day* genre. Most of our Movie Views readers know that science fiction is not my favorite genre, so if I write a favorable review for a sci-fi movie, science fiction enthusiasts will like it even more than I do. I confess that I was drawn to this movie because it scored 94% from the over 200 professional critics who viewed it. They must have seen it as a worthy successor to the 1993 Bill Murray-Andie MacDowell time loop classic. A man and a woman caught in a time loop fall in love. That sounds rather boring, but that is part of the point. We are living in a unique period of history when Covid-19 has forced thousands of people to isolate and struggle with ways to fight boredom. This movie not only deals with that struggle, but cleverly works in quantum physics. Strong performances and a refreshingly original concept made for an interesting hour and a half of viewing for Barb and me. **GRADE B**

PANIC: (2000 release seen on Video.) A dark and strange movie about an unhappy hit man who starts seeing a therapist. With William H. Macy, Donald Sutherland, Tracey Ullman and John Ritter as the therapist. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

PANIC ROOM: Jodie Foster has done some unusual and interesting roles in her career, but I can't understand what prompted her to take this one. We were very disappointed in *Panic Room*. The idea of a modern castle-keep was intriguing, and the movie did have a

few exciting moments, but the script was full of holes. Why did Mag Altman (Foster) buy such a big house, when only she and her daughter (Kristen Stewart) would be living there? Why were the heirs so quick to sell the house when there were rumors that a fortune was hidden in it? Why was the Panic Room stocked with water, but no food? Why did Meg spend many minutes talking with two policeman at the front door and not tell them exactly what was going on? Etc., Etc., Etc. And that "fortune-blowing-away-in-the-wind" ending was laughably hokey. It has been a while since we've seen the always fine Forest Whitaker, and his crook-with-a-heart is the most interesting character in the movie. But Whitaker's presence wasn't enough to save the film. Jared Leto and Dwight Yoakam were the other two home invaders. The film was directed by David Fincher and written by David Koepp. **GRADE C-**

PAN'S LABYRINTH: This is an amazing film: partly real and partly adult fairy tale; partly brutal and partly astonishing. It is set in 1944 Spain when forces of the fascist dictator Franco were still battling resistance fighters hiding in the forests. We meet Ofilia (Ivana Baquero) as she and her pregnant mother travel to a military outpost to be with the mother's new husband. He is the captain of the fascist outpost, and as evil as they come. Sergi López is outstanding as a man so cruel he brings to mind the concentration camp commandant in *Schindler's List*. To escape the brutal reality, Ofilia retreats into a magical world with fairies and a spectacular faun. Thirteen year old Ivana Baquero was chosen from among 1000 girls for the role of Ofilia, and the casting director chose well. She is remarkable. The movie weaves reality and fantasy together so seamlessly and with such consummate story telling that we were totally absorbed in both worlds. The director, Guillermo del Toro, previously directed *Hellboy* and a sequel to that film is currently in pre-production. When we first saw trailers for this film, we were convinced that we wouldn't care for it. Quite the opposite proved to be true. It is not a film we will soon forget and we can understand why so many critics have put it on their 10 best lists. A word of caution: It is an adult fairy tale, and deserves its "R" rating. The film is in Spanish with English subtitles. **GRADE A** from Barb. **A-** from Gary.

PAPER CLIPS: This is an inspiring documentary about an ambitious educational project dealing with subject matter that nearly always arouses deep emotions in me. That makes it extremely difficult to evaluate with objectivity. So you may as well know up front that both Barbara and I loved this film despite any flaws and we were deeply moved by it. In 1998 in a tiny rural Tennessee town a middle school project was started in an effort to help young students better understand the Holocaust. Getting 8th grade students to comprehend the enormity of Hitler's crimes proved more difficult than the teacher's thought. Just getting a handle on understanding a number like 6,000,000 Jewish victims, motivated them to collect 6,000,000 small inexpensive items. Paper clips were chosen because they were worn in Norway as a symbol of Nazi resistance. Once word spread of the students' efforts, letters of support and all kinds of paper clips poured in from across the globe. Documentaries are seen by very few, partly because of motivation, but often because they just aren't available. If you have the opportunity to see this heart-warming film, we highly recommend it. **GRADE A**

PAPER HEART: Because we enjoyed the trailer for this film, we expected great things from the film itself. Unfortunately, the trailer is better than the film. *Paper Heart* is a movie about the making of a documentary—a fake documentary. Charlyne Yi claims she doesn't know what love is and she's not sure she even believes in it, so she sets out on a journey to discover the nature of love. Along the way, she interviews happy couples to discover how they knew they were in love. The interviews are pleasant, but not as interesting as we felt they should have been. The couples' stories are illustrated with crudely made paper puppets. The first time we saw this device it seemed rather charming. The charm factor diminished each time the device was used, and when it was used in the last scene, it didn't work for us at all. The interviews do, however, seem real, unlike the fake relationship Yi has with actor Michael Sera in the film. In *Paper Heart*, the two meet and embark on a tentative love affair. In real life, Yi and Sera recently broke up after dating for three years. It might have been a better film if it had chronicled their real-life relationship. Yi is quite appealing and we enjoyed some of the interviews, but overall we thought the movie was a bit boring, and can't give it more than a C. **GRADE C**

PARASITE: (2019) Critics loved this subtitled South Korean film. It had its world premiere at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival where it won the prestigious Palme d'Or. It was the first Korean film to receive the award and it was won with a rare unanimous vote. It was also selected as the South Korean entry for Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards. Filmmaker Bong Joon Ho directed and co-authored the screenplay. The result was a creative and bizarre story about the class struggle between the haves and the have-nots. The haves are represented by the Park Family, the picture of aspirational wealth. Representing the have-nots is the Kim Family, rich in street smarts but not much else. The film surprises us with twists and turns leading to an end far from what one might have expected at the beginning. I think this is one of those films that deserve to be seen with as little advanced knowledge as possible. Barbara and I agree that if you were to describe *Parasite* with one word, it would have to be "WOW"! **GRADE A**

PARIAH: (2011) First-time feature filmmaker Dee Rees wrote and directed this low-budget effort that got a boost from the prestigious Sundance Film Festival. Rees spent several of her formative years marketing panty liners and bunion pads. I think, after this film, we will see a lot of more of her movie making. *Pariah* is about a very bright 17-year-old African-American woman struggling with her sexual identity and her need to "break free" from a cruelly hostile environment. I must confess that neither Barbara nor I were impressed with the first half of this film, but by the middle we became emotionally engaged. The last 25 minutes were as powerful as any film I have seen in the last year. There are no big names in the cast, but I think we will see more of Adepero Oduye who plays the young female lead with exceptional skill. This is a gritty coming of age film that is sometimes flawed, but definitely worth seeing. **GRADE B-**

PARIS JE T'AIME: (2006 Release) The film consists of 20 vignettes of the various atmospheres and lifestyles in the neighborhoods of Paris. Each 5 minute scene is directed by a different director. The U.S. is represented by Gus Van Sant, the Coen Brothers, and Wes Craven, among others. Some of the actors in the film are Natalie Portman, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Elijah Wood, Nick Nolte, Bob Hoskins, Juliet Binoche, Gena Rowlands, Steve Buscemi, Gérard Depardieu and Ben Gazzara. **THUMBS UP.**

PARKER: (2013) We saw Jennifer Lopez on *The Daily Show* and she told John Stewart that this movie was a cross between *Out of Sight* and *The Transporter*. That's one reason we went to see it--that, and Jason Statham. *Parker* isn't as good as those two previous movies, but if you're a Statham fan like I am, you'll enjoy it. Parker is a criminal, but he's a criminal with a code of honor. He always does what he says he's going to do and expects others to do the same. The movie is based on a novel by the late Donald E. Westlake who, like Elmore Leonard, wrote about criminals that weren't all that bad. There was a 1972 movie made from a Westlake novel, *The Hot Rock* with Robert Redford and George Segal that we remember with affection. However, even though Parker is a fairly honorable

burglar, he does eliminate some killing, but only those that need killing. There's plenty of hand-to-hand fighting and some gunplay. The only difference in this movie is that Parker does get pretty beat up. In fact, he almost dies at the beginning of the movie, when the people he pulled a job with decide to eliminate him. Of course, he lives to get revenge. Jennifer Lopez is very good. She is not Statham's love interest, but is a realtor who gets accidentally involved in his revenge scheme. Michael Chiklis is one of the very bad criminals, and he is always worth watching. Critics have not been kind to this movie, but, for the most part, audiences seem to like it. We did, and feel it's worth a B. **GRADE B**

PARTICLE FEVER: (2013) I would be surprised if any of our readers seek out this hour and forty minute documentary about particle physics. Barbara went only reluctantly to keep me company. The real star of this film is the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), one of the largest scientific machines ever built by man. 10,000 scientists from over 100 countries joined forces seeking to unravel the mysteries of the universe by smashing protons together at nearly the speed of light. Filmed over a period of seven years theoretical and experimental physicists discuss the importance of recreating conditions that existed just moments after the Big Bang and finding the "*Higgs Boson*", dubbed by the media "*the God particle*." I don't pretend to understand the math or physics which the film makers tried to minimize, but I came out of the movie with a far greater appreciation for the work that started in Cern, Switzerland in 1954 and is finally paying huge dividends. Barbara even admits that it was better than she anticipated and she is glad she saw it. **GRADE B**

THE PARTY: (2018) Sally Potter, who is known for such films as *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson*, both wrote and directed this short (71 minute running time) drawing room comedy. She shot it in black and white because, as she said in a recent interview: *It links us to earlier cinematic history, grounding it visually in many decades of writer-driven films, strong on spoken word, strong on characterization, strong in parts for women, like the Hollywood screwball comedies or some of films from the sixties in the U.K.* She was able to get some A-list actors including Kirstin Scott Thomas, Patricia Clarkson, Timothy Spall, Cherry Jones, Emily Mortimer and Cillian Murphy looking quite different from his *Peaky Blinders* role. To celebrate her successful election to the post of Minister for Health in the British Parliament, Janet (Thomas) and her husband, Bill (Spall), are hosting a party for a few select friends. Some of the guests have announcements of their own to make, and Tom (Murphy) is obviously upset about something—so upset that he snorts a lot of cocaine. The host is distracted and morose for the first half of the movie, but when Bill finally makes his two startling announcements, the party goes from celebratory to frantic, and, possibly, lethal. The *Variety* critic called it *a consummate drawing-room divertissement, played with relish by a dream ensemble*. We have to agree. **GRADE B+**

PASS OVER: 2018 (Streaming on Prime Video) I'm not sure how we missed this Spike Lee production, but Barb and I decided to find what we missed. In addition to producing, Spike Lee also directed the film. *Pass Over* was originally written as a stage play, partly as a response to the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, but Lee's 2018 adaptation might just as well be speaking about the 2020 death of George Floyd and the pained outrage that followed it. The film has a 93% rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes. It is a filmed performance of the stage play with the same title produced in 2017 by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. *Pass Over* was directly inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a widely recognized masterpiece voted the "most significant English language play of the 20th century" by the British Royal National Theatre in 1999. Both plays feature two young men in nondescript settings waiting for something to happen. In *Pass Over*, Moses and Kitch, two young black men, trash talk through long aimless days dreaming of a better life while periodically ducking bullets and managing visits from a genial but ominous stranger or an overtly hostile police officer. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Moses and Kitch are in a perpetual state of waiting even as they remain stuck in their immovable fates, killing time, while white America is trying to kill them. I liked *Pass Over* better than Barbara, but we started from different positions. *Waiting for Godot* has been one of my favorite plays since I first saw it in the 1950's. Barbara fell asleep watching it for her first time in New York. It was our third play that day and she was exhausted. I suspect that anyone seeing *Pass Over* without a fondness for Samuel Beckett and/or Spike Lee will end closer to Barb's evaluation. **GRADE A-/B**

PASSCHENDAELE: It took the allied troops, many of them Canadian, four months to take the village of Passchendaele, Belgium in an epic WW I battle. Although inflicting many casualties on the Germans, the Allies had captured a mere 5 miles of new territory at a cost of 140,000 combat deaths, a ratio of roughly 2 inches gained per dead soldier. Ironically, the Germans recaptured their lost ground, without resistance, 5 months later. Passchendaele has become synonymous with the misery of grinding attrition warfare fought in thick mud. Most of the battle took place on reclaimed marshland, swampy even without rain. The summer of 1917 was unusually cold and wet, and heavy artillery bombardment destroyed the surface of the land. Mud was a constant feature of the landscape; newly-developed tanks bogged down in mud, and soldiers often drowned in it. Paul Gross wrote, directed and starred in this 2008 Canadian movie. He did a good job with the many—and I do mean many--battle scenes, and tried to weave a love story between a soldier and a nurse into the mix. We are fans of Gross based on that wonderful Canadian TV series *Slings and Arrows*, and that is why we rented this movie from Netflix. Gross did fine with the directing and starring part, but we doubt that he has a great career as a writer. The script was inspired by his grandfather's stories of his experiences in the First World War. However, the personal story is contrived and melodramatic, and his characters seem more like caricatures than real people. He did, however, reinforce the war-is-hell theme in vivid detail. We think this one is strictly for Paul Gross fans. **GRADE C**

PASSENGERS: (2016) The gap between ratings by critics and audience on this science fiction romantic drama was extraordinary a few days ago. Rotten Tomatoes listed the ratings of 65 critics at a chilly 30% and audience scores based on 24,825 people at a boiling 98%, but when it opened more widely the audience score dropped to 65%. A spacecraft transporting thousands of people to colonize a distant planet has a malfunction in its sleep chambers. One of the passengers played by Chris Pratt is awakened 90 years early. Everyone else is still in a state of suspended animation. He may spend the rest of his life alone and never again have any human contact. He will not starve since the space ship is stocked with food and entertainment options much like a luxury cruise ship. There is even an android bartender (Michael Sheen) programmed with many platitudes, but this does not address the problem of crushing loneliness. Since the female lead is Jennifer Lawrence, it doesn't take the brains of a rocket scientist to deduce that she somehow wakes up. I won't go into how that happens or all the things that happen after that. Remember it is science fiction and it is a romance. Science fiction is not my forte, but I found this one rather intriguing. Barbara liked it a bit less than I did. **GRADES B/B-**

Barb's note: I was disappointed that this Sci-Fi movie didn't have the gravitas of *Arrival*, which is now my standard for movies of this genre. I did like Lawrence and Pratt, though. They make an outstanding couple--so attractive, and, by everything I read, two of the nicest people in real life.

THE PASSENGER: Barbara asked me to review this 1975 re-release of an Antonionio film starring Jack Nicholson because she couldn't stay awake during the first half. When she awoke, I suggested we bail out because I wasn't holding up too well. Refreshed, she wanted to see the last half. The film gets marginally better in the second half, but not enough better to recommend anyone spend 2 hours and 3 minutes with only the occasional rewards of beautiful settings. In fairness the critics give the film high marks. Here is a quote from the Boston Globe, "...one of the deepest, most rigorous, and most rewarding films of its era." Many see it to be moody and fascinating, whereas I saw it as profoundly boring. **GRADE D**

PATERSON: (2017) Jim Jarmush is an acquired taste. Critics love him; audiences, not so much. *Paterson* got 96% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, but from audiences only 71%. Gary and I both liked the movie although we hesitate to recommend it because it is slow and nothing much happens. Adam Driver plays a man who is a bus driver in Paterson, New Jersey. His last name is also Paterson. He is a poet, living with his wife and their English Bulldog. His wife, Laura, has many dreams. She dreams of having a successful cupcake business and being a famous country-western singer. Paterson doesn't seem to have any dreams. He goes through the routine of his days, writing the occasional poem about ordinary things, like matches. In that, he is much like another Paterson resident whom he greatly admires, the poet William Carlos Williams. The other Jarmush movie we remember was *Broken Flowers*, in which a depressed Bill Murray visited old girlfriends on that chance that he had fathered a child with one of them. Like *Paterson*, the critics were more impressed than audiences. But, if you like understated acting, realistic dialogue and situations, and you have a high tolerance for slow-moving and yet somehow compelling movies, you might like this one. We gave *Broken Flowers* a B and think *Paterson* deserves the same grade. **GRADE B** (We streamed this one from Amazon.)

PASSING: 2021 (Available for streaming on Netflix) The term "passing" refers to the practice of members of minority or oppressed group pretending to be a member of a less oppressed group to escape prejudice. The film is adapted from a 1929 novel of the same name by Nella Larsen. Shot in black-and-white, the film represents the directing and screenwriting debut for British actress Rebecca Hall, who is a white woman in the eyes of the world, took on the job of writer/director after learning that her maternal grandfather passed as white. She wrote the first draft of her script in 10 days, constantly revising it as she sought financing. It took her ten years to get her script on screen. Tessa Thompson plays Irene and Ruth Negga plays Clare. Irene and Clare are two Black women who can "pass" as White, with each choosing to live on opposite sides of the color line. Irene identifies as African-American and is married to a Black doctor. Clare "passes" as white and has married a wealthy racist white man. Clare is living a lie and always faces the danger of having her passing discovered by her husband. Irene and Clare were former childhood friends reunited in a chance encounter. Their lives become more complicated as they interact. The movie raises interesting questions, but Hall purposely generated more questions than answers. The film runs an hour and 38 minutes but because it is slow moving and low budget, it may seem longer. Barbara said it was the longest hour and 38 minute film she has ever sat through. I found the subject matter gripping, but was hoping for a more gripping movie. **GRADE B-**

THE PAST: This is a slow starting, but ultimately fascinating subtitled foreign film written and directed by Asghar Farhadi, an Iranian film maker who received a Golden Globe Award and a best Foreign Language Film Oscar for a 2011 film titled *A Separation*. As Barbara mentioned in our post film discussion, "subtitled foreign films can be an acquired taste." I can't promise all our readers will love this film, but we did. It is beautifully written and directed and the story is increasingly compelling as the domestic drama unfolds. This is Farhadi's first film made outside of Iran and also his French-language debut. Set in an unglamorous section of Paris, we see an Iranian man returning, after several years' absence, meeting his estranged French wife to finalize their divorce. Were I to describe the complicated plot, it would sound melodramatic and far too like a soap opera. For us it did not play that way. The methodical pace quickens and the tension builds. By the end, the film seems more like a thriller. The cast was uniformly terrific, but a curly-haired young newcomer, Elyes Aguis stole our hearts as six-year-old boy caught in the crosshairs of familial dysfunction. (See his picture at the bottom of the Movie Reviews page.) Sometimes foreign films disappoint us, e.g., *The Great Beauty*. And sometimes we feel grateful we didn't give up on the genre. **GRADE A-**

Bérénice Bejo, who stars in *The Past*, is best known in the U.S.
as the sweet-faced ingénue from *The Artist*

PATRIOT: This Revolutionary War epic hits all the Hollywood formula elements of movies that celebrate the conflict between the good guys and the bad guys. It has romance, battles galore, individual bravery, an incredibly evil bad guy, over-the-top sentimentality, a ridiculous climax, and a final hand-to-hand confrontation that is totally predictable and almost funny. But, it also has Mel Gibson in the title role. There are a few actors who can survive epics like this: John Wayne was one and Mel Gibson is another. He makes it watchable, if not enjoyable. Then, when you add in a big dollop of patriotism by setting it during the American Revolution, it seems almost unpatriotic to criticize the film. Certainly there are bits of truth in this story of a group of South Carolina militiamen who manage to outwit and outfight the British. The individual actors all do capable jobs. The film features Chris Cooper, and that is a point in its favor. It is, however, far too long. The action is constantly interrupted with the romance between Gibson's son and his sweetheart. I'm sure that will please the youngsters, but it didn't do a lot for us. If there is any philosophical point of view in this movie, it is that the act of killing unleashes the beast in the heart of even a peace-loving man. This movie isn't about philosophy though. It's about Mel--fortunately without a blue face this time. **GRADE: C**

PATRIOTS DAY: (2016) Directed by Peter Berg who also directed *Deepwater Horizon*, this film gives us an account of the 2013 Boston Marathon terrorist bombing. With Mark Wahlberg playing the lead, the movie captures the essence of the story and moves effectively between first responders, victims, survivors, investigators, and terrorists. The pandemonium started when two pressure cooker bombs exploded about 12 seconds and 210 yards apart near the marathon's finish line. The explosions killed 3 civilians and injured an estimated 264 others. Pandemonium is hard to film and 30 continuous minutes of pandemonium with hand-held cameras

was for Barbara and me not the best part of **Patriots Day**. The scenes that saved the film for me was the aftermath of the unspeakable attack. The search and encounter with the terrorists made the movie worth the 130 minutes run time. **GRADE B-**

PAVAROTTI: (2019) It's been 12 years since the great tenor Luciano Pavarotti died of pancreatic cancer, too young at the age of 71. In paying tribute to this enormously talented and charismatic man, director Ron Howard uses a mix of intimate interviews and archival footage of history-making performances to tell a warm and affectionate story of the singer from his humble beginnings, to his larger than life persona, and to the almost godlike status he achieved in the world of opera. The film keeps focus on the great tenor's talent and charisma. Though it acknowledges the singer's flaws, the Ron Howard documentary emphasizes the opera star's brilliant performances and generous spirit. He raised millions for charity, and helped make opera popular with the masses. When a person is as famous as Pavarotti, there's no shortage of photos and film footage. Howard did an excellent job of making the film flow seamlessly. Clip after clip reinforces the image of Pavarotti as a robust man who loved life, loved food, loved wine, loved women – and usually loved himself though he endured terrible stage fright throughout his career. Before going onstage he would regularly mutter to himself "I go to die." To me it seemed like Luciano was most relaxed and having the most fun when joining with Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras in their beautiful and popular "Three Tenors" concerts. When Pavarotti dies at the film's end, it is as though we've lost a friend. For opera lovers, like Barbara, this film was a reminder of Pavarotti's enormous talent and worldwide triumphs. For the more casual fan, like me, it's a well-made biopic leaving me with greater appreciation for opera. **GRADE A**

PAWN SACRIFICE: The name Bobby Fischer isn't as familiar to young people, but back in the Cold War era American chess prodigy Bobby Fischer was as compulsively pursued by the press as is Donald Trump today. **Pawn Sacrifice** is based on the true story of Fischer, who was the greatest chess player our country has ever produced pitting his skills against the World Chess Champion Boris Spassky, the greatest chess player The Soviet Union ever produced. The two leads are brilliantly played by Tobey Maguire (Fischer) and Liev Schreiber (Spassky). Also playing leads are Peter Sarsgaard and Michael Stuhlbarg. The dramatic showdown between the two champions was set in Iceland in 1972 and was the most symbolic confrontation of the entire Cold War with the Soviet Empire. If you are worried about spending the just under two hours runtime trying to understand the chess moves of two world champions, let me assure you that with almost no understanding of chess, Barbara and I were fascinated with this gripping biopic. The screen writer wisely chose to focus on personalities rather than chess as Bobby Fischer struggled with mental illness under the pressure of world-wide attention. We believe the film is worth seeing regardless of your interest in chess. **GRADE A-**

PAY IT FORWARD: This movie is unabashedly sentimental but for someone who has been moved to tears by Hallmark commercials that's not necessarily a bad thing. The feel-good/tear-jerker genre is always manipulative, but in this case we didn't resent being manipulated. We rather enjoyed it. And we loved Helen Hunt in her role as Arlene McKinney, a trailer-trash single mother. She was perfect. What can I say about Kevin Spacey? The man seems incapable of not being good in whatever role he undertakes. Spacey is a seventh grade teacher who gives his social studies class an unusual assignment. He asks them to come up with an idea that will change the world. Arlene's son, Trevor comes up with a philanthropic pyramid idea. He does a good deed for three people and asks each to pay it forward to three more people. He is disappointed because his idea doesn't seem to be working but. . well, you'll have to see the movie. Haley Joel Osment, so good in *The Sixth Sense*, is equally good as Trevor. In this film he sees nice people. We were surprised to see Angie Dickinson in a small but important role. I almost didn't recognize her. Jay Mohr appears as a reporter trying to find the beginning of the pay-it-forward idea. We think most of you will like this one. **GRADE: B**

PEACE OFFICER: (2015) I'm not sure why **Peace Officer** received 100% from critics on the *Tomatometer*. We thought it was a good documentary, but not a great one. Perhaps the reason it scored to high with critics is that its message--the increasing militarization of law enforcement--is so timely. When Dub Lawrence was a Utah sheriff he established and trained the state's first SWAT team. After he retired, a SWAT team was responsible for killing his son-in-law. That tragic event began his mission to investigate officer-involved shootings in his own community. He is convinced that the idea behind the original SWAT teams, that of diffusing potentially violent situations, was a good one. But he believes that the use of SWAT teams is being abused to such a degree that they are a threat to our peace and safety. He has made it his lifework to expose the problems with the militarization of the police. He is, in the words of one critic, a *one-man CSI unit on a mission to expose the cracks in a foundation he himself laid*. Lawrence is an amiable man who is not given to proclamations. Instead, he doggedly investigates, finding evidence that police CSI departments either overlooked or covered up. A problem illuminated by **Peace Officer**, is that the federal government gives the police a huge cache of military-style weaponry, and if they have it, they are highly likely to use it. One incident was especially sobering. A young man and his family were the victims of a SWAT team's over-zealous attempt to apprehend a man they thought was an Army deserter. The owner of the home grabbed a baseball bat rather than a gun to protect his family. Eventually, the situation was diffused and the law officers realized they had the wrong man. Leaving the house, one SWAT team member said, "You're lucky you came to the door with a baseball bat. If that had been a gun I would have wasted you." Lawrence was successful in one respect: The Utah legislature recently passed a law mandating that records be kept on the use of SWAT teams. Except for Maryland, no other state mandates oversight when it comes to SWAT. The movie is not a polemic and does not pit citizens against the police. It is instead a thoughtful examination of an important message, and for that, I suppose, **Peace Officer** deserves an "A." However, as a movie, Gary and I can only give it a B. **GRADE B**

THE PEANUT BUTTER FALCON: (2019) This strangely titled movie is a feel good adventure story and a showcase for Zack Gottsagen, a young man with Down syndrome*. The story begins when Zak (22) who was abandoned by his family. He runs away from a residential nursing home where he has been placed by the State to follow his dream of attending the professional wrestling school of his idol, The Salt Water Redneck (Thomas Haden Church). With the help of his crusty old roommate played by the one and only Bruce Dern in a marvelous cameo, Zak actually does escape---- but he's clad only in his underwear, has no money, and doesn't know a single soul in the outside world. Navigating a few hundred miles to Salt-Water Redneck's wrestling school seems about as attainable as flying to the moon. The story is a sweet, funny, engaging and undeniably a little corny, but as one critic admitted, "it may be the feel-good movie of the year. It is a simple lighthearted road movie. Joining Zack in the leads and giving outstanding performances are Shia LaBeouf and Dakota Johnson. Critics are often hard on movies like this so it is remarkable that it earned 95% based on 144 critics on Rotten Tomatoes, but less surprising that it earned 98% from audiences based on over 1100 viewings. Barbara and I enjoyed the film and were especially impressed with the work Zack Gottsagen. **GRADE B+**

* Down syndrome is a genetic disorder also known as trisomy 21 because it is caused by the presence of all or part of an extra copy of chromosome 21. It is usually associated with physical growth delays, mild to moderate intellectual disability, and characteristic facial features. Despite being the most frequently occurring chromosomal disorder, it is the least funded. As recently as 1983, the average lifespan of a person with Down syndrome was 25 years. The dramatic increase to 60 years is largely due to the end of the inhumane practice of institutionalizing people with Down syndrome.

THE PEANUTS MOVIE: (2015) We took a chance on this animated feature because we are fond of the Charles Schulz characters and we remember the musical, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, with pleasure. The movie does seem like a visit with old friends, but Gary remarked afterwards that if it had been a short he would have enjoyed it more. The movie centers on two stories: Charlie Brown and his desire to appeal to The Little Red-Haired Girl, and Snoopy's quest to defeat his arch-nemesis, The Red Baron. The latter story allows the animators to soar, but it is the Charlie Brown story that provides the heart to this movie about friendship and what makes a personal likeable. The best part for us came during the closing credits as Lucy once again held the football for Charlie Brown to kick. We've seen it in the comic strip many times, but it always delights.. I'm afraid *The Peanuts Movie* reminded us of why we avoid animated features. We just don't appreciate the art of animation enough to enjoy a full-length movie. That's, no doubt, a failure on our part. People who appreciate the animator's art will probably enjoy the movie. Gary said that he wouldn't recommend it for adults unless they had a kid to take with them. There was one little girl in our sparse audience, but she obviously loved it. The worst part of attending the movie was sitting through the animated trailers, although it added to our list of movies to avoid. **GRADE C-**

PEARL HARBOR: This over-hyped movie is neither as bad as some critics led us to believe, nor as good as we had hoped it would be. Michael Bay wasn't content to make a simple, historically accurate account of the Pearl Harbor sneak attack. He felt compelled to frame the attack in a triangle love story. Unfortunately, the love story falls flat for two main reasons: The characters and the dialogue. While there is no doubt that Ben Affleck (Rafe) has star quality, the other two sides of the triangle, Josh Hartnett as Danny, and Kate Beckinsale as Evelyn, are uninteresting characters. They weren't bad so much as lackluster. It may not be their fault, though, because much of the dialogue they had to spout belongs in a soap opera, and neither one of them was given much of a sense of humor. The love story also suffers from several plot points that strained credibility. For example, Rafe steals a police boat to take Evelyn on a tour of the New York Harbor, and Danny steals a plane to take her on a sunset flight over Honolulu, and nobody seems to notice. The war story fares better. The attack sequence, although shorter in real time than the actual two-wave attack, is frightening and the aftermath is incredibly moving. Tacked on to the end of the *Pearl Harbor* is the story of Jimmy Doolittle's Tokyo raiders. I actually found this the most interesting part of the movie, in spite of some typical war-movie dialogue about bravery, etc. This segment played like an abbreviated *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, without Van Johnson. I also liked John Voigt's depiction of F.D.R. The film at times seemed disjointed as it flicked between the love story, Washington D.C. and the Japanese high command. Bay tried to tell too many stories and each story suffers for it. On the good news side, neither one of us was bored during the movie's 183 minute running time. **GRADE: C+**

PENGUINS: (2019) In 2005 we were captivated by *March of the Penguins*, the movie about Emperor Penguins in Antarctica. Morgan Freeman was the narrator, and the film was made by Luc Jacquet who is a French film director and screenwriter. It was not made by Disney. Disney did make the 2019 movie, *Penguins*, and that made all the difference. Emperor penguins are likely to pair with different mates the next breeding season whereas Adélie penguins always breed with the same mate as long as they both return to the same nesting ground. This fact apparently delighted Disney, and they focused their movie on Adélie penguins. *Penguins* tells the story of Steve, a young penguin on a quest to find a life partner and start a family. The footage of the birds "who think they are fish, was delightful and occasionally frightening. The segment showing large seals hunting for Adélie chicks was interesting to us, but I imagine scary for the little ones in the audience. Ed Helms narrated this penguin movie with dialogue that was often a bit too cute. (Disney simply can't resist anthropomorphizing animals.) Fortunately, the narrator was silent for stretches of time and let the photography of the penguins and their extremely harsh habitat take center stage. We gave *March of the Penguins* an "A" in 2005, but Gary and I can't go above a B for *Penguins*. **GRADE B**

PEOPLE LIKE US: This is the kind of G-rated movie that causes some critics to get snarky. There are no sex scenes, no four-letter words, and no violence. But it does have a human story that is nicely told and acted. Chris Pine as Sam and Elizabeth Banks as Frankie are ably assisted by Michelle Pfeiffer, Olivia Wilde and a talented youngster, Michael Hall D'Addario, who comes to the screen with impressive Broadway credits. This is a family story—a family with a secret. When Sam reluctantly goes home to attend his father's funeral, he learns that his father had another family. Sam is stunned to learn that he has a sister (Banks) and a nephew (D'Addario), and that his father's last message to Sam is "look after them." Sam is also expected to deliver some money—the only money his father had—to this other family. The device that bothered some of the critics is that Sam befriends Frankie and her son, but doesn't tell them that they are related. Roger Ebert calls this technique "The 90-Minute Delay" which involves "waiting through most of a movie for one simple line to be spoken that would clear up all of the confusion." It's not the first movie to employ this technique and I'm sure it won't be the last. Sam's delay in telling Frankie is partly, though not entirely, justified by the script. If you can overlook "The 90-Minute Delay," you will probably enjoy this good-hearted movie that has an especially touching ending. The story is loosely based on the true story of director and co-writer Alex Kurtzman. We were able to overlook the contrivances of the story enough to give it a solid B. **GRADE B**

A PERFECT GETAWAY: We don't usually go to *there's-a-killer-in-the-woods* movies, but Roger Ebert kind of liked this one so we decided to take a chance. Plus, it features Steve Zahn, and we like him. Zahn and Milla Jovovich are on a honeymoon adventure hiking to one of the most beautiful and remote beaches on the island of Kauai. Early on, they hear about the murder of a honeymoon couple on Oahu, but decide to continue their back-packing trip. Along the sometimes treacherous trail, they encounter some strange and possibly treacherous couples. Timothy Olyphant and Kiele Sanchez are one of those couples. There's always a lot of misdirection in thriller like this, and *A Perfect Getaway* is no exception. But the acting is quite good and the Kauai scenery is spectacular, so we kind of liked it, too. **GRADE B**

THE PERFECT STORM: I read that many of the actors and crew were seasick during the filming of this movie. I can understand why: I felt queasy just watching it. Wolfgang Petersen, who directed another watery epic, *Das Boot*, does a fine job with the special effects. The storm scenes are frightening and realistic—you can almost feel the spray. Based on a true incident, *The Perfect Storm* introduces us to the captain and crew of a swordfishing boat, the *Andrea Gail*. George Clooney is Billy Tyne, the captain, and Mark Wahlberg and John C. Reilly (*Magnolia*) are two of his crewmen. We learn just enough about the fishermen to create great sympathy for their plight. In an attempt to land a big catch, the *Andrea Gail* gets caught in the convergence of three weather fronts that create a storm of terrible ferocity. Early in the film, Clooney talks romantically about the thrill of setting off in the early morning on a fishing trip. He says, "You're the captain of a swordfishing boat, can anything be better than that?" When that comment was repeated at the end of the film, I turned to Gary and whispered, "Yes--NOT being the captain of a swordfishing boat." It was interesting to see what deep-sea commercial fishing entails, but it does not look like fun. I would have liked to see more of Clooney and less of a subplot concerning a sailboat caught in a storm off Bermuda. I thought the storm overwhelmed the human element in the film, and because of that, it's not an "A" movie. Gary agrees, although he was very impressed with the special effects. **GRADE: B**

THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER: This is so much more than a simple coming-of-age story. It avoids all the standard clichés of that genre while introducing us to some very special people. They are misfits, and they have secrets, but their friendship is real and touching. The movie is taken from a popular young adult novel that is written as a journal. A young boy, Charlie, writes letters to an unknown and probably imaginary friend. Stephen Chbosky, who wrote the novel and both directed the movie and wrote the screenplay for it, was wise to use some of the letters as voice-over narration. Chbosky uses some creative imagery to bring his story to the screen. Charlie is played by Logan Lerman*, and although his real age is 20, he is believable as a high school freshman. We thought he was outstanding. Charlie is struggling to overcome the suicide of his best friend when he begins his first year of high school. Terribly shy and introverted, Charlie is worried that he will be unable to make friends. He can hardly believe it when Patrick, a senior who uses his sarcastic wit to handle his own demons, befriends him. Through Patrick, he meets the group of misfits that become his friends. I was particularly taken with Ezra Miller as Patrick. Miller was terrific as Kevin in *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011) and he is terrific here. Emma Watson, famous for her portrayal of Hermione in the *Harry Potter* movies, is fragile and thoroughly delightful as Sam. It is no wonder that Charlie falls for her. It's always a bonus to see Paul Rudd in a movie, and he is excellent as an English teacher who befriends and encourages Charlie. We expected to like this movie based on the trailer—neither of us has read the book—but *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* exceeded our expectations. **GRADE A**

PERMANENT MIDNIGHT: This 1998 film is a brutally honest look at the horrors of addiction. It is based on the biography of Jerry Stahl who was a successful TV writer. At the height of his career he was making \$5,000 a week. Unfortunately, he had a \$6,000 a week heroin habit. Drugs consumed his life. Ben Stiller plays Stahl. This is not an easy movie to watch, but the performances are excellent. **THUMBS UP**

PERSEPOLIS: This highly creative, mostly black and white animated film received higher marks from professional critics than from typical viewers. It was selected as France's Oscar entry in the foreign-language category and was ultimately nominated by the Academy for best animated feature. The funny and heartbreaking story is based on a French-language autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi. She describes the coming-of-age of Marjane, a precocious Iranian girl struggling to understand and find herself during the Islamic Revolution and later in a repressive theocracy. It was amazing to Barbara and me how effectively black and white drawings could portray the terror and humor in a young girl's struggles. Though animated films do not easily win us over, we both liked *Persepolis* and recommend it. **GRADE B**

PERSONAL SHOPPER: (2017) This modern-day ghost story stars Kristen Stewart who became the first non-French actress ever to win a French César award. The award was for her performance in Olivier Assayas's 2015 movie *Clouds of Sils Maria*. Assayas, who wrote both films, said in a 2017 interview "*I don't think I would've written this screenplay if I had not known Kristen Stewart*". As with his previous movie, professional critics rate *Personal Shopper* higher than do audiences according to *Rotten Tomatoes*. I can understand that, because the movie is slow-moving and puzzling and doesn't answer any of the questions a viewer might have. Stewart's character, Maureen, is in Paris where she works as a personal shopper for an international celebrity. Maureen also describes herself as a medium, although not as accomplished as her twin brother, Lewis, who recently died of heart attack. Maureen is trying to establish contact with her late brother because they had a pact that whoever died first would contact the living twin. Does a person's soul exist after their body has died? Can the living communicate with the dead? Both Gary and I have trouble with the questions, and so had trouble with the movie. However, we didn't have any trouble with Stewart's performance. She is excellent. She doesn't do much with facial expressions, but her stillness speaks volumes in every shot. One critic said that the movie, while implausible, casts an intoxicating spell. It did that for me, but less so for Gary. He can't go higher than C+, and the + is for Stewart's mesmerizing performance. Because the movie almost made me believe in ghosts, I say B+. **GRADE B+/C+**

"Cinema is about resurrection.

Cinema is about dealing with your own ghosts and bringing them to life.

Cinema can explore your subconscious and your memories, but mostly it allows what is lost to come back."

— Olivier Assayas

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPEN: 2021 (Not available for streaming, so Barb and I saw it at a local theater.) Based on a true story, this movie comes to us from Great Britain. Leave it to the Brits to find an offbeat story and turn it into a charming and engaging film about an underdog you have probably never heard of. Everybody loves an underdog story and they don't come any more *underdoggy* than *The Phantom of the Open*, the true story of Maurice Flitcroft, a middle-aged crane operator from the West of England. Despite having never played a single round of golf in his life he managed to bluff his way into the 1976 British Open. He shot a record-breaking game.... the worst round in Open history. He became a folk hero in the process, first in United States where a tournament was named after him. A prize was given to the worst duffer. Later he even became a folk hero in his home country. It's a good reminder that you don't have to be the best to achieve your dreams. The movie leans heavily on comedy but there are many touching moments that emphasize the importance of family. Tight-jawed and soft-spoken, Mark Rylance, earns our sympathy and support playing Flitcroft while the irresistible Sally Hawkins plays the necessary but thankless role of the hero's ever-supportive wife. The film received positive

reviews earning 88% from 116 critics on Rotten Tomato's Tomatometer. For me it was a B movie with a strong ending that brought tears to my eyes. **GRADE B**

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA: I must say up front that I am not a fan of Andrew Lloyd Webber. I think his music is, for the most part, emotionally overwrought. It rarely touches me. (*Entertainment Weekly* says that Webber "holds a patent on romantic bombast.") I saw *Phantom* on stage and was underwhelmed. To quote a Glen Ellyn friend, "It's no *Les Miz*." I was expecting to like the movie better than the stage version, but I didn't. I do think that Joel Schumacher is a skilled director (*Tigerland*, *Phone Booth*, *A Time to Kill*, *Cousins*) and thought he was very creative with the musical numbers in this film. Also, the set and costume designers deserve kudos for their work. But, the story is thin and the music, except for "The Music of the Night," is unmemorable. I have no problem with the actors. Minnie Driver is very funny. Emmy Rossum gives Christine a beautiful face and a lovely voice. Patrick Wilson (*Angels In America*) is fine as the earnest young lover and Gerard Butler makes the Phantom sexy and evil at the same time. Both the men have excellent voices. In the original *Phantom of the Opera* (1925), Lon Chaney was hideously deformed. In this version, the Phantom looks incredibly handsome in his partial mask. I have to agree with Roger Ebert who wrote, "In this version, any red-blooded woman would choose the Phantom over Raoul, even knowing what she knows now." I thought Butler was particularly effective in the final scene, and his agony did touch me. Gary appreciated the quality of the filmmaking, but wasn't crazy about the movie. For him, "It was no *Chicago*." **GRADE B**

PHANTOM THREAD: (2017) This strange film drew high praise from most critics, but in a burst of brutal honesty one critic wrote, "This one, I admit, completely sailed over my head." Another critic praised the film and ended with, "I don't care if I never see it again." Paul Thomas Anderson wrote and directed *Phantom Thread* and his films often do not appeal to mainstream movie audiences. But Barbara and I have liked some of his films, e.g. *Magnolia* and *There Will Be Blood*. I don't know if this film went over our heads or not, but we certainly don't want to see it again. Set in the glamour of 1950's post-war London, three-time Oscar winner Daniel Day-Lewis plays a renowned fashion designer who creates dresses and garments for members of high society. Day-Lewis plays Reynolds Woodcock, a tightly wound neurotic man who is devoted to his work, but is maddeningly self-centered. He is antisocial, demanding, and cruel to those around him and he often acts like a petulant child. Day-Lewis has the acting ability to keep you riveted even when sewing a dress or doing nothing at all. He says this is his final screen performance, but he has said it before and I am skeptical. Nearly equaling his acting prowess is Vicky Krieps, an actor from Luxembourg. She plays Alma, a clumsy-but-attractive waitress whom he quickly transforms into a compliant model and companion. And so begins a tale of unconventional love and a slow and unique shifting balance of power. Looking back, I find this slow moving strange film more interesting to contemplate and write about than it was to sit through. **GRADE C+**

PHILADELPHIA: (1993) It has been 27 years since Gary and I saw *Philadelphia* for the first time, and it affected us in much the same way as it did in 1993. The story of a brilliant lawyer who was fired because he had AIDS still resonates. I was curious about how much the movie changed attitudes toward AIDS. I learned that Jonathan Demme, who directed the movie, tried to come up with a movie that would help push for a cure and save lives." The challenge, the director said, was creating a story that could transcend the huge stigma AIDS carried and pull in the general public. "We wanted to reach the people who couldn't care less about people with AIDS. That was our target audience." Demme understood that the story had to be told partly from Joe Miller's point of view. He saw the lawyer Andrew Beckett hired to plead his case as an average Joe wrestling with his own homophobia. He would serve as a stand-in for the audience as he went from recoiling from Andrew to becoming his friend and ally. Wanting to make Miller accessible to audiences, Demme first thought was to cast a comedian, but when Denzel Washington declared "I can be funny," he was convinced that an actor of Washington's stature would be an asset. I can imagine Demme's surprise that Tom Hanks, beloved for his role as a charming lightweight, was interested in playing Andrew Beckett the lawyer. For someone at Hank's level to be clamoring to play dying lawyer Andrew Beckett was more than Demme had dared dream. (It isn't by chance that Demme cast Joanne Woodward as Beckett's mother.) The movie went on to win two Oscars, Tom Hanks for best actor and Bruce Springsteen for best song, and earn more than \$200 million in box office sales. The film accomplished a lot more than that. It changed the national conversation about HIV-AIDS, and fostered an accurate public awareness about the AIDS epidemic. *Philadelphia* was not universally beloved among the gay community. The Beckett character was attacked in some quarters as two-dimensional and desexualised, with the decision to cut a scene in which Beckett and his partner Miguel cuddle in bed attracted criticism. One of the loudest fault-finders was gay rights activist Larry Kramer, who described Philadelphia as "legally, medically, and politically inaccurate." Hanks was respectful of Kramer's position. However he felt that, in order to reach a mainstream audience, care had to be taken in how Andrew was presented. If he and Banderas had been filmed passionately entangled, the hoopla over movie star Tom Hanks kissing another man on screen would have overshadowed the movie's message of compassion and empathy. We agree with Hanks. If made today, the movie would be very different, but it was perfect for the audiences of 1993. **GRADE A**

Movie Quote:

Judge Garrett: In this courtroom, Mr. Miller, justice is blind to matters of race, creed, color, religion, and sexual orientation.

Joe Miller: With all due respect, your honor, we don't live in this courtroom though, do we?

PHILOMENA: The least surprising thing about this film is that Dame Judi Dench is fantastic playing a woman who is a victim of harsh but routine cruelty dealt out by a strict Irish Catholic convent. Dench has been receiving awards for her outstanding acting in film, TV, and theatre for decades. The movie is based on a 2009 investigative book by Martin Sixsmith titled *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*. In her teens Philomena was mother to a boy conceived out of wedlock. In the convent young mothers were forced to work long hours in a laundry and allowed to see their children one hour per day until the children were sold to wealthy parents. Following Church policy the girls were forced to sign contracts forbidding them from inquiring into their children's whereabouts. A second surprising thing about *Philomena* is that it blends considerable humor with outrage and pathos. Steve Coogan co-stars with Dench and is more than up to the task. They work brilliantly together to make a tragic episode gripping and entertaining. Barbara and I were both reminded of a powerful and memorable film titled *The Magdalene Sisters*. Reading our review in the "Movie Views Archives" will give you further insight into the Magdalene Laundries where fallen girls could save their souls through hard work. This film focuses less on the laundries and more on the long range consequences. We gave *The Magdalene Sisters* an "A" and I believe this film is also worth a high grade. **GRADE A**

PHOENIX: (2014/2015) This German movie offers a different take on a Holocaust story. It's the personal story of Nelly, a disfigured concentration-camp survivor and her return to Berlin after the war. Nelly is determined to find her husband—a husband she still loves in spite of the fact that he might have been the one who betrayed her to the Nazis. Her facial reconstruction surgery has changed her look enough so that, when she finds Johnny, he doesn't recognize her. Believing that Nelly is dead, Johnny wants to claim her significant inheritance. To accomplish this, he hires the woman he knows as Esther to impersonate Nelly. Thus, we see Nelly pretending to be herself. As is typical in many foreign films, motivations are not clearly spelled out. That makes for interesting speculation and discussion after seeing *Phoenix*, but it may also be the reason audiences surveyed on *Rotten Tomatoes* do not rate the movie as high as do the critics. The talented director lingers on faces and slowly increases the tension as the story plays out to its satisfying ending. The aftermath of the war and the haunting specter of the camps are ever present in this quietly gripping film. We applaud the skill of the actors, especially Nina Hoss who plays Nelly. The unique story is not one we will easily forget, and we recommend it highly to those who enjoy sub-titled films. In spite of the slowness of the story-telling and one or two lingering questions about motivation, we still rate this one highly. **GRADE B+**

PHONE BOOTH: Two Colin Farrell movies in one week. My cup runneth over. (See Video Views for a Review of Hart's War.) Farrell does a masterful job stuck in a phone booth for almost this entire 81-minute movie. I don't know of any actor who could have done a better job. Farrell is Stu Shepard, a media publicist in the mold of Tony Curtis' Sidney Falco in *Sweet Smell of Success*. Stu stops at a phone booth to call a young actress he is romancing--he uses the phone booth so his wife won't know about the call--and when he hangs up the phone, it rings. Stu answers it because that's what you do when a phone rings, and he hears a malevolent voice say, "If you hang up, I will kill you." For the rest of the movie, Stu alternately talks to the sniper and tries to convince the police that he doesn't have a gun. It's a somewhat contrived plot but the frenetic pace keeps your attention. We watch an arrogant man crumble as Stu is forced to apologize for his many transgressions. Kiefer Sutherland has the perfect menacing telephone voice, and Forest Whitaker is interesting as the police Captain called to the scene. The movie was directed by Joel Schumacher who also directed Colin Farrell in his first film, *Tigerland*. Gary was totally caught up in the suspense and he gives this film an A-. I definitely liked watching Farrell do his thing, but couldn't grade the film itself higher than B. **GRADE A-/B**

THE PIANIST: This is an incredible story of survival with a moving performance by Adrien Brody as pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman. Szpilman was one of only a handful of Warsaw Jews who managed to stay alive throughout the Nazi occupation. And he was the only one of his family to avoid a concentration camp. It is moving to watch him narrowly escape a cattle car bound for Treblinka--just one of the many close brushes with death he experienced. Adrien Brody is an inspired choice to play the pianist. He looks as though he is Polish and his long fingers look like those of a musician. Plus, his incredible soulful eyes are adept at registering a full range of emotions. When it comes to grading this picture, I must confess that ever since we saw Schindler's List, we have measured all other holocaust movies against it. Since *The Pianist* is the personal story of one man it is necessarily smaller in scope than Spielberg's masterpiece. In addition, Szpilman is not presented as a hero, but simply as a man who survived through strength of will, a bit of luck, and some help from Polish resisters. The film was directed by Roman Polanski who himself was saved from a concentration camp. The script is based on the book by Wladyslaw Szpilman. It is well worth seeing. Be sure to stay through the credits so you can experience the soaring music. **GRADE A-**

PIECES OF APRIL: (2003) Patricia Clarkson was nominated for best supporting actress for her role as a wife and mother who is ill with breast cancer in this film about a semi-dysfunctional family. It is Thanksgiving Day and Clarkson, her husband, daughter and son are driving to New York to have Thanksgiving dinner with a troublesome daughter. April is Clarkson's oldest daughter and they have always had a difficult relationship. Scenes in the family car are interspersed with scenes of April and the trouble she is having with the turkey. I particularly liked the heartwarming ending. Katie Holmes is April and Oliver Platt is Clarkson's husband. Sean Hayes, from TV's *Will and Grace*, has a cameo role. We enjoyed *Pieces of April*, but, compared to other recent Independent films, we like *The Station Agent* better. I'm surprised that Clarkson didn't get her Oscar nomination for that movie. **THUMBS UP**

PIECES OF A WOMAN 2020/2021 (Streamed from Netflix): When a child is lost in childbirth it is devastating for all concerned. When a baby dies during a home birth there is guilt along with the devastation. Martha (Vanessa Kirby) and Sean (Shia LaBeouf—unrecognizable with a full beard) are the prospective mother and father. We are not sure if they are married—Martha refers to Sean as her partner—but that is incidental to the story. Martha wanted a home birth, perhaps to spite her mother, Elizabeth (Ellen Burtsyn), with whom she had a difficult relationship. Elizabeth urged Martha to give birth in a hospital. The couple had a midwife whom they trusted. But when Martha is experiencing contractions every four minutes, and the midwife is attending another difficult labor, Eva (Molly Parker) steps in to assist with the birth. You have to be in mood for a movie where the sparse dialogue is not as important as the silences. The director relies on mood scenes, and Kirby is especially adept at showing the grief she feels as she attempts to go on with her life as her relationship with Sean seems to worsen as the months pass. Elizabeth, Martha's mother, is described as "domineering," but I felt a bit of sympathy for her. One critic called the film an "emotional roller coaster that will leave the viewer as distraught as its characters." Gary said that, for him, it was a B- film, but I would give it a B. **GRADE B/B-**

PIG: 2021 (Hulu) This film received acclaim from critics, who praised its direction and themes, as well as Nicolas Cage's performance. Barbara and I fell in love with Cage's acting when we saw him in *Leaving Las Vegas* in 1995. For that film he won an Academy Award for Best Actor. Then after several years of bad films, we fell out of love. *Pig* stars Cage as the reclusive owner of a truffle-hunting pig. When the pig gets stolen Cage's character sets out on a search for his missing pet, and reacquaints himself with his old stomping grounds in Portland, Oregon. This deeply moving film of loss and love was written and directed by Michael Sarnoski in his directorial debut. We think Sarnoski has a promising future in the film industry. 249 reviews earned him 97% on the Tomatometer. It's a small movie that will surprise many and reaffirms that Cage is always an actor worth watching if he has the right material. These were the best reviews Cage has seen in years. He is only 58 years old so let's hope makes a few more good movies. Remember, he is already an Oscar winner and is capable of incredible range and depth. **GRADE A**

PIRATE RADIO: I think Geoff Berkshire of the Chicago Tribune got it right when he said that this was "A soundtrack in search of a movie." It is a terrific soundtrack, especially for those of us who like our rock from the 60s and 70s. There are critics who complained that some of the songs in this movie, set in the sixties, weren't written until later, but we weren't even aware of that. From the birth of rock 'n' roll all the way until the late 1960s, the British Government didn't allow any rock music on their radio stations. The allowed only 30 minutes of pop radio a day, but rock was considered decadent and dangerous. Pirate Radio is about a band of rogue DJs who captivated Britain, playing the music that defined a generation and standing up to the government—a government that was desperate to take them off the air. Philip Seymour Hoffman is "The Count," the leader of the group until the legendary Gavin (Rhys Ifans) comes out of retirement. The first half of the movie introduces us to the goofy characters who live on the Rock Radio Ship, and we also meet the uptight government official (Kenneth Branagh) who is determined to crush them. That's one of the problems with the movie, since it takes quite a while to introduce everyone and while that's happening, we began to wonder if there was any story at all, or just characters in search of a story. Ultimately, a story of sorts did develop, and the movie ended stronger than it began. The real star, for us at least, was Bill Nighy who plays Quentin, the owner of the floating rock station. Ever since we first saw him in *Love Actually*, we have looked for and enjoyed his performances. Emma Thompson appears in a cameo role, and it's always good to see her. The music gets a B+, but we don't think the movie deserves more than a B-. **GRADE B-**

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL: Errol Flynn was the master of the pirate/adventure movie, but this modern version is not quite like the pirate movies of old. In the first place, it is very, very long, at a running time of 134 minutes. In the second place, it stars Johnny Depp, whose offbeat portrayal is the best part of the movie. And Geoffrey Rush has so much fun playing the really nasty pirate that you have to laugh just watching him gnash those awful teeth. Plus, Keira Knightley (*Bend It Like Beckham*) and Orlando Bloom (*Lord of the Rings* series) are suitably good to look at and skilled enough to hold their own with Depp and Rush. But Ebert is right when he says, "There's a nice little 90-minute B movie trapped inside the 134 minutes of Pirates of the Caribbean, a movie that charms the audience and then outstays its welcome." Gary would elevate this one to a C because of the two main stars, but only because of them. I frequently enjoyed the movie, but got very bored in the interminable fight sequences. I might go as high as B-, but only because Depp is so delicious! (You might want to read MovieViewer Paul K.'s review of this film in the Readers' Views section.) Quote: Roger Ebert reflecting on Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow: There has never been a pirate, or for that matter a human being, like this in any other movie. **GRADE B-/C**

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MAN'S CHEST: My advice: Enjoy the trailer. Skip the movie. Most of the amusing bits with Johnny Depp are in the trailer, and what isn't there isn't worth sitting through 145 boring minutes to see. Even Depp's quirky and considerably charming Captain Jack Sparrow can't save this sequel for us. We loved the first one, but pretty much loathed this one. We have had our fill of ghostly pirates, sword fights and narrow escapes from death. They must have offered a big prize to the make-up artist who could come up with the most disgusting visage. Even the normal pirates look quite nasty, but the crew of Davy Jones's Flying Dutchman are beyond hideous. Quite a few critics seem to like this film, though, and a lot of moviegoers give it high marks. In fact, the film set a record for opening weekend grosses, so Gary and I may be in the minority. (Although readers Diane & Lee U., didn't care for this sequel either.) I guess I agree with the Boston Globe critic who called the film "...a noisy and lazy stopgap movie that goes absolutely nowhere and takes 2 1/2 hours to get there." I hear they're already planning a Pirates of the Caribbean 3. We will definitely skip that one. **GRADE D+**

PITCH PERFECT: Our local critic gave this movie 4½ stars saying that the script, direction and delightful cast added up to a film "that's surprising and snarky fun." But you have to realize that he's much younger than we are. I sang in an a cappella choir in high school but it wasn't even close to the groups that compete these days. The groups in this movie have been much influenced by TV's Glee. In spite of the fact that my music taste was arrested back in the seventies, I did like some of the music in Pitch Perfect, especially the numbers that the two groups from Barden College performed in the final competition. Plus, we both like Anna Kendrick (*Up In The Air, End of Watch*) and she didn't disappoint us in this one. In fact, all the girls in "The Bellas" were good but Rebel Wilson, Australian actress, writer, and stand-up comedienne known for her role in Bridesmaids, was especially funny. We also thought Anna Camp did a credible job as the controlling leader of the Bellas, and she definitely can sing. Skylar Astin, a young actor with a terrific voice, provides the love interest for Kendrick and they made for an appealing couple. That being said, we still can't give this movie a high grade because even college humor is too childish for us. The youngsters in the audience, and there were many, howled with appreciation at the projectile vomiting scenes, but we didn't find them at all amusing. Gary said he couldn't possibly go higher than a C, and even that grade was generous. I'd add a plus to his grade because I did like Kendrick and Astin, and I appreciated the quality of the music, even though the songs were unfamiliar to me. **GRADE C+/C**

THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES: (2012) Leaving the theater, Barbara and I agreed that our interest in this 2 hr. 20 min. film never flagged, but we were ultimately unsatisfied. It is a multi-generational epic that unfolds like three loosely connected one act plays. The title is enigmatic and would have been more descriptive had it been The Sins of the Fathers. A collision course of events that will have a devastating impact for years to come starts with Luke, a motorcycle daredevil/drifter in a traveling carnival. Luke is brilliantly played by Academy Award nominee Ryan Gosling who bleached his hair, covered himself with tattoos, and put on about 40 pounds of pumped-up muscle for the role. He discovers that his once a year girlfriend (Eva Mendes) gave birth to and is raising a baby boy that he fathered. Luke means well but has no skills beyond his motorcycle. Desperate, he begins robbing banks to support the child he never knew. The repercussions of this bad decision ripple their way through the film. In Act Two the story widens to introduce Avery Cross played by Golden Globe nominee Bradley Cooper (The Hangover and Silver Linings Playbook). His powerful chance connection with Luke carries the tragedy forward as we watch a nervous rookie cop turn into a conflicted hero cop struggling with guilt and political ambition. The third act jumps forward 15 years to continue the widening tale of dysfunctional fathers and sons. Relative newcomers Dane DeHaan (Jason) and Emory Cohen (AJ), play the now grown sons of Luke and Avery. The bad choices escalate. Writer/director Derek Cianfrance worked on this sprawling family drama for nearly twenty years and was only able to find financial backers after the success of Blue Valentine (2012) which took twelve years to finance. No one ever said making movies is easy. *The Place Beyond the Pines* is a film we wanted to love. It is not a bad film. We just wanted it to be better. **GRADE B-**

PLAN B: 2021 (Streamed on Hulu) *Plan B* is a bawdy coming-of-age teen comedy that also comes with a more serious message. What makes the movie work is the chemistry between the leads, Kuhoo Verma and Victoria Moroles in breakout comedic performances. They play Sunny and Lupe, likeable teens with typical teen girl insecurities but also red-blooded hormone-addled teens trying to fit into a world they don't always understand. After a regrettable sexual encounter, Sunny finds herself in desperate need of a morning after pill (Plan B) ...in South Dakota. If you choose to see *Plan B*, you will understand why the setting of South Dakota is significant. When the girls are unable to purchase the pill at the local pharmacy, the movie turns into a high stakes road trip which is equal parts frustrating and funny. As is usually true of road trip movies, relationships between friends are strained, but emerge strong. The girls end the trip knowing each other better and knowing themselves better. Barbara and I liked the film, especially the ending, but agree that it didn't reach A level for us. **GRADE B**

PLEASE GIVE: This slice-of-life film about a New York family boasts some outstanding performances. Kate (Catherine Keener) and her husband, Alex (Oliver Platt) own and operate a vintage furniture store, specializing in mid-century pieces. They get their inventory by buying furniture and art work from the family members of someone who has recently died. They are able to acquire some excellent furniture at extremely low prices, but Kate suffers from guilt feelings that she tries to assuage by giving generously to homeless people. Actually, this film is largely about guilt, and there's plenty to go around. Both Kate and Alex feel guilty because they have bought the apartment next to theirs and plan to knock out walls and increase their living space as soon as Andra, the elderly occupant, dies. The fact that the old lady is very unpleasant doesn't make them feel less guilty as they wait, sometimes with impatience, for her to die. We also meet Andra's two granddaughters, nicely played by Rebecca Hall and Amanda Peet. There are no emotional climaxes and no startling revelations and nothing much happens. We simply watch these characters live their lives, and we are delighted to do so. This is the kind of film that stands out at a Film Festival. Compared with more typical Hollywood fare it seems rather tame and only a movie buff who appreciates skilled performances and a finely crafted film will be interested in it. Please Give will probably be hard to find in your town, but we suggest that you keep it in mind for a DVD rental. Although we were charmed by it, we can't give it our highest grade. Gary says B; I say B+. **GRADE B+/B**

POETRY: This 2010 Korean film won the prize for best screenplay at Cannes. Mijja is a 66-year-old woman who cares for her ungrateful grandson in a small apartment in an unnamed Korean city. She enrolls in a poetry class at the local cultural center and is determined to write a poem by the end of the month-long class. The poetry teacher encourages his class to really see things—to experience what they see deeply—and Mijja tries her best to do so. However, two events intrude on her lonely but peaceful life: First, she learns that she is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and second, she learns that her grandson and some of his friends have taken part in a shocking crime. How she deals with these two tragedies is told in a slow and measured 139 minutes. Gary was surprised by the ending, but I thought it was inevitable. The woman who plays Mijja came out of retirement for the part, and she is wonderful. We hesitate to recommend this one, because many people have difficulty with very slow, sub-titled films. If you are a foreign film fan, you might be interested. Roger Ebert gave the film a glowing review. Manohla Dargis of the *NY Times* felt that Poetry is an "example of how art allows us to rise out of ourselves to feel for another through imaginative sympathy." **GRADE B**

POINT BLANK: (originally released in 2010) The action starts immediately in this fast-paced French thriller and it lets up once in a while so you can catch your breath. There are no explosions and no car crashes but there is a lot of running. However, we thought the chase scenes were especially realistic--so much so that I almost felt out of breath just watching. When Samuel, a nurse's aide, thwarts an attempt to murder a hospital patient, his nightmare begins. The people who want the patient dead kidnap Samuel's pregnant wife and demand that he get the injured man out of the hospital. Samuel must rely on Hugo, the injured patient, to find and rescue his wife. Hugo is not exactly a good man, but he's a bit better than the evil men who want him dead. Samuel does whatever is necessary to find and save his wife even though he and Hugo are both wanted by the police. There is, as I said, a lot of running, a fair amount of gunplay, an incriminating video and group of really bad cops. All combine to keep you on the edge of your seat. Since none of the actors were familiar to us, it was easy to accept the characters and get totally involved in the action. Although subtitled, much of the action is without dialogue so it is not difficult to keep your eyes on the screen. We both thought that Point Blank was very well done. In 1967, Lee Marvin and Angie Dickinson starred in a movie with the same title, but, except for the title, there is no similarity. We think you'll like this one! **GRADE B+**

THE POLAR EXPRESS: AN IMAX 3D EXPERIENCE: We're glad we decided to see *The Polar Express* at an I-Max theater. It was a remarkable experience! I don't know if we would have been as impressed if we had seen the standard film, but we were both entranced with the 3D version. The huge plastic glasses we wore fit over our regular glasses and provided the best 3D ever. The digitally rendered animations are incredibly real. It is true that the characters' eyes are rather lifeless and this lends an eerie quality to the film, but it didn't bother us. Some critics have been hard on the film calling it "a grave and disappointing failure (*NY Times*). On the other hand, Roger Ebert thought the film had a "haunting, magical quality" that would make it a Christmas classic for all time. The story is a simple one of faith in things you cannot see and in the magic of a child's imagination. We thought it was both spectacular and touching. Robert Zemeckis (Forrest Gump) used a process called "performance capture," in which human actors perform the movements which are translated into lifelike animation. Tom Hanks was the executive producer and provided the movements for five of the characters. He wore a cap that transmitted a record of his movements to a computer, creating templates for the animated characters. The film was written by Zemeckis and William Broyles Jr., and is based on the book by Chris Van Allsburg. We give this 3D version an A. I suspect the regular version would have been in the B to B+ range. **GRADE A**

POLLOCK: You don't have to be a depressed alcoholic to be an artist, but the two often go hand in hand. At least they did for Jackson Pollock. Ed Harris, in a bravura performance, brings the tortured artist to vivid life in this film that he also directed. The story begins in 1941, when Jackson Pollock meets Lee Krasner (Marcia Gay Harden) but before he has achieved any acclaim. Krasner literally takes him under her wing, and, before long, he has a one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery. (Amy Madigan appears as Guggenheim.) Pollack was fortunate in that he lived to see his art become successful, but unfortunate in that he also saw other, newer, more original talent take over his place in the art world. We greatly admire Pollack's work but I suspect we would have disliked the man. Practically inarticulate, given to violent fits of temper and terrible alcoholic binges, Pollack is not as easy film subject. It's

surprising that a film about his life could be so absorbing. For that we give credit to Ed Harris's performance and to Marcia Gay Harden's beautiful portrayal of the woman who loved the artist and the man. But the painting sequences are the true magic of the movie. The scenes of Harris painting with Pollock's distinctive splatter technique have amazing vitality and credibility. I would have to vote for Harris for Best Actor. I agree with Movie Viewer Seth W. that Harden and Julie Walters (Billy Elliot) have given far and away the best performances in the Supporting Actress category. Of course, neither of them has much of a chance to take home the Oscar. Too bad. **GRADE: B+**

NOTE: Ebert wrote this about Harris's dedication to the film and to the artist:

"This is Ed Harris' movie. He started thinking about it 15 years ago, after reading a book about Pollock. He commissioned the screenplay. He raised the money. He stars in it, and he directed it. He knew he looked a lot like Pollock (his father saw the book and thought the cover photo resembled his son). But his similarity to Pollock is not just superficial; he looks a little like Picasso, too, but is unlikely to find the same affinity. He seems to have made a deeper connection, to have felt an instinctive sympathy for this great, unhappy man."

PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE: (2019) Set in France in the late 18th century, this award winning film relies heavily on cinematography. The plot is thin telling the story of forbidden love between an aristocrat and a painter commissioned to paint her portrait. There is minimal dialogue in the two hour film, but it is gorgeously photographed. Virtually every minute the film runs through the projector at least one frame is like a beautiful picture that might hang on an art collector's wall. (I am aware that film projection has gone digital, but I am old-fashioned.) Critics loved it with 98% on the Tomatometer and the Audience score of 94% was nearly as high. The story of love and desire is also about the limited options afforded women in a male dominated society. Héloïse has been confined to a holy order for much of her young adulthood and now she faces an inevitable marriage she does not want to a man she has never seen. Marianne is commissioned to paint a portrait of Héloïse without her knowledge since she refuses to pose for a painting. So Marianne operates under the guise of companionship, observing Héloïse by day and secretly painting her by firelight at night. Day by day, the two women become closer and the simple story unfolds. Appropriately, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* was written, directed, and choreographed by women. I liked the film more than I thought I would, but it doesn't quite reach the "A" level. Barb agrees. **GRADE B+**

POSSESSION: There are two parallel love stories in this film--one modern and one over 200 years old--and both are totally absorbing. In addition, there is an academic mystery to be solved. Roland Mitchell (Aaron Eckhart), an American majoring in Victorian Literature, is a research assistant for an English professor who specializes in the poetry of Randolph Henry Ash. Ash is famous for romantic poetry that everyone believes was written for his wife. Mitchell finds evidence that perhaps Ash had another love. He enlists the help of Maud Bailey (Gwyneth Paltrow), a Professor who is an authority on Christabel LaMotte, a poetess who may have been involved with Ash. As the modern couple investigates the mystery, they begin to form a relationship, though each is terrified of giving in to "true love." They seem to save their passion for scholarly discovery and not for each other. That is not true of Ash, played by Jeremy Northam, and LaMotte, brought to life by Jennifer Ehle. Director Neil LaBute has intercut the 21st Century story with scenes of the impressively passionate relationship between Ash and LaMotte. Northam and Ehle seem born to play period characters and Paltrow and Eckhart are cool and modern as Maud and Roland. The transitions from the past to the present are handled deftly and creatively. There is also a subplot of academic rivalry--two other scholars are hot on the trail of the Ash/LaMotte affair. Gary commented that it was refreshing to see academic inquiry handled with so much passion. This one may not be popular with the teenagers that seem to be the intended audience for so many films these days, but it is an exceptionally fine movie. **GRADE A-**

THE POST: (2017) In 2015 we had the Oscar-winning *Spotlight*, the true story of how the *Boston Globe* uncovered the massive scandal of child molestation and cover-up within the local Catholic Archdiocese. This year, we have *The Post*, the true story of how the *Washington Post* published secret government documents about Viet Nam that exposed a cover-up that spanned four U.S. Presidents and resulted in a Supreme Court decision. Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers first to the *New York Times*. When the Nixon administration slapped a cease and desist order on that newspaper, Ellsberg then gave the Pentagon Papers to the *Washington Post*, hoping they would continue the story. Katherine Graham was the owner of the *Post*, taking over the family-owned business when her husband died. Ben Bradlee, played with great panache by Tom Hanks, was the paper's executive editor. The decision to publish, however, was Kay Graham's alone, and Meryl Streep beautifully showed the complicated influences at work on a woman in the aggressive man's world of 1971. Plus, she had a lot to lose if the government was successful in its censorship of newspapers. She could have lost the only business she had ever known, and could have gone to jail under the espionage act. The landmark ruling of the Supreme Court held that "the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors." Could any movie be more appropriate for our times? The film closes with the Watergate burglary, reminding us that it was two intrepid reporters from the *Washington Post* that broke the story of the Watergate conspiracy. The entire cast, which includes, Matthew Rhys, Tracey Letts, Alison Brie, Sarah Paulson, Bob Odenkirk and Bradley Whitford, is excellent. Praise should go to the makeup people for the uncanny resemblance that Bruce Greenwood had to Robert McNamara. We thought it was a wise decision to show President Nixon only from the back, while perfectly recreated that distinctive voice. *The Post*, which gathered six nominations in the Golden Globes, may not win the Oscar this year, but Gary and I think that Steven Spielberg has made a movie everyone should see. **GRADE A**

POTICHE: (Released here in 2011) This 2010 French film is set in the mid-seventies and is reminiscent of the women's lib movies of that era. When her husband is taken hostage by his striking employees, Suzanne, a trophy housewife (a still radiant Catherine Deneuve), takes the reins of the family umbrella business. It was the business her father ran successfully for over forty years, and one that her husband, because of his disastrous relationship with his employees, has managed to run to the edge of ruin. Suzanne proves to be a benevolent and effective leader, and when her husband recovers from his hostage induced heart attack, she declines to go back to being "only" a housewife. Gérard Depardieu provides some interest as a former union leader and the current town mayor. He's also a former lover of Suzanne's. The script isn't going to win any awards, but it is such fun to watch Deneuve and Depardieu together. They are both so natural on screen that you can buy even the corniest dialogue. Plus, it has that very French sense of humor. We saw this on a DVD from Netflix. **GRADE B.**

THE POWER OF THE DOG: 2021 (Netflix) Two brothers own a ranch in Montana in the year 1925. Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) is loud and disagreeable; George (Jesse Plemons) is quiet and thoughtful. And yet, their relationship is strange. For all his bombast, Phil seems to depend on George, whom he denigrates by calling him "fatso." When George marries Rose (Kirsten Dunst), a suicide-widow with a teen-aged son, and brings her home to the ranch, it seems to create a quandary for Phil—he doesn't know quite how to behave toward Rose. Rose's son, Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) pledges, in a voice over at the beginning of the movie, to always look after his mother. Rose used to be a florist, and Peter makes artificial flowers for her. When Peter comes home from school for the summer, Phil calls him "Nancy." All the hands at the ranch, who idolize the brutal Phil, follow suit, crying "faggot" and other insults when Peter walks by. Over the summer, Peter and Phil develop an unlikely friendship, which worries Rose. But eventually Peter discovers Phil's secret and plots a terrible revenge. A word about the title of the movie is in order. It's from a biblical quote: "Deliver my soul from the sword; My love from the power of the dog." It's from Psalm 22 and has to do with the kind of men who would do awful things, like crucify Jesus. The movie is based on a novel of the same title by Thomas Savage. Beautifully filmed and brilliantly acted, it is a feather in the cap of screen writer/director Jane Campion (*The Piano*), whom Rotten Tomatoes calls "one of her generation's finest filmmakers." We agree, and give this remarkable movie a B+.

GRADE B+
**Cumberbatch told Jimmy Kimmel, "I went to 'Dude Camp.'
I kinda went there to learn the life of a rancher, because my fellow does a lot of stuff..."**

A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION: We enjoyed the gentle humor of this Robert Altman film, but then, we also enjoy Garrison Keillor's radio show. If you, too, enjoy his show, you will find the movie charming. If you don't care for Keillor, or have never heard the radio show, the movie will have little appeal. It does provide some good celebrity watching, though. Lily Tomlin and Meryl Streep play the singing Johnson Sisters, with Lindsay Lohan as Streep's suicide-obsessed daughter. Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly are hilarious as the slightly off-color singing cowboy duo, Dusty & Lefty. Garrison Keillor plays himself, and Kevin Kline is Guy Noir, Keillor's fictional detective. The movie is classic Altman: Conversations overlap and the story is rather slight. It's supposed to be the final performance of the show because a new owner (represented by Tommy Lee Jones) is going to tear down their theater and put up a parking lot. But the movie is really about the family of performers who take part in the radio show. As Roger Ebert said in his review: Like the show that inspired it, *A Prairie Home Companion* is not about anything in particular. Perhaps it is about everything in general: About remembering, and treasuring the past, and loving performers not because they are new but because they have lasted. There are some wonderful old songs, and we especially enjoyed Meryl Streep's singing. The casting of Kevin Kline as Guy Noir was brilliant—he's very funny. And we loved the sound effects guy who played himself. It looked like the actors were having a ball making this film. Streep says that collaborating with Altman for just 10 days, had an impact, more than other films I've done that took five months. (No stories of Lake Wobegone were included because Keillor wants to make a movie set in that fictional Minnesota town.) We think this is a B+ movie.

PRAY AWAY: 2020/2021 (Available on Netflix Runtime: 1h 41m) A few decades ago there was a widely held belief that homosexuality was an illness that could be cured. This led to the controversial "conversion therapy" movement, a Christianity-cloaked movement that promoted the idea that homosexuality could be changed through faith and prayer. The therapy and the assumptions supporting it have been widely condemned by major medical organizations including the American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Conversion therapy has been declared illegal in 20 states, but it is still widely available in many other states. Although less common than in decades past, conversion therapy remains dangerously alive today. In a kind of footnote at the end of the film, an interesting statistic is quoted: a national survey found that LGBTQ youth who experienced conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to attempt suicide. The notion that the God they believed created them couldn't love them as they were inflicted immeasurable guilt and self-loathing. Barbara and I both wanted to live this documentary. But we both feel it could have and should have been better. For us, more film time could have focused on the survivors and their sympathetic stories and less time on techniques used to convince them their behavior was sinful but curable.

PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL PUSH BY SAPPHIRE: Sometimes a film tells a story that is so bleak, so heart-breaking, so gut-wrenching that it is difficult to watch. Films such as *Sophie's Choice*, *Schindler's List*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Slumdog Millionaire* come to mind. But they are so powerful that any film lover will put them on their "must see" list. *Precious* is such a film. It premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Grand Jury Prize, Audience Award and a Special Jury Prize for Acting. The last film to do so well at Sundance was *Slumdog Millionaire*. Clareece "Precious" Jones is an illiterate obese 16 year-old black girl from Harlem whose life has been a living hell. What could have been heavily melodramatic is presented with brutal honesty due to the brilliant performances of its nearly all-female cast. Mo'Nique, a television hostess and comedian, delivers an award winning performance of the most vile and unsympathetic mother Barbara and I can remember. An almost unrecognizable Mariah Carey effectively plays a sympathetic social worker, and the beautiful Paula Patton plays a dedicated teacher. But critical praise is sure to be justifiably heaped on first-time actress Gabourey Sidibe. She is so believable hiding behind bland affect to survive her unbearable life that you barely recognize her when she slips into scenes of fantasy for escape. The movie was directed by Lee Daniels who started his career by producing *Monster's Ball*, in which Halle Berry shed her glamour and won her first Oscar. In spite of an awkward title demanded in the original optioning agreement, Barbara and I have settled on a high mark for this memorable film.

THE PRESITGE: Have you ever seen a magic trick that had a great buildup but fizzled at the end? This movie is a bit like that. It's unusual to have two movies so close together both about magicians and both set in turn of the century London. The *Illusionist* was reviewed in the last issue and we gave that one an A-. I'm afraid this one suffers by comparison. It has an exceptional cast: Christian Bale, Hugh Jackman, Michael Caine, and Scarlett Johansson, who seems to be in every other film these days. The premise is promising: Two rival magicians compete to create the best trick. Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins*) directed and wrote the screenplay along with his brother, Jonathan. But the story is muddled. It tries to be dark and mysterious, but instead it's just confusing. And the ending surprise reminded me a bit of the soap operas I watch—or to be more precise—fast forward through. I would have liked to fast forward through this one. Gary and I agree on a grade of C.

PRIDE: (2014) *Pride* gives a human face to the sense of community that was eventually established between Welsh miners and a small group of gay men and women from London. The movie has received high praise from critics and audiences alike. Here is the

history: In March 1984 British coalminers began a national strike against pit closures that would last for twelve months. There were networks of support organizations established throughout the country. One such group was the London Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners--LGSM, which collected funds primarily for the Dulais mining community in South Wales. It was an attempt to bring political activism onto the agenda of the London lesbian and gay community, and to bring sexual politics onto the agenda of trade union politics. Although the actual events that inspired the film deserve an A+, we did not feel the movie deserved that high a grade. I thought that occasionally the movie resorted to stereotypical gay/miner behavior, although the eighties was a decade of prejudice against gays and perhaps the movie merely reflected the times. Gary felt that the story would have been better served by reducing the two hour running time. Dominic West, Imelda Staunton and Bill Nighy are the most familiar actors. Ben Schnetzer deserves praise for his portrayal of Mark Weston, the leader of the LGSM group. We especially liked Jessica Gunning who played Siân James, a young miner's wife who, inspired by her part in the union struggle, eventually became the first woman MP for Swansea East. The spirit of solidarity between the two beleaguered groups was inspiring and we were both moved the movie's ending. Critics have called this a "feel-good" movie, and we concur. **GRADE B+**

The real story behind *Pride*: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/31/pride-film-gay-activists-miners-strike-interview>

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: We saw this film with my sister and brother-in-law and all four of us liked it very much. We agreed it was a wonderful adaptation of the familiar and much loved Jane Austin novel. Gary and I had seen a stage version a few weeks ago and Gary wasn't sure he wanted to see it again, but he was delighted with the film. Keira Knightley is an absolutely perfect Elizabeth Bennet, every bit as feisty, witty and intelligent as Austin imagined her. What a talent she is. Brenda Blethyn and the marvelous Donald Sutherland were perfect as the loving though sometimes bewildered parents. We also like Rosamund Pike as the sweet and lovely Jane Bennet. At first I wasn't sure that Matthew Macfadyen had the sexual intensity I think Darcy must have, but he grew on me and by the end, I quite liked his interpretation. As usual, Judi Dench was memorable as the imperious Lady Catherine. Director Joe Wright created a beautiful backdrop for the story—surely England must have looked exactly like that in the early 19th Century. We can find no fault with this one. **GRADE A**

PRIME: This is a love story with complications. In the first place, the boy is 14 years younger than the girl. The boy's mother is another problem: She is disturbed that her son is dating a gentile and even more disturbed that the girl in question is her therapy patient. As these complications unfolded, fairly early in the movie, we worried that the story would have nowhere to go. We were pleasantly surprised that we enjoyed the rest of the movie. It is to the credit of the writing and the acting that what appeared to be one-note plot (what Roger Ebert calls "the Idiot Plot") was fleshed out with such interesting people that we were involved to the end. Meryl Streep, looking quite matronly, is the therapist/mother, Uma Thurman is the 37-year-old divorcee, and Bryan Greenberg is the 23-year-old son. Although there are some funny moments, the movie isn't played strictly for laughs. Instead, it has some nice moments and people who act in a very human way. There is one bit that made us laugh every time. It concerns the boy's paternal grandmother and a skillet. **GRADE B.**

THE PRINCESS DIARIES: It's hard to criticize a movie that has Julie Andrews in it. It was lovely to see her again on the big screen. It's also hard to find fault with a movie that is designed for children and embodies the classic Cinderella story. What's more, I really can't criticize Ann Hathaway, who plays Mia, the gawky teenager who suddenly discovers she is a princess, because she is very appealing. But, as entertainment for adults, we really can't rate the film higher than a C. Nathan, the ten-year-old who went to see the movie with us, thought it was "pretty good." He would give it a B. And the children in the audience when we saw it seemed to enjoy it. If you decide to go, we suggest you take a kid with you. **GRADE C/B**

PRISONERS: There are several of actual prisoners in this movie, but I think the title refers to the fact that we are all prisoners: Prisoners of our history and our beliefs about ourselves and the world around us. This thriller about two abducted girls has a lot of exciting moments. It also has a few slow spots and the car speeding through traffic at the end is a bit over-the-top. Two girls disappear from their neighborhood on Thanksgiving Day. Hugh Jackman and Maria Bello are the parents of one of the young girls, and Terence Howard and Viola Davis are the parents of the other girl. Jake Gyllenhaal is the detective in charge of the case, but when he doesn't find the girls quickly enough, Jackman takes matters into his own hands. He feels terribly guilty that he didn't protect his little girl and that guilt is expressed in overwhelming rage. Paul Dano is the mentally challenged young man who appears to have taken the girls, although there is absolutely no physical evidence linking him to the kidnapping. This is a very dark movie, and it's hard to identify a good guy. Gyllenhaal comes the closest to a hero, but he has rage issue of his own. Watching *Prisoners* I was up and down in terms of a grade. The acting was uniformly good, but the subject matter is very disturbing. It was especially disturbing to see Jackman's character saying The Lord's Prayer before torturing the man he believes kidnapped his daughter. Because of some slow spots and a few inexplicable details, we decided on a grade of B-. **GRADE B-**

PRIVATE LIFE: (2018/2020--*Netflix*) Rachel (Kathryn Hahn) and Richard (Paul Giamatti) are an older couple who have put off having children because of her career as a writer and his as a theatre director. Now Rachel is 41 and Paul is 47. They are deep in the throes of In Vitro Fertilization. In fact, the movie opens with Paul injecting Rachel with IVF hormones. They are also pursuing adoption because, at their age, why not try everything. The movie was written and directed by Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Tamara Jenkins (*The Savages*, *Slums of Beverly Hills*), and is both funny and moving, as Richard and Rachel try to maintain their marriage as they sink deeper into the insular world of assisted reproduction. Molly Shannon and John Carroll Lynch (*Fargo*) play the couple's good friends--they are almost like family--until their grown daughter, Sadie, gets involved as a potential egg donor. There are moments in the film that are shatteringly real, and others that made us chuckle. The writing was spot on. I can't say enough about Hahn and Giamatti. They are brilliantly up to the task of playing Kathryn and Richard with the skill that only actors of highest ability can bring to a movie. The critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* gave the film deservedly high marks. Gary and I agreed on grade of B+. **GRADE B+**

THE PRIVATE LIVES OF PIPPA LEE: (A 2009 release we saw on Cable TV) When Pippa Lee (Robin Wright) and her much older husband (Alan Arkin) move to a retirement community, Pippa begins to evaluate her life. She remembers growing up with a troubled mother, living a communal life in the sixties, and meeting and marrying Herb, a successful publisher. She appears to have it all together, but the move unsettles her. She begins to sleep walk; she starts sneaking out to smoke cigarettes and she worries that she

may be having a nervous breakdown. She thought that moving to a retirement community would be an ending, but it turns out to be another beginning. Writer/Director Rebecca Miller has assembled a star-studded cast including Blake Lively (playing the younger Pippa), Maria Bellow, Wynona Ryder, Julianne Moore, and Keanu Reeves. Although it has the trappings of a typical dysfunctional family drama, the film is not overly sentimental. As Stephen Holden of the New York Times said, "The movie gazes steadily and without sentimentality at upper-middle-class angst as old age and death loom, and there is suddenly too much time to fill." The movie ends not exactly with hope, but with the reality that life keeps changing and we'd best change with it. Robin Wright is wonderful and Alan Arkin gives a fine performance. Gary loved it and gives it a B+. I give it a solid B. **GRADE B+/B**

THE PRIZE WINNER OF DEFIANCE, OHIO: Early in the movie, Evelyn Ryan (Julianne Moore) consults her parish priest asking for advice. She tells her priest that her husband most of his paycheck on liquor, leaving her and their 10 children practically destitute. The priest tells her that there is a lot of pressure on her husband to provide for the family and she should provide him with a "better home." You're right. It is the 50s! When else could a woman listen to advice like that with a straight face. Evelyn, relentlessly cheerful, does her best to provide for her children by entering and winning an amazing number of contests. Once again, Moore plays a "perfect wife" as she did in *The Hours* and *Far From Heaven*, and she does it beautifully, as always. The movie, directed by Jane Anderson, is based on a memoir written by Terry Ryan, daughter of the real-life Evelyn. Woody Harrelson plays Evelyn's hapless and self-loathing husband so well that, although you spend much of the film hating him, you can also feel pity for him. At times, Moore's character talks directly to the camera and sometimes her prize-winning jingles come to life on-screen. Gary said he wasn't certain he liked the movie at first, mostly because he was so angry at the husband's behavior, but it grew on him and by the end, he liked it quite a bit. I liked it from the beginning. Laura Dern appears briefly as another champion prize-winner, and all the Ryan children seem suitably authentic. **GRADE B**

THE PRODUCERS: This film version of the hit Broadway musical turns out to be the flop that Bialystock & Bloom were looking for. I have no doubt that Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick were showstoppers on stage. They aren't bad in the movie version, but the broad farce designed for the stage just doesn't work on screen. What's more, there are no memorable songs, except for "Springtime for Hitler," which was introduced in the 1968 film with Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder. Uma Thurman is agreeably tall, limber and lovely in the Ulla role, and Wil Ferrell is amusing as the playwright. Although there were a few laughs, for us the movie was mostly tedious. (I did get a kick out of the posters commemorating former Bialystock productions, such as "The Breaking Wind," and "King Leer.") The production numbers were appropriately glitzy, and the one with Bialystock's "investors" on their walkers was clever. We both felt that Brooks really overdid the "gay" jokes. Enough already! The two gay characters were way, way over the top. I'm afraid neither one of us can go higher than a C. **GRADE C**

PROPHET'S PREY: (2015) This chilling documentary is a compelling portrait of a megalomaniac: Warren Jeffs. It is a shocking account how Jeffs became a worshipped and adored Prophet in the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FDLS), and took absolute control of a congregation numbering in the thousands. Despite a trail of abuse and ruined lives and his life plus 20 years sentence for sexual assault of a child that landed him in a federal prison, he has maintained the blind trust of most of his devout followers. Director/Writer Amy Berg tells a story of warped religious authority and patriarchal abuse every bit as chilling as any horror film you are likely to see this year. A few of the polygamist cult followers escaped Jeff's powerful hold to give personal interviews for the film. The staggering story of their former lives is a powerful and sad description of a large group of people vulnerable to exploitation. Jon Krakauer, author of *"Under the Banner of Heaven"* is one of the many talking heads. Berg has few answers, but an abundance of blistering facts. She seems to be hoping that shining a harsh light on the practice of raping and molesting young girls & boys and financially exploiting thousands will curtail the practice. Barbara and I can only hope she is right. It is impossible to fully comprehend how the constant message of "Obey the prophet," even after his incarceration for sexual assault, continues to mesmerize his submissive flock. Perhaps the most telling and frightening moment came with the audio recording of Jeffs raping a 12-year-old girl he had just taken as one of his many wives. There is no doubt in my mind that his devout followers would blindly carry out any order passed along to them from his prison cell. That is the scariest thing of all. Because of the importance of the subject matter, and the arousal of my passion while writing this review, I grade the film higher than Barbara. **GRADE: A-/B**

PROJECT NIM: If the names Washoe, Viki, Coco, or Nim trigger no memories, you may not wish to make the effort to see this new documentary from director James Marsh whose last nonfiction film was the Oscar-winning *Man on Wire*. On the other hand, if you have long been fascinated by non-human primate studies, especially those involving language acquisition, this absorbing film may go on your "should see" list. Nim was born a cute little chimpanzee who in the 1970s became the subject in a landmark experiment trying to show that a chimp could learn to communicate with sign language when raised like a human child. At times the film is funny and heartwarming, but ultimately it is sad and heart-wrenching. Nim goes from cute coddled baby to a lonely ape in a cage. Herbert Terrace, Columbia University professor, started the project hoping to rebut influential MIT linguist Noam Chomsky's position that language is unique to humans. Unfortunately the results were controversial and inconclusive. The project in the bright light of Marsh's camera reveals as much, if not more, about humans than it does about chimpanzees. Documentaries are always difficult to evaluate, but this one is especially so. For Barbara and me who included non-human primate studies in our college lectures, it is deserving of a high grade. For people not as interested in primate research, it might not fare as well. **GRADE B+**

PROMETHEUS: Science fiction is not my favorite genre and I often have to fight off sleep while others sit on the edge of their seats. I have to admit that Ridley Scott's latest directing effort in Sci Fi did not put me to sleep. Scott's earlier films include two on the iconic list: *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982). *Prometheus*, in Greek Mythology, is a god entrusted with the task of creating mankind out of clay. In this Sci Fi thriller "Prometheus" is the name of the futuristic space craft taking a team of explorers to the darkest corners of the universe in a search for answers about the origin of mankind. Apparently they didn't totally buy the Greek version. Noomi Rapace plays a truth-seeking scientist. Charlize Theron is a corporate executive representing the interests of the corporation with billions invested in the project, and Michael Fassbender plays a cheery and servile android that seems to have nearly everything programmed into his head. All are excellent in their roles and I may never free myself of the haunting memory of an astonishing surgery scene featuring Rapace. I think one of the reasons Barbara and I liked this film more than some of the Sci Fi thrillers we have braved lately

is the presence of dialog rather than beginning to end explosions and computer enhanced chases. I told Barbara I would review this film, but due to my bias against the genre, I leave the grade to her. **GRADE B+**

PROMISED LAND: (2012) This is a well-intentioned project. It seeks to expose the dangers of fracking, the process of drilling and injecting fluid into the ground at a high pressure in order to fracture shale rocks to release the natural gas inside. I suspect that the 2010 Oscar-nominated documentary on the topic, *Gasland*, wasn't seen by a lot of people, so Matt Damon and John Krasinski, who wrote the screenplay, wanted to explore the topic in a more entertaining format. Damon and Krasinski, along with Frances McDormand, Hal Holbrook and Rosemarie Dewitt, do their best to make the story entertaining, but they are only marginally successful. Damon and McDormand work for Global, a natural gas company. They have been sent to a small farming community that appears to have large deposits of natural gas underground. The townspeople are struggling: their way-of-life is a dying one, and Global is offering huge sums if only the farmers will agree to lease their land for drilling. Enter Krasinski as an environmentalist warning people that fracking will destroy their town. The story seems disjointed and some scenes simply don't make sense. For example, Damon gets punched in a local bar, but we never could figure out why. The movie ends with a "light-bulb" moment for Damon's character, but we didn't think the scene was properly illuminating. **GRADE C**

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN (2020, a \$19.95 rental on Amazon Prime.) I hesitate to say anything about this movie for fear of giving away the plot and the shocking ending. I will say this: Cassie works by day in a coffee shop, but she is living a secret double life by night. We soon learn that she was a student who dropped out of medical school for an unknown reason. That reason, which we learn slowly throughout the movie, is the motivation for Cassie's nighttime activities. I will gladly talk about Carey Mulligan's stunning performance as Cassie. It left an indelible and haunting impression on Gary and me. In the words of one of our favorite critics, Richard Roeper, "...an astonishingly powerful, deeply layered performance by Carey Mulligan." We first saw her in 2009's *An Education*, but it wasn't until two years later, with her performance in *Shame*, that we became fans. Since then, she has built a commendable career and some consider her, deservedly we think, one of the best actresses working today. We are doing a Carey Mulligan retrospective this month, having watched her in *The Dig*, and we are planning on watching her in 2018's *Wildlife*. **GRADE A**

PROOF: We liked the movie version of David Auburn's play better than the stage version we saw here in Phoenix. We thought the film did an excellent job of illustrating the complex emotional relationships between the characters. Catherine (Gwyneth Paltrow) is the daughter of a brilliant but mentally unstable mathematician. She left her own studies in mathematics to care for Robert (Anthony Hopkins), and for the last five years has put her life on hold. Her father was only 28 when mental illness put an end to his brilliant career. Catherine has just turned 27. It appears that she may have inherited her father genius, but she is terrified that she has also inherited his mental instability. The story opens one week after Robert has died. Catherine's older sister, Claire (Hope Davis), comes back to Chicago for the funeral and proceeds to take over Catherine's life in the guise of "taking care of her." Claire is not emotionally strong enough to resist her sister's dominating presence. Hal (Jake Gyllenhaal) is the other character in the mix. He was a student of Catherine's father and hopes to find something extraordinary in the papers that Robert left behind. David Auburn, the playwright, graduated from the University of Chicago, so he knows the landscape. In his review, Roger Ebert, who also attended that University, writes that the film contains one scene after another that is pitch-perfect in its command of how academics talk and live. I know it made me nostalgic for both the campus atmosphere and the beautiful Chicago skyline. Auburn co-wrote the screenplay, and John Madden (*Shakespeare In Love*) directed. Paltrow gives an extraordinary performance as Catherine, Davis and Gyllenhaal are terrific, and the film benefits from the presence of Anthony Hopkins. It's true that he is dead, but we see much of him through Catherine's eyes and heart and memory. **GRADE A-**

A PROPHET: (*Un Prophète*, a 2009 release seen on DVD) This French language film was nominated last year for Best Foreign Film, and we can understand why. It is a violent story of a vulnerable Arabic man who is sent to a prison run by a gang of Corsican thugs. He suffers the standard prison brutalities and learns to adjust to the conflict between the Corsicans and the Muslims. During his six years inside, he performs tasks both menial and venal for César, the head Corsican thug, in exchange for protection. By the end of his six years he has been "rehabilitated" from an impressionable 19-year-old into a full-fledged gangster—a gangster who has eclipsed César in influence and power. Tahar Rahim is outstanding as Malik. The prison scenes are sometimes difficult to watch, but we do recommend the film. The dialogue is sparse and the subtitles are in easy-to-read yellow on the DVD. Manohla Dargis of the N.Y. Times thought that the viewer could see it "as an allegory about France and its uneasy relations with generations of Arab immigrants and their children." Political implications aside, it is an excellent prison film, showing how Malik's time inside prepares him for life back on the streets. Our local AZ Republic reviewer thought it was "close to brilliant." We both give it a solid B. **GRADE B+**

THE PROPOSAL: Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds try their utmost to breath life and vitality into this stock romantic comedy plot. A plot that dates back, at the very least, to Shakespeare's *Taming Of The Shrew*. You are all familiar with this story: Couple doesn't like each other; couple is forced to travel together, room together, get married, etc., but, big surprise, their antipathy turn to love and the end up happily together. Bullock and Reynolds are two very likeable actors, and for a while they succeed in making Margaret, the bitchy boss, and Andrew, her put-upon secretary, interesting and funny. To escape deportation—to Canada, no less—Margaret blackmails Andrew into marrying her. As always with this well-worn plot, the beginning is better than the end. We all know what the end will be, but sometimes the trip is fun. In this film, once the two leave the office to spend a weekend with Andrews parents in Sitka, Alaska, the fun begins to wear thin. Even Betty White as a 90-year-old grandmother can't save it, and she is quite amusing. I didn't think the bit with the dog was particularly clever, and the bit with Oscar Nuñez (TV's *The Office*) as a goofy exotic dancer was downright embarrassing. I did like Dennis O'Hare as a dogged Immigration agent. He fancies himself the Elliot Ness of Immigration, although I doubt that the most dogged agent would fly all the way to Alaska to expose a fraudulent marriage. The biggest problem in *The Proposal* is that the switch from hate to love happens much too quickly. And it isn't very believable, either. (The closing credits are good, though.) Gary can't grade the film higher than C+, but I like the two actors enough to say B-. **GRADE B-/C+**

THE PROPOSITION: Gary said that as he watched this film he had the feeling he was watching an "A" film that few people would want to sit through. Harsh, brutal and violent does not even begin to describe it. Set in Australia, the film is as bleak as the outback in which it is filmed. It reminded him of a Sam Peckinpah movie, only bloodier. I agree with Gary that if you are squeamish about

violence, avoid this film. This Australian frontier is even bloodier than Deadwood! Guy Pearce (looking incredibly scruffy), Ray Winstone, Emily Watson, Danny Huston, and John Hurt give flawless performances, but there are no heroes in this movie. "Loathsome" would fit just about everyone except Emily Watson. Winstone is a sheriff and I guess he's the best of a bad lot, but I wouldn't want to cross paths with him. When Winstone arrests Charlie Burns (Pearce) and his younger brother, Mikey, he offers Charlie a proposition: Save your younger brother from the gallows by killing your older brother, Arthur. Huston (21 Grams) is outstanding as Arthur, the leader of the vicious Burns gang. He kills without a qualm, yet quotes Irish poetry, appreciates a beautiful sunset, and talks about the importance of love and family. Huston gives a wonderfully nuanced performance. The Proposition is a beautifully photographed and brilliantly directed film, and Roger Ebert gave it 4 stars. However, we can't, in good conscience, give it an A, so we'll settle for a B+. See it at your own risk. **GRADE A**

PROZAC NATION: (2001 release) Christina Ricci is Elizabeth Wurtzel, a young woman whose troubled childhood led her into a severe depression when she was a student at Harvard. Wurtzel wrote the novel Prozac Nation upon which this movie is based. Ricci's performance is excellent and Jessica Lange is equally good as her mother. The movie is a real downer but the acting is good enough for us to recommend it. **THUMBS UP**

THE PUBLIC: (2018) The film had its world premiere in 2018 at the Toronto International Film Festival. It was not well received by critics but audiences loved it. Written, directed, and starring Emilio Estevez, son of actor Martin Sheen and brother of actor Charlie Sheen, *The Public* is an empathetic parable about the plight of the homeless. The movie takes its title from the Cincinnati Public Library, where most of the action is set. As an unusually bitter blast of Arctic air moves through, some of the city's homeless take shelter in the public building and refuse to leave at closing time. Facing subzero temperatures and filled homeless shelters, their sit-in becomes less about political protest and more about physical survival. Escalating into a stand-off with the police, this inspiring David vs Goliath story takes on some of our nation's most challenging issues and what better setting for a civics lesson than a public library. He also sprinkles enough humor to make it enjoyable. Emilio Estevez, once famous as a teen Brat Pack star in the 1980's (*Breakfast Club*), has transitioned to become a serious filmmaker. Barbara and I liked the movie. **GRADE B+**

PUBLIC ENEMIES: Michael Mann tries to turn a 1930s crime story into a modern masterpiece, but, for us, he fails miserably. Using far too many hand-held cameras, shooting from weird angles, focusing on unimportant details and shooting mostly at night does not a masterpiece make. It makes for a mess: a confusing and boring film. Even Johnny Depp can't save it, although he looks terrific. And someone should tell Mann that putting an obviously plastic saguaro in a scene does make anyone think they are in Tuscon. Dillinger became a folk hero in the thirties by robbing banks but not taking money from ordinary people. But we learn nothing about Dillinger in this film, except for the fact that he was probably an abused child. Christian Bale plays Melvin Purvis, the FBI agent who killed Pretty Boy Floyd and led the team that eventually killed John Dillinger. He plays it with almost no discernible facial expression, so we don't learn anything about him either. Marion Cotillard, so brilliant as Edith Piaf in 2007's *La Vie En Rose*, is Billie, Dillinger's love interest. For me, this 2 hour and 23 minute film seemed to go on forever. I wanted to urge Depp to go to a movie and get it over with. The film is based on a book by Bryan Burrough, although the author had nothing to do with the screenplay. Mann did. The subtitle of the Chicago Tribune's movie review was, "Too bad John Dillinger never stole any quality scripts." People who are familiar with the Dillinger legend will remember that he went to Chicago's Biograph theatre with a woman who told the FBI she would be wearing a red dress. Will someone tell me why Mann decided to make it an orange skirt and white blouse? Why? **GRADE C-**

PUNCH DRUNK LOVE: There is no doubt that this is one weird movie. But then, we rather like weird. Nothing that happens is expected and nobody behaves as expected in this strange love story written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson of *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* fame. Adam Sandler is Barry Egan, a shy lonely man whose mild exterior masks a wealth of rage. Emily Watson is Lena Leonard, a woman who is attracted to Barry in spite of his odd behavior--or perhaps because of it. Barry has seven sisters, so you can understand that he might be a bit bent. I can't begin to give you a synopsis of this plot because it would sound too bizarre. I think the director is saying that people are never what they seem to be, and that life, for many people, is an endless corridor whose doors are mostly closed to them. I can understand why so many people think this is an awful movie, but also why so many critics think it is brilliant. Gary and I are somewhere in between, and while we rather enjoyed it, we can't recommend it for most viewers. It's no *Magnolia*, that's for sure. The director has been quoted as saying, "I have a feeling, one of those gut feelings, that I'll make pretty good movies the rest of my life. And maybe I'll make some clunkers, maybe I'll make some winners, but I guess the way that I really feel is that *Magnolia* is, for better or worse, the best movie I'll ever make." So far, I agree with him. **GRADE B**

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS: If you are interested in pursuing some happiness, we recommend this movie. The ever charming Will Smith is ably supported by his real-life son, Jaden, in this story of a man so down on his luck that he and his son are forced to spend a night in a subway men's room. Smith's Chris Gardner is a salesman who isn't making a living selling a portable high-density bone scanner: A scanner that he schleps all over San Francisco. His wife works two shifts in a laundry and they still can't pay the rent. Thandie Newton is excellent in a minor role as a woman so desperate to find a better life that she leaves her husband and son for the promise of a job in New York. After she and her paycheck leave, the father and son become homeless. The story is unabashedly sentimental, but both of the Smiths are so appealing that you forgive the sentimentality and root for a man who loves his son and vigorously pursues a better life for the two of them. That better life consists of making a lot of money as a stockbroker. First, however, Gardner must take an internship at Dean Witter—an unpaid internship. How he manages to excel at Dean Witter and shield his son from the harsh realities of poverty make for a compelling pursuit. The role of Chris Gardner is a departure for Will Smith. There are no aliens, no guns, no fast cars or space crafts. Richard Roeper believe this is Smith's best role ever, and he may be right. Although the film has both humor and drama, *Pursuit* is really a love story: the love of a father for his son. Jaden Christopher Smith has inherited his father's good looks, appeal, and his acting ability. The young actor has a loose, natural style. He said in an interview, "You have to just be in the moment. My dad told me to do that." I predict we will see this pint-sized charmer in other films. Steve Conrad wrote the screenplay after the producer saw a 20/20 story on the real-life Gardner. We both give this one a B+. **GRADE B+**

PUSSY RIOT: A PUNK PRAYER: (HBO Summer 2013 Documentary Series) This documentary was an official selection of the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, where it received a special award. It, tells the story of Nadia, Masha and Katia of the feminist art collective

Pussy Riot. In Feb. 2012, they performed a 40-second “punk prayer” inside Russia’s main cathedral, which led to their arrest on charges of religious hatred, followed by a trial that reverberated around the world and transformed the face of Russian society. This is an interesting look inside a society that makes it a criminal act to denigrate religion. Surprising how much influence the Church has in modern-day Russia.

PUZZLE: “Life is random. You have no control over it. But, when you finish a puzzle, you know you’ve made all the right choices.” A character in the movie says this in defense of jigsaw puzzles, and I especially liked it. The movie is about a young suburban wife and mother who has submerged her own personality to care for her husband and two boys. Her husband isn’t a bad man, but he’s a man who calls his wife “cute” and demeans her in many small ways. One day, a friend gives her a jigsaw puzzle for her birthday and she finds out that she’s good at putting the pieces together to make a picture. Bored with the same puzzle, she travels to New York City to buy more, and sees a notice that someone is looking for a puzzle partner. And that is the beginning of her “getting a bit of her own back.” Kelly Macdonald, an always outstanding actor, is perfect as Agnes. Irrfan Khan, an Indian actor you might recognize from *Jurassic World* and *The Life of Pi*, is impressive as Robert who becomes Agnes’s puzzle partner and more. One critic called the movie “a mild crowd pleaser for people who are exhausted by blockbusters,” but Gary and I liked it better than he did and give it high marks. **GRADE B+**