

Movie Titles that begin with “M”

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom * Macbeth * Mad Hot Ballroom * Mad Max: Fury Road * Made * Made In Dagenham * Made of Honor * The Magdalene Sisters * Maggie's Plan * Magic Mike * The Magnificent Seven * Magnolia * Maiden * Mamma Mia! * Mama Mia! Here We Go Again * A Man Called Ove * The Man From Elysian Fields * The Man From U.N.C.L.E. * Man of Steel * Man on Fire * Man On The Train * Man On Wire * Man Up * The Man Who Invented Christmas * The Man Who Knew Infinity * The Man Who Sued God * The Man Who Wasn't There * Management * Manchester by the Sea * The Manchurian Candidate * Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom * Manifesto * Mank * The Many Saints of Newark * The Map Of The World * Maps to the Stars * March of the Penguins * Margin Call * Marguerite * Maria Full of Grace * Marie Antionette * Marlene Diedrich: Her Own Song * Maria by Callas * Marriage Story * Marshall * Mary Poppins Returns * Mary Queen of Scots * Martha Marcie May Marlene * The Martian * Mass * The Master * Master and Commander * The Matador * Match * Match Point * Matchstick Men * Maudie * The Mauritanian * McFarland USA * Me and Earl and the Dying Girl * Me And Orson Welles * Me and You and Everyone We Know * Me Before You * Mean Girls * The Meddler * Meek's Cutoff * Meet The Fockers * Meet The Parents * Megan Leavey * Melancholia * Memento * Memoirs of a Geisha * Memory of a Killer * Men In Black II * Men of Honor * The Men Who Stare At Goats * The Merchant of Venice * The Messenger * The Mexican * The Meyerowitz Stories(2018 &2020) * Michael Clayton * Michael Jackson: This Is It * Midnight In Paris * The Midwife * A Mighty Heart * A Mighty Wind * Mike Wallace Is Here * Miles Ahead * Milk * Million Dollar Arm * Million Dollar Baby * A Million Ways to Die in The West * Millions * Minari * Minding the Gap * Minority Report * Miracle * Miss Pettigrew Lives For A Day * Miss Sloane * The Missing * Mission Impossible-Fallout * Mission Impossible 2 * Mission Impossible III * Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol * Mission Impossible-Rogue Nation * Mississippi Grind * The Mole Agent * Molly's Game * Mona Lisa Smile * Money Monster * Moneyball 2011&2021 * Mongol * Monos * Monsieur Ibrahim * Monsieur Lazhar * Monsoon Wedding * Monster * Monster's Ball * The Monuments Men * Moon * Moonlight * Moonlight, a Second Look * The Moonlight Mile * Moonrise Kingdom * Moonstruck * Morning Glory * A Most Violent Year * A Most Wanted Man * Mostly Martha * Mother (Madeo) * Mother! * Mother of George * Motherless Brooklyn * The Motorcylce Diaries * Moulin Rouge * Mr. 3000 * Mr. Brooks * Mr. & Mrs. Smith * Mr. Holmes * Mr. Turner * Mrs. Henderson Presents * Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont * Mulholland Drive * Much Ado About Nothing * Mud (2012&2020) * Mudbound * The Mule * Mumford * Munich * Murder on the Orient Express * Murderball * Music and Lyrics * Must Love Dogs * The Mustang * My Afternoons With Margueritte * My Architect * My Big Fat Greek Wedding * My Dog Skip * My Family and Other Animals * My Heroes Were Cowboys * My Name Is Pauli Murray * My Octopus Teacher * My Old Lady My One And Only * My Sister's Keeper * My Week With Marilyn * Mysterious Skin * Mystic River

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM: (2020 on Netflix) Ma Rainey was one of the earliest professional blues singers. Her name is as well known in the black community as is Frank Sinatra's in the white. The Black Bottom is a dance which became popular in the 1920s. The film showcases riveting performances by Chadwick Boseman and Viola Davis. Barbara and I agree that watching Chadwick Boseman's moving performance in his final movie is heartbreaking. Boseman shockingly died over the summer of colorectal cancer at age 43. The talented Viola Davis shows her extraordinary range playing Ma Rainey, who became known as "Mother of the Blues. With her teeth extravagantly capped, her cheeks lavishly rouged, and her body realistically padded, Davis's Ma Rainey is terrifying, domineering, and deeply wounded by her treatment in the white dominated entertainment industry. Boseman, plays an ambitious 32-year-old trumpet player with dreams of leading his own band. I think Boseman and Davis are both good enough in their roles to be nominated for Academy Awards. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was a 1984 play by August Wilson that became a movie. The award winning play is considered one of the best plays of the 20th Century and critics loved the 2020 movie earning it a rare 99% on the Rotten Tomatoes' Tomatometer. With a runtime of only 94 minutes, the movie left me wanting more. The tragic story is set in 1927 on a hot summer day in a Chicago recording studio where Ma Rainey is supposed to record a few of her popular songs. She engages in a battle of wills with her white manager and producer over control of her music. Tensions and temperatures rise over the course of the afternoon and the bristling racial tensions feel as timely as they might today. Chadwick Boseman's untimely death will understandably draw attention to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, but I think it will endure because it is a powerful and engaging film. **GRADE A**

MACBETH: 2015 Let me say first that it takes "chutzpah" to in any way change the story or words of a man widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. This would be especially true of a director making only his second big screen production and knowing his work will be compared with directors like Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa and Roman Polanski. Apparently Australian director Justin Kurzel is fearless, taking on a 400 year-old play that is thought to be so cursed that thespians won't utter the name "Macbeth" inside a theater. The most amazing thing is that it worked for the majority of 128 critics evidenced by an 80% score on the *Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer*. From the opening scene it is clear that we are seeing an altered version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Instead of seeing the three witches who I will always think of as ugly hags hovering over a boiling cauldron of evil brew, we see Lord and Lady Macbeth at their young son's funeral. This is a scene absent from other adaptations because in Shakespeare's famous tragedy there is no clear evidence that the Macbeths ever even had a child. This version works from a stripped down text and frequent alterations to the familiar story. Most high school graduates are at least vaguely familiar with Shakespeare's classic tale of ambition, murder, guilt, and madness. And many would recognize a few of the often quoted lines: "Out damned spot," "What's done is done", "screw your courage to the sticking-place", "it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Barb and I have seen multiple versions of *Macbeth* and we both consider it our favorite of the tragedies. We were not enamored with this version. It was shot on location in England and Scotland and the cinematography was beautiful. The extent to which the film worked we attribute to the leads, Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard. They were supported by a talented crew of character actors. I would never recommend the movie to anyone not familiar with Shakespeare's work and had not seen *Macbeth* more than once. It might have more appeal to certain people such as film students, but we cannot give it high marks. **GRADE C**

MAD HOT BALLROOM: In this charming documentary we watch New York City 4th, 5th and 6th graders learn ballroom dancing, American style. They master the steps, postures, and attitudes of the fox trot, merengue, rumba, tango and swing. At the end of the 10-week program, the best dancers from each school compete in a citywide dance competition. The would-be dancers are adorable as they struggle to make dance "a dialogue between a gentleman and a lady," as one of their instructors defines it. The hardest thing of all

seems to be looking directly at each other—important in ballroom dancing. At their age, eye contact between boys and girls is very difficult. We also hear some of the students talk about dancing, life, the opposite sex, and their hopes for the future. The film is funny, exciting, and frequently touching as these youngsters struggle to be good enough for the final competition. The film follows classes at three different schools: their practice sessions, the selection of the best students to form the school's team, and the final competition. Along the way, the youngsters learn about partnership, teamwork and how to handle the disappointment of not advancing to the finals. The kids are delightful and the documentary is certain to give you a good feeling about today's youngsters. **GRADE B+**

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD: (2015) I'm trying to think of things that would be worse than watching this movie. Going to the dentist? No. A colonoscopy? I don't think so. Prepping for the colonoscopy? Perhaps. This movie might be a bit more enjoyable than that. Since it got 98% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, it's clear that I'm living in the wrong century. Except for a few moments, my reaction to the non-stop car chase in the desert hell scape of *Mad Max: Fury Road* was "Please make it stop!" I totally agree with the critic who said, "A spectacular demolition derby of action that totally overwhelms every other aspect of the film: characters, narrative, emotion and charm flattened in the dust." (He must have been in the 2%.) I did like Charlize Theron and the girls and the feminist theme, but not enough to ever see another movie like this one. (Although I may have to see the new *Terminator* movie, if only to hear Arnold say "I'll be back.") I do have a question. Why is almost everything and everyone so dirty and ugly in these post-apocalyptic movies? Making the movie did employ a lot of people though, so I guess it wasn't all bad. Tom Hardy is a terrific actor, but he was wasted here. Charlize looked fantastic, and she is the only reason this movie didn't get an F from me. Gary said that he went with very low expectations, but the movie failed to rise to that low level. **GRADE D-/F**

MADE: In 1997, Jon Favreau wrote and starred in an Independent film called *Swingers*. His best friend, Vince Vaughn also starred. We saw that movie on video and enjoyed it, so we were anxious to see Favreau's latest effort. He wrote and directed *Made*, and once again is teamed with Vaughn. Favreau is Bobby, a stone mason/amateur prizefighter. Vaughn is Bobby's childhood friend, Ricky, an intellectually challenged motor mouth who always seems to make things more difficult than they should be. When Bobby accepts a job from Max (Peter Falk), he asks that Ricky be included. The job is mysterious, but definitely on the far side of the law. Max is an old-style Jewish mobster, and Falk plays him to perfection. If you see the movie, don't try to figure out the particulars of this job--it's incomprehensible. Besides, it really doesn't matter: the fun is in seeing how Bobby and Ricky go about it. Sean "Puffy" Combs appears as a sophisticated New York mobster. There are lots of laughs and lots of objectionable language in *MADE*. In fact, if you took out all the "F" words, the movie's 95 minute running time would be cut in half. This is not an easy film to categorize. Roger Ebert suggests that Favreau and Vaughn made this movie together " because no one else could understand how it could work. The best part of this movie is the fun that the two actors seem to be having with their characters. We enjoyed the film, but have a hard time recommending it. Unless you enjoy offbeat, independent movies, and aren't bothered by pervasive language and drug use, we suggest you skip this one. **GRADE: B**

MADE IN DAGENHAM: This is a delightful comedy/drama import from Great Britain, and it might have been even better had we been able to cut through more of the thick British accents. Barbara commented when leaving the theater that at times it was like watching a foreign language film without subtitles. But the essence came through. Based on a real life story of hard working female machine operators who fought for workplace justice at a time when equal pay for women was thought impossible. It may sound boring, but even without subtitles, it is not. Sally Hawkins stars as wife, mother, and important spokesperson for a cause that led to the Equal Pay act of 1970 and to similar laws in all industrialized countries. Bob Hoskins plays a sympathetic shop steward at the Ford plant outside London. The women work in sweatshop conditions under a leaky roof in one of the outlying buildings. I think Dickens might have put together the descriptive prose to do it justice. The story could have seemed contrived and sentimental, but it escaped that pitfall. For me it was a profound treatment of an age-old struggle that still exists. If you have the opportunity to see it, you will be rewarded with an entertaining look at a slice of history. **GRADE B**

MADE OF HONOR: I wasn't expecting much when we went to see this film, and I got just about what I expected. However, I am a fan of Michelle Monaghan and I wanted to see Sydney Pollack in his last film role. All the critics told me that the story is trite and predictable—but then, so are a lot of romantic comedies. The plot is actually just a remake of the Julia Roberts film, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, with role reversal and a happier ending. But, the actors were interesting to watch and I did get my "McDreamy" fix. Pollack played Patrick Dempsey's father and seeing him made me realize how much he will be missed. Monaghan was delightful as Dempsey's best friend, and it was particularly nice to see Kathleen Quinlan looking great and making the most out of a minor role. Kevin Kidd, so good in HBO's *Rome*, played Monaghan's fiancée, and since he was from Scotland, we were treated to some beautiful shots of the Scottish countryside. It wasn't the worst romantic comedy ever, but it was far from the best. Because I enjoyed the actors and the scenes in New York and Scotland, I'd give it a C+, but Gary would put it in the C- range. **GRADE C+/C-**

THE MAGDALENE SISTERS: This powerful film tells the story of The Magdalene Laundries which were run by the Catholic Church as places where fallen women could save their souls through hard work. They got their name from Mary Magdalene, the fallen woman who became one of Jesus' closest followers. The Laundries began 150 years ago as homes to rehabilitate prostitutes, but by the early 20th century, the role had been expanded to care for unwed mothers and other young women the church considered to be wayward. The film, set in 1964, introduces us to three young women who were sent to a Magdalene laundry. They were forced to work long hours, without pay, for 364 days a year in the profit-making convent laundry to "wash away their sins." Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff) was sent there because she had been raped and that somehow put her in moral danger. Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone), an orphan, was sent to the Laundry because she was pretty and liked to flirt. Rose (Dorothy Duffy) was brought to the convent labor camp by her father who effectively disowned her because she had given birth to an illegitimate child. Once incarcerated, the girls worked long days without pay and with no hope of release. They worked alongside women who had been there for forty years. The laundry workers were poorly fed, humiliated, and cruelly treated. The Mother Superior of the Convent, Sister Bridget, is beautifully brought to life by Geraldine McEwan. She is an evil woman, but McEwan plays her as a complex character who truly believed she was helping the Magdalene women. We were shocked to learn that the last Magdalene Laundry didn't close until 1996. The screenplay was written by the director, Peter Mullan, and is based on testimony by Magdalene inmates. The film is beautifully made and beautifully acted and is likely to elicit strong emotional reactions. As we watched the credits roll, we expressed our shock at how recently these abuses occurred, and a man

walking in front of us said, "If you think the Nuns were bad---the Priests were even worse!" I'm sure many people have had positive experiences in Catholic Schools, but this bitter man was not one of them. We think this memorable film deserves a **GRADE: A**

MAGGIE'S PLAN: (2015/16) Given the cast—Greta Gerwig, Ethan Hawke and Julianne Moore—and a respectable 81% on the *Tomatometer*, I was prepared to love this movie. Perhaps my high expectations affected my perception, because instead of loving it, I only liked it. Maggie (Gerwig) is so anxious to have a baby she decides to use donated sperm and a turkey baster. But when she volunteers to read a professor's novel, she begins to have feelings for him. Unfortunately, John (Hawke) is married, although it seems he has fallen out of love with his wife, Georgette (Moore). Eventually, John leaves his wife for Maggie. Three years later they are married with an adorable child, and he is still trying to finish his novel which has ballooned to over 500 pages. Maggie, however, is tired of being the breadwinner and even more tired of living with a self-absorbed writer. She hatches a plan to bring John and Georgette back together. Moore is wonderfully eccentric and amusing as Georgette, and Gerwig is skilled at seeming not to be acting at all. She is such a natural actor that she makes every role look easy. Gary commented on leaving the theatre that Hawke didn't deserve either of the women, but admitted that he was skilled in his portrayal of John. *Maggie's Plan* was woefully lacking in humor despite the presence of Maya Rudolph and Bill Hader as Maggie's best friends. Perhaps the slow pace contributed to my occasional inability to keep my eyes open. Gary and I agree that this one is pleasant, but not particularly memorable. **GRADE B-**

MAGIC MIKE: Barbara and I were hoping for better. Especially from an Academy Award-winning film director, Steven Soderbergh, who brought us films we loved: *Out of Sight*, *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*. Set in the world of male strippers, one would expect this 1hr. 50 min effort to show oodles of rippling abs and tons of gluteus Maximus and Gluteus Medius interspersed with considerable simulated sex. What I wasn't prepared for was for these few categories to fill 90% of the film time and leave about 10% for an extraordinarily skimpy script. Channing Tatum and Matthew McConaughey play the leads and both nail their roles. Actually the film was supposedly inspired by Channing Tatum's short stint as an 18-year-old male stripper in Florida before he made it in Hollywood. The dance numbers are inventive and athletic, but in my never humble opinion there are just too many of them. *Magic Mike* has received a few high marks from professional critics. One said, "The eye candy is worth every penny of your ticket price." We cannot agree. **GRADE C**

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN: (2016) This film is a remake of the 1960 classic film with the same title and that film was based on a classic Japanese film by Kurosawa, *Seven Samurai*, a film that has consistently ranked high in critics' greatest films lists. Ironically Kurosawa loved American Westerns and was heavily influenced by them in his writing of *Seven Samurai*. I would like to say I loved this film and I went to the theater with high hopes. If body count were my only criterion for rating films, this latest version would beat all the others. The cast was splendid, and Barbara and I agreed very effective in the scenes written for them. The emphasis on killing left little time for quiet scenes played for character development. For us *The Magnificent Seven* never really lives up to the superlative in its title. With tongue in cheek, our local reviewer suggested *The Pretty Good Seven* might be a title that would better reflect the quality of this film. Even though we wanted it to be better, you may want to see this film, especially if you are a fan of Westerns. The sight of Denzel Washington riding a horse with guns blazing and starring in his first Western might be worth the ticket price. He plays the male lead played by Yul Brynner in the 1960 film. This film was helped along with an impressive supporting cast: Peter Sarsgaard, Ethan Hawke, Chris Pratt, and Vincent D'Onofrio. Just to see if the 2016 film measured up to the 1960 production, Barb and I came home and watched the original. It didn't. **GRADE B-**

MAGNOLIA: When Roger Ebert reviewed Paul Thomas Anderson's film on his television show, his guest critic said she didn't like it and didn't know what it was about. Magnolia is about so many things that it's a wonder she couldn't see at least one of them. It's about life and death, love and betrayal, regrets and forgiveness. Most of all, it's about how chance and coincidence rule our lives. Anderson warns us in the opening segment that we shouldn't look for structure and meaning in our lives or in his movie. Instead he shows us a twenty-four hour period in the lives of several people. Here is a partial list of these characters: Tom Cruise as the loathsome stud; Jason Robards as the dying television producer who deserted his wife and child; Phillip Baker Hall as the dying game show host who has much to regret; the wonderful Julianne Moore as a woman who married a man she didn't love and then fell in love with him as he lay dying; Melora Waters as a drug-addicted daughter who can't forgive her parents; John C. Reilly as a gentle cop who is looking for love; Jeremy Blackman as a young child genius; William H. Macy as a former child quiz star who has turned into a broken-down loser; and the ubiquitous John Philip Semour as a nurse who gives loving care to a dying man. If you give yourself time, you will get involved in all these stories. All the actors are flat out terrific, but Tom Cruise outdoes himself. Anderson uses a modern day *deus ex machina* for the climax of all these partially intersecting tales and it is a doozie! We didn't care much for Boogie Nights, but this is inspired filmmaking. Whether you like this film or not, you're sure to talk about it afterwards. Magnolia is weird, that's true, but it may be brilliant. (The B+ is Gary's.) **GRADE: A/B+**

MAIDEN: (2018/2019) Maiden is the story of how, in 1989, 24-year-old Tracy Edwards became the skipper of the first ever all-female crew to enter the Whitbread Round the World. Edwards had experience serving as deckhand and first mate before entering her first Whitbread in the 1985–1986 competition. She began as a cook aboard the *Atlantic Privateer*. "Out of the 230 crew in the race, four of us were girls," Edwards remembers. It was at this point that she began asking herself, "I wonder if girls could do it?" She recruited a 12-woman crew, and mortgaged her home to buy a dilapidated sailing yacht, and brought it back to the UK where she and her crew began working on it. Edwards says that nobody could believe their eyes when they saw women in the boatyard. She christened the refurbished sailboat "Maiden," but they had difficulty raising the money necessary to participate in the race. Potential sponsors rejected her, fearing they would die at sea and generate bad publicity. She finally called upon her friendship with King Hussein of Jordan, who gladly sponsored Maiden. But sexism abounded in the racing world. The chauvinistic yachting press took bets on her failure, and, as Edwards recalled, "Maiden was met with either antipathy or aggression." However, with Edwards as both skipper and navigator, Maiden finished second in its class, winning two out of six individual legs of the race. But, as the crew learned when they sailed into Southampton harbor, it didn't matter that they hadn't won the race, they had accomplished something brilliant. How did a film of an event 30 years ago finally make it to the big screen? Edwards explained, "Five years ago, I went to a talk at a school, and the film director and his daughter were there. He listened to the story, he called me the next day, and he said, "Has anyone ever made a film of this?...I would love to talk to you about doing that." And so, many hours of footage from that historic race were distilled into the incredibly thrilling and moving story of the Maiden and her all-female crew. Gary and I gave *Maiden* an enthusiastic A. **GRADE A**

(We attended a preview performance of this movie, and there was a short taped Q &A session at the end of the credits. We hope the filmmakers included that with the film's release, because it added to our appreciation of *Maiden*.)

MAMMA MIA! Gary and I have never seen this musical on stage, so the movie version was totally new for us. You expect the story to be slim in a musical but, in this movie version, it is almost non-existent. Here are the basics: Sophie is getting married on a picturesque Greek isle; She doesn't know who her father is but has discovered her mom's diary and learned that her dad could be one of three men; She invites them to the wedding; Her mom doesn't know they are coming. The Abba music was delightful and the cast was very entertaining, but what passes for choreography seemed mostly frantic. Roger Ebert thought that at times it resembled calisthenics. There was entirely too much jumping around, falling off roofs, crawling on walls, etc.—what one critic called "irrational exuberance." Perhaps the director felt she had to hide the fact that none of the leads were chosen for their singing ability. She didn't have to do that because they all do an acceptable job in the vocal department, although I would like to see it onstage with really good singers. I thought Meryl Streep was OK in the role of Donna, although some critics disagree. A.O. Scott of the New York Times thought there was a degree of fascination in watching her *mug and squirm, shimmy and shriek and generally fill every moment with antic, purposeless energy, as if she were hogging the spotlight in an eighth-grade musical*. I thought that was a bit harsh, though not entirely untrue. The three potential fathers are capably played by Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth, and Stellan Skarsgård. Amanda Seyfried, from TV's *Big Love* is charming as the bride, and we both liked Dominic Cooper as the bridegroom. Christine Baranski and Julie Walters play Streep's best friends who have come for the wedding, and each has a solo number. I particularly liked Streep's rendition of "Winner Takes All" and loved the "Dancing Queen" number. The backgrounds and Brosnan were gorgeous to look at, and the music was pleasantly nostalgic. We can't, however, grade this movie higher than a B. **GRADE B**

MAMMA MIA! HERE WE GO AGAIN: (2018) If listening to an Abba song makes you feel happy, this movie will delight you, as it did me. However, if you think that the white-bread disco beat of Abba was a bad joke in the 70s, you should skip this one. I didn't mind that often the scenes were merely set-ups for production numbers, because that's what I expected. How could I miss seeing a movie that has both Colin Firth and Cher in it? Cher plays grandmother to Sophie (Amanda Seyfried) who is mourning the death of her mother, Donna (played in the original *Mamma Mia* by Meryl Streep), even as she prepares for the opening of the hotel that was her mother's dream. Through flashbacks, we see how Donna came to the island. Lilly James plays the young Donna with tremendous energy and extraordinary charm. We also see younger versions of her friends, Tanya and Rosie, and they look remarkably like younger versions of Christine Baranski and Julie Walters. The actors who play the younger versions of Pierce Brosnan, Stellan Skarsgård and Colin Firth have their personalities down pat. Our local critic said that he was into the movie when he heard that Cher would be singing "Fernando," and when Cher sang it to Andy Garcia it was definitely worth the ticket price. I won't go any further into the almost non-existent plot, because that's not the reason to see the movie. Joyous musical numbers is the reason to see *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, although be warned, you may shed a few tears. My enjoyment was at an A level, while Gary enjoyed it at a B+ level. **GRADE A/B+**

A MAN CALLED OVE: (2016) This heart-warming Swedish dramedy is based on a 2012 debut novel by Swedish author Fredrik Backman. The book became an international bestseller and now the film has become Sweden's official entry for best foreign-language film at the 89th Academy Awards to be held in February, 2017. It was one of the biggest Swedish box office hits of all time. Now American audiences get to see what the buzz was all about. There is no sex, no violence, no car chases or special effects, just good story telling by terrific Swedish actors. Barbara read and loved the novel which I never read, and we both loved this skillfully made movie about the healing power of neighborly love. It received an impressive 92% from Rotten Tomatoes. Swedish film star Rolf Lassgård is brilliant playing Ove, an ill-tempered elderly busybody who spends his days making his neighbors miserable. As the action unfolds, well written flashbacks gradually force us to reassess our opinion of the surly protagonist. A Persian family moves in next door and his growing friendship with them helps him reconnect with life. It sounds like a simple plot and it is. The beauty lies in the gifted story telling. It would be best if I don't tell more and let you get the full impact of this fascinating film. You would do well to take a tissue or two for the touching, funny and engrossing last twenty minutes. In my opinion, the film generates sympathy without cheap manipulation. **GRADE A**

THE MAN FROM ELYSIAN FIELDS: (2001 Release) Andy Garcia is Byron Tiller, a happily married writer whose first novel got some good reviews, but didn't make much money. He has written another book, but can't find a publisher. Desperate for money, he is persuaded to take a job with an escort service called Elysian Fields. It is run by an elegant Englishman (Mick Jagger). Byron keeps his new job hidden from his wife (Julianna Margulies), and soon finds himself working for the beautiful young wife of a famous novelist (James Coburn). The movie got off to a rather slow start, mostly because Garcia's character is so depressed. But, the script is exceedingly literate and Mick Jagger and James Coburn give life and energy to the film. Their scenes are the best and it's worth seeing the movie just to see the two of them. **THUMBS UP**, which would probably translate to a B-. **GRADE B-**

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.: (2015) In 1964 *The Man From Uncle* burst upon our TV screens starring Robert Vaughn and David McCallum. In 2015, Guy Ritchie decided it was time to revisit the story of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. He co-wrote the screenplay and cast a British actor, Henry Cavill, as Solo, and Armie Hammer as Kuryakin. Both men are gorgeous and both are up to the roles. Then he added Alicia Vikander to tease the two men with some clever patter. The movie isn't quite like the TV show, but it does have a Sixties vibe. There are some interesting twists, some interesting filming techniques and a couple of evil doers who want to sell a nuclear warhead to some Nazis. Now, when anyone can learn how to make a nuclear device on the Internet, it seems a rather quaint dilemma, but Solo and Kuryakin are stuck in the Sixties, so they take it very seriously. Nice to see Hugh Grant in a supporting role, and, if the ending of this movie means anything, we may be seeing him again. Critics have been lukewarm, but audiences have enjoyed the action and the repartee. I liked it better than Gary, who only dozed off three times during *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* That equates to a C+ from him, but I give it a B. **GRADE B/C+**

MAN OF STEEL: (2013) We liked the first half of the movie, the part that most critics thought was too long and tedious. The second part of the movie, which carried the level of alien space ship destruction to ludicrous, we thought was too long and tedious. I must

admit, however, that Superman (Henry Cavill) was a pleasure to look at all the way through. He spent months building muscle mass for the part and I for one appreciated the result. This will be, however, the last time we go to one of these mega-CGI movies. If I ever succumb to another one, Gary said that I will have to go alone. We've both overdosed on futuristic machinery creating levels of havoc that make me chuckle at the ridiculousness of it all. I will give **Man of Steel**, a C, but only because I liked the supporting cast. Diane Lane and Kevin Costner play Clark Kent's adoptive parents and Amy Adams was a lovely Lois Lane. Michael Shannon (TV's *Boardwalk Empire* along with several current films) is General Zod, the military man who was created to protect his people—the people of the planet Krypton. I even liked Russell Crowe as Superman's father, although he's no Marlon Brando. But Cavill as Superman made the movie tolerable, at least for me. A sequel has already been announced, but even Cavill won't draw me into the theatre for that one.

GRADE C

Entertainment Weekly Bullseye Comment:

"Man of Steel—as in, you stole two and a half hours of our life, and we want it back."

MAN ON FIRE: This movie is a case of style over substance. Unfortunately the style is irritating, characterized by a jerky camera and quick cuts to out-of-focus images that confuse rather than enlighten. Pittsburgh Live.com referred to director Tony Scott's style as "camera and editing hysteria," and A.O. Scott of the New York Times felt that Scott's filming tricks have "overwhelmed whatever story sense he once possessed." The cast is excellent: Denzel Washington is Creasy, a former counter-insurgency mercenary who drinks too much. The adorable Dakota Fanning is Pita, a young girl living in Mexico City whom Creasy is hired to protect from kidnappers. It probably doesn't surprise you to learn that she is kidnapped, but not before she has softened the taciturn Creasy and they have established a bond. We enjoyed this part of the film. When the ransom payoff goes wrong, and Pita is not returned to her parents, Creasy goes on a mission of revenge. That's when the fragmented camera technique really gets annoying. Rachel Ticotin is a journalist who helps Creasy identify the kidnappers and Giancarlo Giannini is a Federal agent who stays out of his way so that, in the words of Creasy's friend, Rayburn (Christopher Walken) Creasy can paint his masterpiece of death. One critic wrote that **Man On Fire** has an A cast list and a B story line. Screenwriter Brian Koppelman did a much, much better job on **L. A. Confidential** and **Mystic River**. In spite of our appreciation of the A-list cast, I can't give this film higher than C+ and Gary can't go higher than C. **GRADE C+/C**

MAN ON THE TRAIN (French-Subtitled): We went to see this film because several critics raved about it. Although we agree with them that the acting is excellent, we didn't care that much for the movie. It is about two men who meet by chance: Manesquier (Jean Rochefort), a retired school teacher, and Milan (John Hallyday) a bank robber. Both actors create interesting characters. Manesquier talks all the time and Milan rarely utters a word. Each man envies the life the other leads. Manesquier feels his life has been empty and fantasizes about being a western outlaw or a criminal. Milan is tired of a life of crime and sees value in a simple, uneventful life. We especially didn't like the ending of this one, and can't give it higher than a **GRADE: C**

MAN ON WIRE: Our local film reviewer gave this documentary five stars out of five possible stars. So Barbara and I went to the theater with high hopes. However, we were skeptical that any documentary film could live up to that kind of glowing review. We were wrong! It did! It was brilliantly made and as gripping as any feature film we have seen this year. Spellbinding" is not an adjective that often goes with a documentary, but in this case, it is appropriate. In 1974 a French tight wire walker, Philippe Petit, fulfilled a personal dream, and with the help of a few friends, managed to pull off what has been called the "artistic crime of the century." In a few tense hours, they rigged a cable between the newly constructed Twin Towers at New York's World Trade Center. Then, at 7:15 A. M., Philippe stepped out onto a cable suspended 1,350 feet above the sidewalks of Manhattan. Philippe Petit became an overnight sensation. He did something that had never been done before and will never be done again. A side benefit of seeing this film is you may remember the World Trade Center for something other than the tragedy of 9/11. **GRADE A**

MAN UP: Barbara and I have seen and liked Lake Bell in a number of independent films. We especially liked her work in **In A World** (see **Archives**) which Bell wrote, directed and starred in **Man Up** is a British off-beat romantic comedy in which she plays the female lead while Simon Pegg, an English actor, plays the male lead. They work well together and the film received mostly positive reviews from critics earning an 86% on *Rotten Tomatoes* Tomatometer. The structure of the film is typical rom com: boy and girl meet cute, the audience knows they are made for each other, they don't, they hit many bumps in the road, finally they see the light and everyone is happy. Bell plays a 34-year-old woman who is depressed and exhausted by the dating circus and surprises herself when she goes along with pretending she is someone else in a wild evening with Pegg. There is a lot of playfulness, a lot of wit, a lot of sex talk, and a lot of drinking. Some of it worked for us, but not as much as we had hoped for. There was enough chemistry between the leads and enough humor to carry us through to a warm and romantic ending. Bell and Pegg are both terrific comic actors but Barbara and I weren't as charmed as some of the critics. **GRADE C+**

Barb's Note: I thought that the music at times was very irritating!

THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS: (2017) It is a difficult task to make a movie about writing. In this movie about the writing of **A Christmas Carol**, the characters take human form as Dickens invents them. For example, once Dickens decides on the name Scrooge, Christopher Plummer appears as the living character. And the device is appropriate because Dickens himself claimed that the characters he invented would haunt his waking hours, and in many ways tell him what to write. After making a literary splash with **Oliver Twist**, Dickens had several books that did not do well. Overwhelmed with debt and writers block, Dickens had to come up with a story that would sell. He wrote **A Christmas Carol** in just six weeks. It was published on December 19, 1843 and by Christmas Eve all the copies had been sold. Dickens had a hit, and charitable giving at Christmas that year was at an all-time high. William Butler Yeats once said, "Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people." Dickens was skilled at that, probably because he had an impoverished childhood. *When Dickens was 10 years old, he had to leave school because his parents could no longer afford the relatively inexpensive fees. He went to London to work in a blacking factory.... He hated the fumes and harsh conditions of the factory, where he was often bullied by his coworkers. (History Vs Hollywood)* Dan Stevens, Christopher Plummer, Jonathan Pryce headline an excellent cast. Although we had some difficulty getting into the story, by the end we were quite engaged. **GRADE B-**

The movie is based on Les Standiford's 2008 non-fiction book

The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits.

THE MAN WHO KNEW INFINITY: (2016) This insightful film tells the true story of a gifted theoretical mathematician who lived and died early in the twentieth century. It is based on a 1991 book with the same title. Srinivasa Ramanujan, I can't pronounce the name, was a self-taught mathematical genius from India who faced racial prejudice, class discrimination, poor diet, brutal British winters, and a teaching staff at Trinity College, Cambridge who barely tolerated him. His work profoundly changed theoretical mathematics forever. The brilliant mathematician is played by Dev Patel who gained notoriety in Hollywood with his breakout role in *Slumdog Millionaire* and later in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. In my opinion he is perfectly cast in *The Man Who Knew Infinity*. Also excelling in the film is Jeremy Irons who plays G.H. Hardy who created a slow-blooming bond with Ramanujan. He then fought prejudice and ignorance to reveal the creative genius of Ramanujan. The film has been praised by mathematicians and scientists for its authentic portrayal of theoretical mathematicians, but it took ten years to bring the story to the big screen. Early potential backers wanted to change it in ways the filmmakers could not tolerate. Both Barbara and I liked the movie, though I rate it slightly higher. **GRADE B+/B**

THE MAN WHO SUED GOD: We enjoyed this film which we saw on video. Billy Connolly plays a former lawyer who became disenchanted with the legal profession and started a new life as a fisherman. When lightning destroys his boat, and the Insurance Company refuses to pay because it was an "Act of God," he decides to sue God through his representatives—the Church. With the help of a reporter, played by the always delightful Judy Davis, the fisherman becomes a media darling. The Australians are especially good at this kind of movie, managing to make it funny, thought-provoking, and not at all sacrilegious. **THUMBS UP**

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE: The Coen brothers are nothing if not inventive. No two of their movies are alike, and none of their previous films is anything like this one. I think they were flexing their creativity here, making a film that will be studied in film classes but will not be very popular in the theaters. They took a classic 1940s film noir plot, shot it in color, and then printed it in black and white. I thought the lack of color would bother me, but on the contrary, the film looked beautiful, and black and white certainly fit the post WWII period. Gary commented that when he thinks of that era, he tends to remember it in black and white, probably that was the look of many of the films we saw growing up. Billy Bob Thornton is Ed, a second chair barber in his brother-in-law's shop. He is a man so devoid of affect that he is almost invisible. When he discovers that his wife, Doris (Frances McDormand) is having an affair with her boss, Big Dave (James Gandolfini) it doesn't really bother him. However, when he decides to invest in the dry cleaning business, he blackmails Big Dave to raise the money. As with all film noir plots, things do not go well. These films all have a pervading sense of doom, intensified here by Ed's first-person narration. Thornton's total lack of facial expression makes it impossible to identify with Ed, and none of the other characters is likeable enough to care about. We were interested in the film, but not involved. There is a point about two thirds of the way through the movie that we both thought would have made a good ending. But the movie goes on and on past that point. As filmmaking, *The Man Who Wasn't There* is interesting, but I wouldn't call it entertaining. **Fargo** it isn't. **GRADE: B-**

MANAGEMENT: This charming love story is told slowly and gently. Sometimes touching and sometimes funny, it is always enjoyable. Steve Zahn is Mike, who is the night manager of his parent's motel in Kingman, AZ. He lives in a corner double room at the motel, and he's drifting through life with a sort of innocent resignation. Then, one day, he notices an attractive businesswoman (Jennifer Aniston) registering for a room. Smitten, he does his best to interest her and succeeds, much to his astonishment, in a brief dalliance. As a result, Mike falls totally in love. However, to Aniston's Sue, he's a likeable loser she doesn't expect to ever see again. What follows amounts to stalking, but Mike does it in such a sweet non-threatening way that you can't help but be on his side. Even though we could anticipate the end, getting there was fun. Zahn gives another skilled performance, and we also liked Aniston. She and Zahn make an appealing couple. You'll recognize Margo Martindale and Fred Ward as Mike's parents. We didn't much care for Woody Harrelson as Sue's successful boyfriend, and we could have done without some of the slapstick. Steve Zahn says that he picks a film based on its script, and he thought this was one of the better scripts he's ever read. The critics don't agree with him, and give it low marks. We liked it much better than they did. Gary says B+; I say B **GRADE B+/B**

MANCHESTER BY THE SEA: (2016) In 2000 we saw Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count On Me*. We loved the writing, the directing and the acting and gave it an A, calling it "one of the best movies of the year." It starred Laura Linney and introduced us to Mark Ruffalo. We praised Lonergan for his skillful and subtle storytelling. In 2007, he wrote and directed *Margaret*, and now, in 2016, we saw the writer/director's third movie, *Manchester by the Sea*. Once again Lonergan has given us real people in real situations who act with honest emotions. The plot is simple: An uncle must take care of his teenaged nephew after the boy's father dies; but the emotions are anything but simple. The themes of grief, trauma and guilt do not make for a happy movie, but in Lonergan's hands they make for a brilliant one. Casey Affleck plays the uncle and his performance is so powerful that he is certain to get an Oscar nomination. Lucas Hedges deserves equal mention for his nuanced performance as a boy dealing with his father's death. Michelle Williams plays Affleck's ex-wife and their story is defined by a terrible tragedy. The cast is unanimous in their praise of Lonergan calling him an amazing director and an extraordinary playwright. Perhaps it is Lonergan's experience as a playwright that enables him to write such natural sounding dialogue. I was particularly aware of how deftly Lonergan uses music to heighten the emotion. I was greatly affected by this wonderful movie and think it deserves a grade of A. Gary thinks it is a skillfully-made movie but he did not receive the emotional jolt that I did. It may not be a movie for everyone, but we loved it, and hope we're still around to see Lonergan's fourth movie. **GRADE A/A-**

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE: I don't remember much about the 1962 version of *The Manchurian Candidate*, so I won't try to compare them. Besides, as Roger Ebert said, *To compare Demme's version with Frankenheimer's is sort of irrelevant. That was then and this is now.* The current version is a compelling thriller elevated by the performances of Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep and Liev Schreiber. Ben Marco (Washington) and Raymond Shaw (Schreiber) served in the Gulf War together. Shaw was decorated for saving the lives of their company and he has just been nominated for Vice President. Shaw's mother (Streep), is a U.S. Senator and his ardent supporter. In fact, it is her behind-the-scene manipulations that have secured his nomination. Marco, Shaw's commanding officer in Kuwait, has been having dreams that make him doubt what really happened to his company. The villain in this version is a huge conglomerate, Manchurian Global. Their evil plan to control the mind of the next President eventually becomes clear. The brain implant device used to control Shaw smacks of science fiction, but you have the feeling that in a few years it could be possible. And that is a frightening thought. Jonathan Demme directed and has managed to sustain the tension throughout. Jon Voight also appears and we were pleased to see Vera Farmiga from TV's *Touching Evil* playing Voight's daughter and Shaw's former girlfriend. **GRADE B**

MANDELA: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM: This is a film based on an autobiography by South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela. It covers his childhood, young adulthood as a lawyer in Johannesburg, involvement with the African National Congress (ANC), 27 years of imprisonment, and his negotiations to bring an end to apartheid. Idris Elba is impressive playing Mandela from age 23 to 76. It was unfortunate that the film was released just days before Mandela died at age 95. For several days his story saturated the news channels and his funeral was the number one story the world over. Since the film's time line ends with the election of Mandela, it misses people's most powerful and emotional memory of events surrounding his funeral. *Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom* is a good movie, but not a great one. His life was so big that it makes a biopic seem small by comparison. Especially good in her role as Winnie Mandela was Naomie Harris. Watching the film, I was thinking Winnie deserved a movie script herself. I was unaware at the time that Winnie got her film biopic in 2011 when Jennifer Hudson appeared in the title role. Unfortunately, critics trashed it. Though Barbara and I enjoyed this film, it lacked the emotional impact we had hoped for. **GRADE B**

MANIFESTO: (2017) Acclaimed visual artist Julian Rosefeldt wrote, directed and produced this strange film which provides a tour de force vehicle for two-time Academy Award winner Cate Blanchett. On one of the first frames in the movie a dictionary definition of "manifesto" is projected. I won't insult our readers' considerable vocabularies by repeating it. The film was shot in 11 days, which is incredible considering that Blanchett plays 12 demanding roles ranging from roaring homeless-man to demanding dance teacher to garrulous newscaster. Each character recites from some of history's most impassioned artistic statements (manifestos) in scenes designed to match the artist's words to a variety of settings. One of my personal observations was that artist's manifestos are often indistinguishable from gibberish. Trying to find meaning in this film is like trying to find meaning in abstract art. Barbara reluctantly accompanied me across town to view this off-beat film and she says her enjoyment of the film would put her grade and around D. I would grade it a little higher, but honestly feel that the film cannot be meaningfully graded. **GRADE: no grade**

MANK: (2020 on Netflix) First we'll deal with the unusual film title, *Mank*, which is available on Netflix. The character, Mank, is played by Gary Oldman and is the nickname people called Herman J Mankiewicz, a Hollywood screenwriter who some believe was the primary writer of the 1941 film *Citizen Kane*. The true authorship of *Citizen Kane* has been a hotly debated subject for over sixty years but David Fincher, who directed *Mank*, and his father Jack Fincher who wrote the original screenplay, obviously believed Herman Mankiewicz deserved most of the credit. Others are sure the velvet-voiced Orson Welles deserved most of the credit. *Citizen Kane* is considered by many critics, filmmakers, and fans to be the greatest film ever made. This film may lack historical accuracy, but film buffs will likely find it enjoyable, possibly even fascinating. The movie is shot digitally, but is in black-and-white. The story flashes back from Mank's recovery after a car accident in 1940 to the early 1930s when he was a regular guest at San Simeon. San Simeon was newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst's opulent estate and playground which is still open for public viewing. As Mank, Gary Oldman's performance is magnificent. Other actors give solid support: especially Amanda Seyfried as Hearst's mistress, Marion Davies. *Mank* is a niche film made for an audience of film lovers and those with knowledge of the happenings of the time. It won't be for everyone, but Barbara and I liked the film and think most movie buffs will agree. **GRADE B+**

THE MANY SAINTS OF NEWARK: 2021 (This film was simultaneously released in theaters and streamed on HBO Max on Oct. 1st for a limited period of 31 days). *The Many Saints of Newark* is the prequel film to *The Sopranos*. It's been more than 14 years since *The Sopranos* ended a six-season run totaling 86 episodes. It was widely regarded as one of the greatest television series of all time. James Gandolfini's 2013 death from a heart attack rendered any sequel impossible but a prequel that lays out the story of Tony Soprano's early influences and younger versions of the familiar characters is second best. Playing a young Tony Soprano is James Gandolfini's son, Michael Gandolfini. You might assume that a movie like this would be a box office smash. It isn't. So far, the film has grossed only \$10 million against a budget of \$50 million. The movie takes place during the 1960s and 1970s in Newark, New Jersey in the midst of the city's 1967 race riots. Young Tony Soprano is given relatively little screen time. Greater focus is on Dickie Moltisanti, Tony's favorite uncle who has powerful influence over Tony and helped shape the impressionable teenager into what he would later become. After seeing the film, Barbara and I can understand why it didn't do better. The story was disjointed, or to put it in her sharp analytical words, "It's a movie searching for a story." **GRADE C**

THE MAP OF THE WORLD: I read the book by Jane Hamilton on which this movie was based, and I was impressed that the director was able to make visual a story that was so internal. The book centered on the thoughts and feelings of Alice Goodwin, its heroine. Sigourney Weaver is impressive as Alice and David Strathairn is believable as her husband, Howard. Alice is a difficult woman--not your typical movie heroine. She is outspoken and seems uncomfortable in her own life. She can't seem to organize her house or control her children. Her older daughter, Emma, is a difficult child and Alice admits, "Sometimes I don't even like her." One day when Alice is taking care of her best friend's daughters, the younger child tragically drowns. Alice is overcome with feelings of guilt and sorrow. She can hardly get out of bed. A few weeks later, Alice, who works in the local school as a nurse, is accused of the sexual abuse of a young boy. Her life spins out of control. *A Map of the World*, is the story of a terrible year in the life of a family. The luminous Julianne Moore is Theresa, Alice's friend, and Chloe Sevigny plays the mother of the young boy who makes the unspeakable accusation. This is not an easy movie, but we thought it was a good one. I wouldn't be surprised if Weaver gets an Oscar nomination. She deserves it. **GRADE: A/B**

MAPS TO THE STARS: (2014) Three things drew us to this film: (1) The director, David Cronenberg, a respected Canadian filmmaker who directed one of my favorite films, *Eastern Promises*. (2) The powerhouse cast including Mia Wasikowska, John Cusack, Julianne Moore, Robert Pattinson, and Carrie Fisher in a small cameo playing herself. (3) It is about Hollywood which, like it or not, is part of our lives. Our local reviewer referred to the film as "an ugly little movie." I would say it is a dark film depicting an ugly side of Hollywood. The story focuses on the Weiss family, all of whom are incredibly self-centered and psychological messes. *Maps to the Stars* is an "inside" film not unlike *Birdman* in that it focuses on the broken psyches that seem to be a byproduct of the Hollywood movie industry. Looking back at films like *Sunset Boulevard*, *Day of the Locust*, *Mommy Dearest*, *The Player*, and now *Maps to the Stars* it is as though there is a self-loathing that needs to be vented. The film is brilliantly acted and Barbara and I were impressed with Cronenberg's genius, but I know many would find it utterly repellent and will be wise to avoid it. Empty lives in the midst of incredible luxury, pampered child

stars, crippled personalities obsessed with fame, severe family dysfunction, abuse, violence, incest, self-immolation, and unappealing sexual content are just a partial list of reasons to seek out or avoid this Tinseltown portrait. Even though viewing the film was at times uncomfortable, we left the theater with high regard for the acting and filmmaking expertise. **GRADE B**

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS: Hollywood, with all its fabulous digital imaging, can't come close to providing the drama of this documentary. We were spellbound watching penguins doing what penguins do. The Emperor penguins of Antarctica leave their home in the water at the end of every summer and walk—that's right, *walk*—over 70 of the coldest most inhospitable miles imaginable to their breeding ground. Once there, each penguin searches for a mate. To us, they all look alike, but apparently penguins are able to find that special individual with whom they want to make a family. They are monogamous for that breeding cycle and together the mother and father care for and protect their single offspring. Luc Jacquet and his team filmed this remarkable journey under the harshest conditions, and they captured some amazing footage. Morgan Freeman is the narrator. **GRADE A**

MARGUERITE: (2016/2015) Well received by critics, this French subtitled film was loosely based on a deluded American soprano Florence Foster Jenkins who loved to sing, but had absolutely no musical talent. Hearing her sing was a little like listening to fingernails scratching a blackboard, yet Jenkins became popular for the amusement she unwittingly provided. The filmmakers set the movie in Paris in the Golden Twenties. It is more heartbreaking than funny. There is some humor in the film, but director and co-writer Xavier Giannoli persuades us to see Marguerite as a sympathetic character that sincerely follows her dream. It is a moving story about art, love, passion, delusion and the sad reality that dreams and personal talents don't always match. The female lead is played with remarkable charm by Catherine Frot. Interestingly, Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant are cast in an upcoming Florence Foster Jenkins biopic. Barbara and I liked the French film, but think the 127-minute comedy would have worked better at a faster paced 90-minutes. We had no trouble agreeing on a grade. **GRADE B-**

MARGIN CALL: I don't pretend to understand the complexities of the financial crash of 2008, but I remember well that it resulted in the financial meltdown of large financial institutions and downturns in stock markets around the world. *Margin Call* is an entertaining, if not enlightening, fictionalized account of a disastrous twenty-four hours in a Lehman Brothers like operation. An impressive ensemble cast including Kevin Spacey, Paul Bettany, Jeremy Irons, Simon Baker, Stanley Tucci, and Demi Moore move this intellectual thriller along. It isn't a pretty story and the corporate decisions explored have a compelling ring of truth. There is a sprinkling of financial lingo throughout, but the film focuses more on personalities and how morally bankrupt decisions are made to avoid corporate failure. Playing in only one small venue in a Phoenix suburb, I doubt that many will have the opportunity to see this disaster drama on a big screen. If you do, I would love to hear your reaction. Barbara enjoyed the movie but grades it slightly lower than I do. **GRADE B/B+**

MARIA FULL OF GRACE: This subtitled foreign language film has received high marks from nearly all the critics. It is the harrowing story of Maria Alvarez, a fiercely independent 17-year-old girl from Colombia. The film gives a compelling picture of how the desperation of poverty can drive a good girl to bad decisions. Catalina Sandino Moreno gives a stunning performance as Maria. Maria quits her job as a rose de-thorner after a bad experience with an unsympathetic boss. This is an economic tragedy for Maria's extended family that relies on her meager wages to survive. Worse yet, she learns that she is pregnant, but she refuses to marry the child's father. The lure of a way out of poverty leads her to explore an "employment opportunity" that requires her to act as a "mule." In the drug world mules are used to carry the product into countries without being detected. In this instance, heroin is put into small balloons and the balloons are transported in the stomach of the mule. It is a dangerous, often fatal business. This is why desperate poverty stricken people are exploited. A uniformly excellent cast and a small budget has resulted in a powerful film that Barbara and I strongly recommend. **GRADE B+**

MARIE ANTOINETTE: Marie Antoinette was only 14 years old when she was dispatched to France to marry Louis XVI in order to cement relations between Austria and France. Louis was only 15. Director Sophia Coppola's film is beautiful to look at: the settings, room decorations and costumes are breath-taking. I understand that some of the scenes were actually shot at the Palace of Versailles. Coppola's film doesn't cover Marie and Louis's arrest, imprisonment and beheading. Her film concentrates on the life that lead up to the Revolution. She shows us two naïve young people who lived an incredibly rich and idle life. We see Louis spending almost all his time hunting while Marie spending hers buying clothes, drinking champagne and partying, both completely oblivious to events outside the palace. The problem with the film is that Coppola shows us this over and over again. Perhaps if the movie had been only 90 minutes instead of 123, we would have appreciated it more. As it is, we longed for something dramatic to happen. Anything. Although sympathetic to Marie, the film is remarkably dispassionate. Even the death of one of her children is handled by simply changing a portrait hanging on one of the palace walls. I also have a quarrel with the music Coppola chose. It is popular these days to use anachronistic music, but I thought her choices were distracting, and, on two occasions, loud and irritating. Kirsten Dunst and Jason Schwartzman are fine as the Queen and her King. Dunst looks adorable in the period costumes. In an interesting casting note, Marianne Faithfull appears as Marie mother, Austrian Queen Maria Teresa. The look of the film is definitely A+, but as an overall grade, we can't go higher than C+. **GRADE C+**

MARLENE DIETRICH: HER OWN SONG: This 2001 documentary about Marlene Dietrich is narrated by Jamie Lee Curtis. Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva, and many of Marlene's friends talk about the famous singer/actress. There are also many old film clips, some from when she was very young and just beginning to perform in Berlin. The film clips follow her move to America and her involvement with the USO. They bring back such memories of WWII. I had no idea of the extent of her participation in performing for the U.S. troops throughout the war, and found the story quite moving. We saw this one on video and both thought it was well-done and worth renting. **THUMBS UP**

MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE: Everything about this movie is strange, including the title. I will start with the easiest element, the title. Martha, Marcy May, and Marlene are all names given to the female lead played by Elizabeth Olsen, a younger sister of the famous Olsen twins. This offbeat film gives us a disturbing view of a damaged psyche. In no way does the writer try to help us understand the disturbed girl or the sinister cult from which she was, to some extent, able to extricate herself. The ending, especially, will be loathed by those who are looking for clarity. I can't say I enjoyed this film enough to give it a strong recommendation, but I can't say I am sorry I

spent nearly two hours trying to assemble the pieces of this psychological thriller. Barbara commented afterward that she may carry some haunting images from the film for a long time. Olsen gives a powerful break-through performance that should guarantee her some good roles in the future. **GRADE C+**

MARIA BY CALLAS: (2018) After seeing this movie, I regret that I never saw Maria Callas on stage, even though she launched the first fall season of what became the Lyric Opera in 1954. Callas was one of the most renowned and influential opera singers of the 20th century. Director Tom Volf used her own words in interviews and letters to tell the story of the life and work of the Greek-American opera singer. (Her original name was Maria Cecilia Sophia Anna Kalogeropoulos) Maria Callas thought of herself as two different people: Maria was the woman who longed for a normal life and Callas was the opera star. Born in 1923, she grew up with a stage mother who demanded that she become a famous singer. She traded her domineering mother for a husband in 1949 who managed her career and, she later said, cared more for her celebrity than for her. She met Aristotle Onassis in 1957 and began an affair and a friendship with the shipping magnate. In an interview, she said that the affair was a disaster but the friendship was a success. The great turning point in her operatic career occurred in Venice in 1949. Callas was pulled in to cover a soprano role in *I puritani*. She had six days to prepare – and triumphed. Two years later she debuted at La Scala Milan. Callas debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York by opening the 1956 season with Bellini's *Norma*, one of her many acclaimed roles. Callas ended her stage career in London, singing the role of Tosca, in a production by Franco Zeffirelli. After ending her operatic career, she made one film, *Medea* (1969), taught master classes at Juilliard (1972) and staged a series of joint recitals in Europe and the U.S. (1973-1974 with the tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano. Critically, this was a musical disaster owing to both performers' worn-out voices. However, the tour was an enormous popular success. Audiences thronged to hear the two performers, who had so often appeared together in their prime. (from *Maria Callas: 15 facts about the great soprano*) Maria Callas died of a heart attack in her Paris home in 1977. She was only 53 years old. Gary gives Callas's voice an A+, but the movie only a B. I was moved by her glorious voice and saddened that she had so little joy in her life. I give the documentary a B+. **GRADE B+/B**

The director of the New York Met would later say that Callas was the most difficult artist he ever worked with, "because she was so much more intelligent. Other artists, you could get around. But Callas you could not get around. She knew exactly what she wanted, and why she wanted it."

MARSHALL (2017, seen on *Amazon Prime*--rental for \$3.99) Gary and I wanted to see this Chad Boseman movie because we hadn't seen it in 2017. Boseman was noted for playing real-life characters, and we had only seen him as Jackie Robinson in *42* (2013). In *Marshall*, Boseman was playing Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to be appointed to the Supreme Court. The movie opens when Marshall was the only lawyer working for the NAACP, travelling around the country as he battled cases of innocent people accused because of their race. The movie follows the young Marshall to conservative Connecticut to defend a black chauffeur (Sterling K. Brown) charged with sexual assault and attempted murder of his white socialite employer (Kate Hudson). Muzzled by a segregationist court, Marshall partners with a young Jewish lawyer, Samuel Friedman (Josh Gad). At first reluctant to get involved in the controversial case, Friedman relents when the Judge allows Marshall to participate, but rules that he cannot speak. Together they mount the defense in an environment of racism and Anti-Semitism. Some critics felt that the movie was more of a courtroom drama instead of a biopic, but, I don't think the writers ever intended it to be a standard biopic. For us, it showed a great man at the beginning of his career and made us want to learn more about Marshall. Besides, the courtroom aspect made for an entertaining movie. Boseman and Gad were terrific, and Brown and Hudson were excellent. After the high profile case, Friedman, formerly working for an insurance company on accident cases, became a tireless advocate for civil rights. Thurgood Marshall went on to argue 32 civil rights cases before the Supreme Court winning all but three. In 1954, Marshall argued and won *Brown vs. The Board of Education* case, ending forever segregation in American public schools. When he was appointed to the Supreme Court by Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King telegraphed him, "You have proved to be a giant of your profession and your career has been one of the significant epochs of our time." **GRADE A**

MARRIAGE STORY: (2019) Noah Baumbach has written a loving and insightful look at a marriage breaking up. Charlie (Adam Driver) directs a New York avant-garde theatre company, and his wife, Nicole (Scarlett Johansson), is his leading actress. They have an 8 year-old son whom they love very much. The movie opens with each one writing what they love about the other, and then we learn that this was at their therapist's suggestion. They are doing couples counseling in preparation for a separation which will lead eventually to a divorce. Driver and Johansson are outstanding as the separating couple and both were nominated for Golden Globes. (I suspect they will also get Oscar nominations.) They are helped by a compelling and beautifully-written screen-play by director Baumbach, who was nominated for a Golden Globe for his writing. He wrote and directed two movies that we graded B+: *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) and *Frances Ha* (2013) but he outdid himself with *Marriage Story*. Kenneth Turin of the LA Times wrote this about Baumbach's 2005 film: "Acutely observed, faultlessly acted, graced with piercing emotion and unsparing honesty, it will make you laugh because you can't bear to cry." Those words are equally true of *Marriage Story*, although I was twice moved to tears. I agree with **Art S. IN** that this film is one of the best movies of the year. Even seeing it on Netflix, I was stunned by the emotion it aroused. They even worked in two songs from one of my favorite ever musicals, *Company*, and they fit perfectly. We were delighted to see Julie Haggerty as Nicole's mother, and also the Golden Globe-nominated Laura Dern as Nicole's compassionate lawyer. Gary and I agree on a grade of A. **GRADE A**

MARY POPPINS RETURNS: (2018) I loved the original *Mary Poppins* (1964)--this one not so much. Emily Blunt, however, was wonderful and about the only reason to see the return of the magical nanny. Despite the numerous talents of Lin-Manuel Miranda, he wasn't quite the equal of Dick Van Dyke's chimney sweep in the charm department. It was a good idea to make him a lamplighter, and the opening scene, with Miranda on his bicycle going around putting out the streetlights got the movie off to a fine start. But, there was a bit too much Disney and Rob Marshall and not enough of *Mary Poppins*. Why was almost every scene at night? For such a lighthearted story that were too many dark scenes. The kids were good--especially the youngest boy--and Ben Wishaw and Emily Mortimer as the two Bank's children all grown up were charming. As for the songs, I came out of the theatre humming the old tunes from the 1964 movie. I suppose if I listened to the sound track I would discover some gems, but on first hearing, they weren't memorable. Also, it's hard for me to accept Colin Firth as a bad man, although the appearance of Van Dyke to save the day was delightful. And Meryl Streep as Mary's cousin was forgettable in a lackluster scene. Gary and I agree that in spite of Blunt's "A"

performance, the movie only rates a C from us. (But, if you were not one who was enchanted by the Julie Andrews version, you may quite enjoy the movie.) **GRADE C**

Emily Blunt interviewed on CBS Sunday morning, asked the interviewer who had seen the movie,
"Did you have a little weep?" ---(I loved that. So very British)

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS: (2018) Academy Award nominees Saoirse Ronan and Margot Robbie co-star in this period historical drama about Mary Stuart (Ronan), and Queen Elizabeth I (Robbie). Since the beginning, moviemakers have taken artistic liberties when recreating history on film. Think of this film as a showcase for Ronan and Robbie's considerable talents. It is an impressively staged, highly stylized and fictionalized period piece based on two Queens, cousins, from the late 16th century who each strongly believed in her divine right to rule. In the just under two hour runtime, we see a complex and often turbulent relationship between the two women, alliances made and broken, wars waged, and murders committed. I must confess it got a little confusing at times. The cinematography was breathtaking and the costumes immaculate, but Barbara and I left the theater thinking we needed more reading of English history to appreciate the movie. I was hoping for a better screenplay but the experience was redeemed by Ronan's and Robbie's impassioned performances. Based on 126 critic's reviews, Rotten Tomatoes gave the movie 61% and audiences came in a few points below that. **GRADE B-**

THE MARTIAN: With the breaking news that water has been found on Mars, what better time could this movie have opened? That *The Martian* is terrific only adds to Mars-mania. Matt Damon is Astronaut Mark Watney who is on a mission to the Red Planet. In the face of a fierce dust storm, the astronauts prepare to leave, but Watney is injured, and in the chaos, presumed dead. The crew leaves without him. Miraculously he survives and finds himself alone on the hostile planet. With few supplies and dwindling food, Watney is forced to rely on his ingenuity and skill to stay alive. His struggle to grow food and communicate with NASA is compelling. His sense of humor as he records his solitary ordeal provides some chuckles in this otherwise intense and intriguing movie. Damon is perfect as the lone astronaut and superb in the role. In an interview with our local critic, Matt Damon said, "I choose my roles entirely based on who's directing them...and that just comes from knowing my performance and the movie itself is completely at the mercy of this person." He chose wisely in Ridley Scott. Scott has directed many films, but *Blade Runner*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Gladiator* and *Prometheus* are among his most memorable. Here, he creates edge-of-your-seat suspense and some interesting scientific "stuff," along with the importance of duct tape. But at heart, *The Martian* is a survival story, and who doesn't want Matt Damon to survive? Even the Chinese are on his side, according to the movie. Scott's depiction of a Mars landscape that is stark and fearsome is brilliant. Although Damon is the real hero of the movie, he has a supporting cast that is outstanding: Jeff Daniels, Jessica Chastain, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sean Bean, and Kristen Wiig, to name a few. Don't let the 141 minute running time dissuade you from seeing *The Martian*. We can guarantee you will not be bored. **GRADE A**

MASS 2021 (Gary and I saw it in a movie theatre) A room in the basement of an Episcopal Church is the setting for this movie. Years after a tragedy that tore their lives apart, two sets of parents, Jay and Gail (Jason Isaacs and Martha Plimpton), and Richard and Linda (Reed Birney and Ann Dowd) agree to talk privately in an attempt to move forward. Their conversation is devastating. It is difficult to watch these four people as they examine their journey of grief, anger and, eventually, acceptance. Difficult but oh, so rewarding. Their grief is still raw and human as they struggle to understand the unknowable. The movie is unlike any other and hard to review. You have to see it for yourself, and we hope that many do. It establishes writer-director Fran Kranz as a filmmaker of tremendous promise. At the end of the film, the choir has begun to practice in the church above. The hymn they are singing is *Blest Be the Tie That Binds*. I think the line, *The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above*, is a fitting ending for this exceptional movie. **GRADE A**

THE MASTER: (2012) About one third of the way through this movie I thought it would surely get better. After all, our local critic loved it and Philip Seymour Hoffman stars in it. Hoffman is Lancaster Dodd. Dodd is a cult leader who promises to cure cancer and to help people realize their "perfect" selves through what appears to be hypnotic regression therapy. (Any resemblance to L. Ron Hubbard is probably intentional.) Amy Adams is Dodd's current wife, Peggy. Peggy appears to be convinced that her husband is a prophet. Together, they lead a small group of the faithful that is supported by some wealthy donors. Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix), an alcoholic shell-shocked WWII veteran with anger issues, stumbles into Dodd's group. He forms a connection with Dodd and willingly goes through the ridiculous program. Dodd, for some reason, is determined to draw Quell into the fold. About two thirds of the way through this movie the phrase "pretentious crap" came to mind. Of course, the performances are excellent, although Phoenix, with his deliberate simian posture, looks awful. Our local critic found the movie "mesmerizing." We didn't. (But our critic also loved *The Tree of Life*. We didn't.) There is a lot of eloquent bullshit in *The Master*, but it failed to keep us involved, or even interested. We thought that the ending, when it finally came, was ambiguous. Does Quell return to the fold? Does he leave Dodd? Do we care? **GRADE D**

MASTER AND COMMANDER: When I was young I read every book in the *Horatio Hornblower* series. I thought they were wonderfully exciting. I've decided that adventure on the high seas makes for better reading than viewing. At least for me. This movie is very well made and offers some gorgeous views of tall ships riding the waves, but it just didn't get either one of us excited. There are two battles, one raging storm, several shipboard surgeries and at least three scenes of "Lucky Jack" Aubrey playing the violin and, of course, the obligatory flogging scene. Russell Crowe certainly looks the part of a strong and respected ship's captain, but there seems to be something missing. The film is based on the novels of Patrick O'Brian and re-creates the world of the British navy circa 1805. It seems to give a realistic picture of what life was like on a naval vessel far from home. We did enjoy the relationship between Aubrey and the ship's doctor, Stephen Matruin, played by Paul Bettany, and we both liked the scenes in the Galapagos Islands the best. However, while we think the film was beautifully directed and photographed, we can't give it more than B- on our enjoyment meter. I should mention, though, that many critics found the movie "tremendously entertaining," and we don't want to discourage anyone from taking a look at it. **GRADE: B-**

THE MATADOR: Pierce Brosnan is noted for his sophisticated charm, but you'll see none of that in this film. Oh, he's still charming, but it's a very scruffy, odd kind of charm. What a treat it is to watch Brosnan to play a worn-out, sleazeball assassin named Julian Noble. Noble works for some mysterious company and takes jobs all over the world. He refers to himself as a "facilitator of fatalities," and maintains that his jobs are mostly "corporate gigs." When a job brings him to Mexico City, he strikes up a bar-room conversation with

nice, normal guy Danny Wright (Greg Kinnear). In spite of Julian's incredibly poor interpersonal skills, the two do make a connection, perhaps because Julian is a nice guy—for an assassin, that is. Later, when Julian is in big trouble, he calls upon Danny's friendship. Hope Davis is Danny's wife, and she and Brosnan have a lovely scene together. This is a very odd movie—not at all predictable. It is extremely well written, perfectly acted, and very amusing. It's worth seeing the film just to watch Brosnan walk across a hotel lobby on his way to the swimming pool carrying a can of beer and wearing nothing but a pair of boots and tight swim trunks. Gary really enjoyed this film and give it an A-. I'm in the B+ range. **GRADE A-/B+**

MATCH: (2015) Barbara and I are grateful to Michael from Mason City, IA for alerting us to this gem of a film that we missed when it was briefly released in 2015. It can now be streamed through Netflix. We were glued to the screen for the 94 minutes runtime. It is a comedy/drama written and directed by Stephen Belber. Based on his 2004 play of the same name, the story essentially takes place in one New York location. The lack of cinematic spectacle probably limited the appeal of *Match* to students of acting and drama. That is unfortunate because we found the film riveting to watch and worthy of wide release. The movie stars British actor Patrick Stewart. He is best known for his work in science fiction. Here he plays an aging Julliard dance professor and world renowned choreographer. A Seattle couple has traveled to New York to interview the eccentric artist. The woman is played by Carla Gugino, an actor Barb and I have followed with admiration since 2001. There is a fascinating twist in the plot that I won't get into. Suffice it to say that Barbara and I loved the film and hope a few of our readers seek it out. **GRADE A**

Interesting Trivia: The role played by Stewart was originated on Broadway by the Tony-nominated Frank Langella in 2004.

MATCH POINT: Who among us has not contemplated how profoundly altered our lives might be if some frivolous random event had been different? Woody Allen has the writing and directing skill to turn this philosophical question into an award winning film that may revive his flagging career. And he does it without resorting to a single "one liner" joke for which he is so famous. Scarlett Johansson, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Emily Mortimer, and a talented supporting cast make this drama with twists and turns very believable. Set in London among the wealthy, and dealing with love and lust, fidelity and infidelity, morality and lack of it, the film is fantastic to watch. It would be immoral to give away too much of the plot, but my attention never wavered. I grade this film A-. How do you feel, Barbara?

(Barb's comments) How much of our success in life depends on talent and skill, and how much depends on luck? That's the underlying question in *Match Point*. The film is reminiscent of *An American Tragedy*, in that a poor man yearns for a wealthy life, but is betrayed by lust and selfishness. Allen made in good choice when he cast Jonathan Rhys-Meyers (*Bend It Like Beckham*) in the lead role. His face beautifully reflects the moral dilemma faced by his character. Brian Cox (*Red Eye, The Bourne Supremacy*) and Penelope Wilton (*Calendar Girls*) were perfect as Emily Mortimer's wealthy parents, as was Matthew Goode as her brother. I was also struck by the music in the film. Allen always uses music effectively, usually relying on old standards. Here he uses operatic arias throughout the action. I asked Gary why the "minus," and he said that in order for him to give an "A," the movie has to blow him away. This is an expertly crafted film, but it didn't blow him away. I agree with Gary's grade and the reasons for it. **GRADE A-**

MATCHSTICK MEN: Roy (Nicholas Cage) is Obsessive-Compulsive, Anal Retentive, Agoraphobic, and he suffers from numerous tics. He is quirky personified. He is also a low-level con man working with a partner played by Sam Rockwell (*Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*). When Roy discovers that he has a 14-year-old daughter, played winningly by Alison Lohman (*Freaky Friday*), his whole life becomes increasingly complicated. I can't tell you much about the plot because it would spoil the surprises in the film, but I can say that we enjoyed watching Nick Cage do his quirky thing. I'd like to hire Roy to clean my house. It would be spotless! We thought Rockwell was charming and were once again impressed by Lohman's acting ability. She and Cage have some very nice scenes together. **GRADE: B**

MAUDIE: (2017) Sally Hawkins is sensational in the title role telling the story of Maud Lewis an arthritic Nova Scotia woman who despite her crippled hands and twisted body rises to fame as a folk painter. Maud has every reason to surrender to pessimism but does not. In the hands of talented British actor Sally Hawkins, *Maudie* is a delight to watch. But there are two great performances in this Irish-Canadian drama that earned 91% from 67 professional reviewers on *Rotten Tomatoes*. Ethan Hawke, an American actor, writer, novelist and director, who has been nominated for four Academy Awards and a Tony Award, plays Everett, a cranky, illiterate fishmonger and junk collector who hires Maud as a live-in housekeeper for his tiny, rural cabin, and over time he falls in love with her. This poignant character study of a lonely woman and a lonely man who find each other in coastal Nova Scotia is both touching and charming. With no schooling in art and a brush hand limited by rheumatoid arthritis, Maud creates simple, beautiful paintings which sold for as little as \$5 at first, but recently have brought as much as \$20,000. Barbara and I loved this simple story and if you see it you may want to be prepared for a tear or two at the end. **GRADE A**

THE MAURITANIAN: 2021 (Available for streaming on Prime Video for \$19.99 rental) *The Mauritanian* tells the real-life story of a man kept behind bars for 14 years with almost no evidence and no criminal charges. The movie is based on the NY Times best-selling memoir "Guantánamo Diary." After being apprehended by the CIA in his native Mauritania in 2002, the author was transported to Guantanamo Bay detention camp where he was beaten, waterboarded and subjected to daily interrogation. Alone and afraid, he found allies in defense attorney Nancy Hollander played by Jodie Foster and her associate Teri Duncan played by Shailene Woodley. Together, they faced countless obstacles as they battled the U.S. government in a fight for justice. It is a riveting story which needed to be told. Benedict Cumberbatch plays a morally conflicted military prosecutor who locked horns with the human rights lawyer (Foster). Foster won a Golden Globe award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role. *The Mauritanian* was originally titled *Guantánamo Diary* in its early developmental stages and I think it would have gained a wider audience with that title. Barbara and I were very impressed by the powerful performance of an Algerian-French actor, Tahar Rahim, playing the incarcerated Mauritanian. It is an enlightening film that deserves to be seen by the people least likely to see it. **GRADE A**

McFARLAND USA: (2015) It is good to see Kevin Costner back on the big screen. He was the star of my all-time favorite sports movie, *Bull Durham*. While *McFarland* doesn't reach that level for me, it is a satisfying story that is well-acted and well directed. Cross-country running doesn't seem like a good subject for a movie, but when the story is based on real events and is the classic triumph of the underdog tale, you have a recipe for success. McFarland, California is a city in the San Joaquin Valley, with a current population of almost 14,000. Many of the residents work in the surrounding fields picking fruits and vegetables. They work hard and are paid little, but

they have a wonderful sense of community. When Jim White (Costner), a disgraced football coach takes the only job he can get at McFarland High School, he quickly learns that the students aren't very good at football. However, he notices that some of the boys are good at running, perhaps because they work in the fields before school, run from the fields to school, and back to the fields after school. He convinces the principal to start a cross country team with him as their coach. The rest is predictable: problems with his family (Maria Bello plays his wife), problems learning to coach runners, problems building a team spirit, etc. But, **McFarland USA** manages to rise above the predictability and clichés. It tells an ultimately touching story about a segment of our population that is usually ignored by Hollywood. The team members are appealing and the running scenes benefit from the beautiful California scenery. We liked it. **GRADE B+**

ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL: (2015) Greg is beginning his senior year in high school where he has studiously tried to be invisible, becoming part of every social group but making no friends. But that begins to change when his mother forces him to befriend a girl named Rachel who has stage 4 leukemia. Greg does have one friend. He met Earl in kindergarten and they share a love of classic films. In fact, they make self-professed terrible movies that are send-ups of film classics, e.g., **Eyes Wide Butt**, **The 400 Bros**, **Grumpy Cul-de-Sacs**, **Senior Citizen Kane**, etc. Their films are animated by Nathan O. Marsh and director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon used them to honor the legendary directors who inspired him. This is a teenage love story and a coming of age story creatively told and beautifully acted. It would be wrong of me to tell you anything about the plot. You really should experience that for yourselves. But I can tell you that Gary and I loved it. Thomas Mann, who plays Greg, has several screen credits although we had never seen him before. Since he has seven movies in pre or post production, we will probably see much more of this talented kid in the future. Earl is played by RJ Cyler, appearing in only his second film. We liked the character he created and hope that this movie will jump start his career. A British actress named Olivia Cooke is wonderful as Rachel. She will be familiar to fans of TV's *Bates Motel* as the girl with the oxygen tank. While critics usually turn up their noses at sentimental movies, they have been enthusiastic about **Me and Earl**, calling it "smart," "deeply moving," "irreverent" and "an inspired existential comedy." We agree and recommend it highly. **GRADE A**

ME AND ORSON WELLES: In my opinion, Orson Welles is one of the most interesting figures in the history of theatre. For that reason, I think anyone who has a theatre background or a burning interest in theatre history should go out of his/her way to see this film. The screenplay, based on a novel, tells the story of a teenager's few memorable days rubbing elbows with greatness. The teenager is ably played by Zac Efron, who became a teen heartthrob playing in **High School Musical**. The greatness refers, of course, to Orson Welles who is brilliantly played by Christian McKay. He is a British actor who not only looks like a young bombastic Welles, but also may have earned himself an Academy Award Nomination with his flawless performance. It is 1937 in New York City, a few hectic days leading up to opening night at Mercury Theatre where history is about to be made with an ambitious modern-dress production of *Julius Caesar*. This was before the infamous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast and before his *Citizen Kane*, which is often cited as the best American film in history. This film will not receive wide distribution, but Barbara and I agree it was more than worth our time. **GRADE B**
Barb: I think Claire Danes deserves mention. I thought she was especially charming. I was also glad to see Jim Tupper (TV's Men In Trees) in a movie role.

ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW: This film is about relationships: those beginning, those ending, those enduring and those only imagined. It's a film about falling in love and wanting to fall in love. It is either the oddest movie you've ever seen, or the most unique and charming movie you're ever likely to see. We loved it, but then we are suckers for those quirky film-festival kinds of movies. The story revolves around four people. Richard (John Hawkes—*Deadwood*) is separating from his wife. He has shared custody of his two sons, 14-year-old Peter and 7-year-old Robby. Christine (Miranda July) is an aspiring artist who takes a fancy to Richard. We agree with Roger Ebert who said the film "creates a fragile magic." That the film plays like a piece of performance art is not surprising, since July, who wrote and directed the film, is a performance artist. This is her first feature film and it won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance,. At Cannes, *Me and You and Everyone We Know* won the Camera d'Or as best first film. We look forward to her next film. **GRADE A-**

ME BEFORE YOU: (2016) Based on a 2012 romantic novel with the same title, fans of author Jojo Moyers will be happy to learn that she also wrote the screenplay for this film. **Me Before You** tells the story of an unexpected relationship between a small town Englishwoman and a wealthy Londoner whose parents hire her as his companion/caregiver. An accident has made him quadriplegic. The movie has received mixed reviews from critics ranging from those who see it as a tear jerking clumsy romantic melodrama to those who praise it as an effective and affecting rom-com with brains. The female lead is played by British actress Emilia Clarke who has collected an admiring fan base from her extraordinary work in the medieval fantasy **Game of Thrones**, a widely watched HBO series where she plays the striking silver-haired mother of dragons, Daenerys Targaryen. Clarke wisely turned down a starring role in **Fifty Shades of Grey**, waiting for a better opportunity. Her role and hair color in this film is so different from in "Game of Thrones" that I might not have recognized her had I not known in advance who was playing the female lead. Barbara and I agree she did an outstanding job and be assured that if you chose to see it, you should have a pack of Kleenex handy. **GRADE B**

MEAN GIRLS: This teen comedy is better than most because the script is witty and Lindsay Lohan is very appealing as the new girl in school. Cady (Lohan) has moved to Evanston, IL from Africa where she was home schooled. She has no experience with public education and is nervous about being plunged into the social jungle of high school. She infiltrates the "Plastics," a trio of the most popular girls in the junior class, in order to discover their secrets. These girls are mean, and Regina (Rachel McAdams) is the meanest of the three. Cady learns all about the social pecking order, the lunchroom seating priorities, and the rules of being popular. When Cady develops a crush on Aaron (Jonathan Bennett), Regina's former boyfriend, she learns just how mean Regina can be. Unfortunately, Cady gradually becomes more and more like Regina until she herself qualifies as one of the mean girls. There is a message here, though, as Cady eventually realizes the error of her ways. Tina Fey, of SNL, wrote the script and based it on some of her own high school experiences. She also plays Mrs. Norbury, Cady's calculus teacher. Tim Meadows is funny as the school Principal and Anna Gasteyer is Cady's Zoology professor mom. Mark S. Waters, who directed **Mean Girls** with a sure hand, also worked with Lindsay Lohan in **Freaky Friday**. This young woman definitely has a future in the movies. **GRADE B**

THE MEDDLER: (2016) Susan Sarandon shines playing a mother grieving the loss of her husband and seeking to find a new purpose in her life. She's someone who was born to nurture, but simply doesn't know how to stop or where to direct it now that her husband is gone and her daughter is grown. It is a fascinating portrait of a woman whose life is in transition. Not all the critics loved this heartfelt look at family dynamics, but many did. Barbara and I side with the latter. Sarandon is an Oscar winning actress who won our hearts playing Annie in one of the best films ever made, *Bull Durham (1988)*. *The Meddler* is helped along by a talented supporting cast that includes J.K. Simmons and Rose Byrne. Simmons plays an ex-cop who rides a Harley and keeps pet chickens at home. It sounds a little hokey, but Oscar Award winning Simmons makes it work. Byrne plays Sarandon's still single workaholic daughter trying to find her own way in life. This description may sound like the formula for Hollywood disaster, but with superior direction, and terrific acting it turns into a charming comedy/drama that we can enthusiastically recommend. Kudos to writer/director Lorene Scafaria who turned a story that could have been at best mediocre into a delightful hour and forty minutes of fun. Scafaria based Sarandon's character on her own mother. I hope *The Meddler* opens more widely than the one theater in the Phoenix area where we traveled to see it. **GRADE B+**

MEEK'S CUTOFF: We're used to stories that have a beginning, middle and an end. *Meek's Cutoff* has only a middle. We travel for a few days with three families on their way to Oregon in 1849. We didn't see them begin their journey, and we don't see them reach their destination, but as we travel with them, the harsh realities of their journey may catch your imagination, as it caught mine. Our local reviewer called the pace of the movie "patient." There are many who would call it slow—almost agonizingly so at times—but I was absorbed by the movie's realism the stunning photography and the superior acting. The leader of the group, Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), has taken them off the main trail onto a cutoff. We didn't see that happen, but we eventually learn it from the scanty dialogue. Despite Meek's protestations to the contrary, they are lost; lost and sorely in need of water as they walk with their lumbering covered wagons through an inhospitable terrain. Along the way, they capture a Native American, convincingly played by Ron Rondeaux, a stuntman turned actor for this film. Meek wants to kill the captive, but, cooler heads prevail and the men convince the Indian to lead them to water in exchange for some blankets. At least, they think that's where he's taking them. No one knows for certain. Michelle Williams is outstanding as a woman of remarkable resolve. Will Patton plays her husband and together, they become the leaders of the small group. Director Kelly Reichardt focuses on the three women. The other two are beautifully played by Shirley Henderson and Zoe Kazan, but it is Williams who emerges as the strongest character. If you are patient, and if you can tolerate long stretches where nothing much is said and nothing much happens, you will be rewarded with a memorable movie-going experience. It was less memorable for Gary than it was for me. He can't grade it higher than B-, but for me, it was a B+ movie. **GRADE B+/B-**

MEET THE FOCKERS: Many will see this as a not so inspired sequel to *Meet The Parents* but it tickled our funny bone. Both Barbara and I, and the people with us in the theatre the day we saw it, laughed frequently. Ben Stiller, Robert De Niro, and Blythe Danner reprise their roles but it was the inspired casting of Dustin Hoffman and Barbara Streisand as father and mother of the groom that made the film special for us. Most of the comedy comes from the contrasting families. The bride's parents are made up of an uptight retired CIA spook and his compliant military wife. The grooms parents are made up a "touchy/feely" sex therapist and her warm/fuzzy always positive husband. Don't ask how they produced such and uptight anxiety ridden child as Greg (Ben Stiller). Although we both had fun at this movie, we recognize that not all will love it. One of our readers advises against seeing it and calls it "crap." To be objective, it won't win any awards, but we think it deserves a look and grade it a B. **GRADE B**

MEET THE PARENTS: No one is better than Ben Stiller at portraying an ordinary man caught in bizarre circumstances. In this film, Ben plays a male nurse with the unfortunate last name of Focker. He accompanies his girlfriend when she goes home for her sister's wedding, hoping to ask her father for permission to propose. (He has been led to believe that the father will appreciate this archaic gesture.) Robert DeNiro, taking another comedy turn, plays the girl's father. This time he is ,a former CIA agent who puts his prospective son-in-law through a series of interrogations that are mostly funny but occasionally downright mean. The plot is in the mold of *the National Lampoon* movies: you know things will go poorly from the first minute. There isn't much substance, but there are plenty of laughs. We particularly liked an airport scene toward the end of the film, although we seemed to be the only ones who laughed at that. Owen Wilson (*Shanghai Noon*) is the ex-boyfriend and Blythe Danner is Stiller's future mother-in-law. I really like her! **GRADE: B-**

MEGAN LEAVEY (2017) Megan Leavey is a woman who had trouble relating to other people, until a dog named Rex teaches her how to love. The movie, *Meagan Leavey*, is based on the true life story of the young Marine corporal whose bond with her military combat dog saved many lives during their deployment in Iraq. I could tell from the preview that the movie would probably require some Kleenex, and I agree with the *New York Times* critic who said, "If the conclusion doesn't bring a tear to your eye, you're way too cynical." Kate Mara does Leavey proud, although at 5 feet and 2 inches she makes a very tiny Marine. Mara is surrounded by an impressive supporting cast, including Eddie Falco, Bradley Whitford and Common, who was so good in TV's *Hell On Wheels*. He is good here, too, as the officer in charge of the K9 unit. When Leavey and Rex are injured by an IED in Iraq, Leavey decides to leave the Marines. She hopes to adopt Rex and keep him with her, but there are many road blocks to the inevitable happy ending. Gary and I enjoyed the movie. **GRADE B**

MELANCHOLIA: We each wrote about this movie since we differed markedly in our reactions.

Gary: Melancholia was once a widely used psychiatric label. In recent years the term "clinical depression" or "major depressive disorder" is more widely used. In this film, melancholia is also the name of a wayward planet that may collide with earth. Considerably more film time is spent with the horrible effects of depression and some fragile family relationships than with the possible effects of the wayward planet. Justine, a severely depressed bride is effectively played by Kirsten Dunst. An impressive supporting cast is filled by names like John Hurt, Kiefer Sutherland, Charlotte Rampling, Alexander Skarsgard, and Charlotte Gainsbourg. Professional reviews have been widely divergent ranging from "magnificent" to "pretentious nonsense." The painfully long prologue is very slow, and is, in fact, filmed in slow motion. This movie is definitely not for everyone and reminded me of my reaction to *The Tree of Life*. I don't think most of our readers will enjoy *Melancholia*, but if any of you see it and find me wrong, please send your comments and Barbara will see that they appear in Readers' Views. **GRADE D**

Barb: So this is the way the world ends, not with a whimper but a bang. (My apologies to T. S. Elliot) Those Danes are one dark lot! Lars von Trier directed another strange one in 2003 titled *Dogville*. Like *Melancholia*, it was exceedingly cheerless, but we liked it enough to give it an A. In this movie, von Trier has created a personal version of the apocalypse; one with colliding planets. If

establishing a mood is enough for you, then you might like **Melancholia**. I did appreciate the mood and the photographic effects that von Trier created, and I thought Kirsten Dunst and Charlotte Gainsbourg were excellent. In the first part, Dunst was depressed for no apparent reason; in the second part, Gainsbourg was depressed for a good reason. The surreal prologue made more sense by the end of the film. I will be very interested to hear comments from our readers on **Melancholia** which has been both exalted and panned by professional critics. (What's with that 19th hole?) I liked it better than Gary did. **GRADE B-**

MEMENTO: This movie is a gimmick in search of a story. The gimmick is unique: the story is told backwards, reminiscent of Pinter's classic *Betrayal*. Since the movie's hero, Leonard (Guy Pearce) suffers from the inability to put anything into long-term memory, the gimmick serves to make us as confused as he is. Leonard is on a mission of revenge. He is focused on killing the man who raped and murdered his wife and caused Leonard's brain injury. He is a detective with no memory, so he tattoos notes on his body and takes Polaroids of everything. What we want to know is, how can he remember that he has no memory? As in the Pinter movie, the time within the scene runs forward but the scenes themselves proceed backwards: we see the ending first. In *Betrayal* the device helped us understand the people and what happened to them. In **Memento** the device merely confuses us. We spent a great deal of time trying to figure out the story, but the plot has gaping holes, and the memory element, though interesting, is inconsistent, scientifically unsound, and ultimately unbelievable. It was not a unsatisfying movie. We have to agree with Roger Ebert who said that Leonard suffered from a screenplay that makes the movie too clever for its own good. Guy Pearce, memorable in *L.A. Confidential*, is convincingly intense and confused as Leonard, and Joe Pantoliano creates a unique "bad-guy." Christopher Nolan directed and also wrote the screenplay. It was based on a short story by Jonathan Nolan. **GRADE: C**

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA: If you are interested in the life of a Japanese geisha, you may enjoy this beautifully filmed movie, directed by Rob Marshall (**Chicago**). Although it apparently rains frequently in Japan, many of the scenes are breathtaking, especially those in Japanese gardens. We, however, were unable to get emotionally involved in this story of a young girl who is sold to a geisha house, treated cruelly, but eventually grows up to be a famous geisha. At her debut, Sayuri performs a dance that captivates the men in the audience. It didn't do much for us, although the filming of the dance was quite spectacular. The movie is based on a popular novel of the same name. Ziyi Zhang is Sayuri and Michelle Yeoh (**Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**) is the older geisha who trains her. They are both Chinese—a fact that has caused some controversy in the film world. Ken Watanabe (**The Last Samurai**) is The Chairman, a wealthy man whose kindness to Sayuri when she was a sad young girl engenders a lifetime of devotion in the celebrated geisha. He has a dominating screen presence, and the women are captivating, but because the movie left us emotionally cold, we can't give it a high grade. Here are some comments by other critics: *...all fabric and no flesh*—Chicago Tribune; *A beautiful bore*—Atlanta Journal-Constitution; *flatly picturesque*—Entertainment Weekly. Roger Ebert said in his review, *I suspect that the more you know about Japan and movies, the less you will enjoy "Memoirs of a Geisha."* **GRADE C+**

THE MEMORY OF A KILLER: This 2003 film was the official Oscar entry for Belgium in 2005. It is the story of an aging hit man who has a code of honor that does not accept the job of killing a teenager. He turns against the powerful men who hired him and takes on the task of eliminating the criminals. The veteran Belgian actor, Jan Decler, is Ledda, a hit man who realizes that he is losing his mind to Alzheimer's. The movie is a police procedural involving murder, child prostitution and political corruption, and the local police are startled when they begin to get help from the professional killer. Decler is so good and brings such humanity to his character that, by the end, you care deeply for the hit man. The film is in French and Flemish with English subtitles. (We saw it on DVD & recommend it highly.) **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP.**

MEN IN BLACK II: They should have quit while they were ahead! I loved MIB, but this sequel does not live up to the fun of the original. Will Smith is still funny, and we liked Tommy Lee Jones, but the film is just a series of special effects and weird aliens, and that gets tedious after a short while. There isn't much of a story, and Serleena (Lara Flynn Boyle) just isn't an interesting villain. She can't compare to Vincent DeNofrio's inspired performance as the cockroach who inhabited a human form in the original MIB. We liked Rosario Dawson and she and Smith were cute together, but their story was too slight to rescue the movie. We did enjoy Frank the talking Pug--He has some of the best lines--and the little guys in the locker were intriguing. But, although we laughed a few times, I'm sorry to say we thought that most of it was boring. Gary liked it less than I did. **GRADE: C+/C-**

MEN OF HONOR: This is a good old-fashioned bio-pic. It tells the true and inspiring story of Carl Brashear, the first African-American Navy diver. It begins when Brashear is an adolescent in the late 40's and ends in the mid-60's. In between, Brashear had to face terrible prejudice against blacks in the military. He was the first black man to enter diver training school, but only after writing more than 100 letters requesting the transfer. Over and over again, his progress is hampered by racist attitudes. Robert DeNiro is Billy Sunday, the man who trains Brashear and, over time, comes to respect him as a diver and as a man. Of course this is predictable: You know going in that the hero will triumph through adversity. It's also rather heavy with testosterone. But, it's still fun to watch, and you can't help cheering for the hero. It was also good to see Cuba Gooding Jr. in a lead role. The film features Charlize Theron as Sunday's younger, make that, MUCH younger, wife. Are she and Helen Hunt taking over Hollywood? The film was directed by George Tillman Jr., whose first movie, *Soul Food*, was a success in 1997. **GRADE: B**

THE MEN WHO STARE AT GOATS: This military spoof, starring George Clooney, claims that it was inspired by a top secret true story. It was in fact based on a nonfiction book by Jon Ronson about attempts starting in 1979 by the CIA and the U.S. Army to explore occult techniques to gain a military advantage. It sounds like fertile ground for humor and in fact there are several laugh out loud scenes.... just not as many as Barbara and I hoped for. With an all star cast including Jeff Bridges, Ewan McGregor, and Kevin Spacey we went into the film with probably too high expectations. The film might be best described as "quirky." And no one can have more fun with "quirky" than George Clooney. (Remember *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) In fact, if you are an enthusiastic Clooney fan, his performance alone is worth the price of admission. Jeff Bridges is also outstanding as a hippie hired by the army as part of a scheme to create "psychic soldiers." Ewan McGregor plays a journalist hoping to add some sense of purpose to his life after his wife leaves him for his editor. Even though Barbara and I weren't blown away by the movie, we do think it is worth seeing. **GRADE B**

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: Despite her passion for Shakespeare, Barbara has allowed me to try my hand with this review. For me, the film has many highs and lows. Among the highs is the prologue, which informs us of the conditions of Jewish life in Venice in 1586. Jews were forced to live in a confined area that gave the word ghetto to the world. Jews were both reviled and needed in a city where Christians were forbidden to lend money at interest. Jews were forbidden from owning property, but were allowed to lend money as this was an economic necessity to the city. *The Merchant of Venice* is a sometimes-awkward blend of tragedy, comedy and anti-Semitism. You probably remember that when Shlock lends money and it is not paid back in time, it results in the forfeiture of a pound of flesh. If you are not a lover of Shakespeare, I doubt that this film will win you over. But if you, like me, admire the Bard, I think you will find Al Pacino's Shylock mesmerizing. The acting of Jeremy Irons and Joseph Fiennes and Lynn Collins was also brilliant. Costumes, sets, and make-up were inspired. The film deals with many moral dilemmas and you may find yourself troubled by the ways they are resolved. Many scenes in the film rise to a level of A, but overall Barbara and I agree on a grade of B+. **GRADE B+**

THE MESSENGER: This is a small intelligent independent film. It has no aliens, no vampires, no crashes, and minimal nudity. Therefore it will not receive wide distribution and you may need to wait a few weeks and see it on DVD. Barbara and I believe it is worth the wait. It is a war movie. But it probes an aspect of war that is usually suppressed or ignored. Ben Foster is brilliant in his portrayal of Staff Sergeant Will Montgomery who has recently recovered sufficiently from his injuries in Iraq to be given a new assignment in the Army's Casualty Notification service. He will take part in the gut-wrenching job of going to the homes of fallen soldiers to deliver the tragic news to their families. His partner in this horrific task is a career-soldier and recovering alcoholic Capt. Stone, equally well played by the talented Woody Harrelson. Realistic films about the human cost of war are never easy to watch. Like one of our previously reviewed war films, *The Hurt Locker*, this film doesn't take political sides, but gives an emotionally intense view of aspects of war we rarely see. Samantha Morton and Steve Buscemi have small but important supporting roles. *The Messenger* was directed and co-authored by Oren Moverman. Barbara and I both feel this important film deserves and audience. **Grade A-/A**

(Barb: I was absolutely stunned by two scenes in the film: One is a kitchen scene between Foster and Morton and the other, toward the end of the film, a monologue by Foster. Terrific! I say A.)

THE MEXICAN: We thought this movie featuring Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts was entertaining. If its running time of 123 minutes had been shortened by ten minutes or so, it might have been even better. Toward the end of the film, I began to worry that they didn't know how to end it. However, when the end came, it was satisfying. Pitt is quite funny here but the scenes between Julia Roberts and James Gandolfini (from TV's *SOPRANOS*) are the best part of the movie. Pitt is Jerry, a commitment-phobic loser who has to perform one last job for his mob-connected boss. He has to go to Mexico and bring back a valuable antique pistol. Meanwhile, a mob hit man, Leroy (Gandolfini) takes Julia/Samantha hostage to insure that Pitt will come back with the gun. The movie has been criticized because its two high-priced stars are not on screen together enough, but that doesn't seem like a legitimate criticism to me. If they had been onscreen together for the whole movie, it would have been a completely different story. And, we would not have had those wonderful scenes with Roberts and Gandolfini. **GRADE: B-**

THE MEYEROWITZ STORIES (NEW AND SELECTED) (2018) We watched this interesting movie on Netflix. The description on Imdb is: *An estranged family gathers together for an event celebrating the artistic work of their father.* Dustin Hoffman plays Harold Meyerowitz, the father, and Adam Sandler, as Danny, and Ben Stiller, as Matthew, are his two sons. They are half-brothers because Harold was married four times. Danny has a sister, Jean (Elizabeth Marvel). All three children suffered from living with Harold, who was more invested in his sculpture than he was in his kids. Emma Thomson plays Harold's current alcoholic wife, and Candice Bergen is Matthew's mother. Judd Hirsch plays an artist friend who has achieved more success than Harold. The college from which Harold retired is holding the retrospective of the work of several ex-professors. The complicated relationships of this unusual family are brought to vivid life by writer/director Noah Baumbach and the actors who were universally impressive. We were particularly impressed with Sandler and Stiller. Both Gary and I highly recommend this film which got a 93% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*. **GRADE B+**

THE MEYEROWITZ STORIES (2020 on Netflix) We re-watched this movie which we had seen before. We enjoyed it the second time around although it was vaguely (very vaguely, I must admit) familiar. We'll let our original review stand, since when we talked about what we would grade the movie, we settled on a B+. That's what we gave it the first time. We were again fascinated by the subtle intricacies of the Meyerowitz family dynamics. -- **THE MEYEROWITZ STORIES (New and Selected) (2017)** We watched this interesting movie on Netflix. The description on Imdb is: *An estranged family gathers together for an event celebrating the artistic work of their father.* Dustin Hoffman plays Harold Meyerowitz, the father, and Adam Sandler, as Danny, and Ben Stiller, as Matthew, are his two sons. They are half-brothers because Harold was married four times. Danny has a sister, Jean (Elizabeth Marvel). All three children suffered from living with Harold, who was more invested in his sculpture than he was in his kids. Emma Thomson plays Harold's current alcoholic wife, and Candice Bergen is Matthew's mother. Judd Hirsch plays an artist friend who has achieved more success than Harold. The college from which Harold retired is holding the retrospective of the work of several ex-professors. The complicated relationships of this unusual family are brought to vivid life by writer/director Noah Baumbach and the actors who were universally impressive. We were particularly impressed with Sandler and Stiller. Both Gary and I highly recommend this film which got a 93% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*. **GRADE B+**

MICHAEL CLAYTON: This is a terrific movie. Writer and first time director, Tony Gilroy, who was the screenwriter on all 3 *Bourne* films, has crafted a compelling story, and, thankfully, uses the classic style of filming—steady cams. Michael Clayton is an in-house "fixer" for a prestigious law firm—an attorney who specializes in cleaning up complex or dirty cases for the firm's clients. His employers call him a miracle worker, but he calls himself a janitor. The camera lingers on Clooney's face because the story is told from his point of view. Michael Clayton is middle-aged and not as prosperous as he looks. He's hurting from a failed restaurant business and owes a lot of money to some questionable people. Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), Michael's colleague and friend, is the lead attorney defending an important client against a class action lawsuit. The client is a huge agri-chemical manufacturer being sued for alleged poisonous pollution. When Arthur goes wacko during a routine deposition, Michael is called in to fix things. Arthur proclaims that he now believes the client is guilty of murder, but Michael thinks that Edens, who is bipolar and has gone off his medication, is talking "crazy." Tilda Swinton is wonderful as Karen Crowder, the chief counsel for the client. She is mesmerizing on screen and the final scene between Swinton & Clooney is unforgettable. Crowder, along with the head of Clayton's law firm, played by Sydney Pollack, who seems to be

the go-to guy when a high-class corporate executive is required, are desperate to clean up the mess that Arthur has made. That "clean-up" makes for a riveting film, especially with the brilliant cinematography of Robert Elswit, who also gave us the visually memorable films *Syriana*, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, and *Magnolia*. Gary says B+ but I think it deserves an A-. **GRADE A-/B+**

MICHAEL JACKSON'S THIS IS IT: We are so glad we saw this extraordinary film. Although we were not Michael Jackson fans, it was impossible to avoid seeing bits from his videos and reading about his "peculiarities" in the press for the past 30 or 40 years. The film consists of video shot from March through June of this year showing scenes from rehearsals for what was to be Jackson's farewell tour—his curtain call. The tour was scheduled to begin with a London appearance this past summer and would have gone on to 49 more sold-out concerts all over the world. This film changed our impression of the King of Pop. We didn't see a sickly childlike man with multiple plastic surgeries. What we saw was a consummate artist; a performer, singer and dancer at the top of his form; a creative perfectionist who was unfailingly polite and worked with his cast and crew as an equal, enthusiastic and energetic team member. And what a show it would have been! Jackson planned to give his fans their favorite numbers re-imagined in the most spectacular ways. Filmed footage was used as a background for some of the numbers. In one sequence, Michael is inserted into scenes from Rita Hayworth and Humphrey Bogart movies and, through clever special effects, even has a machine-gun battle with Bogie. I was particularly moved by the forest and wild life filming used as a backdrop for his environmental number, *Earth Song*, using his song, *Man In The Mirror*. I wish we could have seen Michael's curtain call concert, because this documentary turned us into fans. **GRADE A**

MIDNIGHT IN PARIS: Paris at midnight is magical; at least it is for Gil. A successful Hollywood screenwriter who would rather be a serious novelist, Gil is in Paris with his fiancée and her very conservative parents. He hopes that the city will inspire him to finish the novel he is trying to write. The novel is about a man who owns a nostalgia shop, and this visit to the City of Lights makes Gil nostalgic for the Paris of the 1920s. One night he goes for a walk by himself and something strange happens. As a church bell tolls midnight, an old fashioned car stops for him. He is taken to a party where he meets Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Not surprisingly, he takes a walk every night and every night he is transported to the Paris of Picasso, Matisse, Dali, Gertrude Stein and others. He falls in love with Picasso's mistress (Marion Cotillard) but realizes that, like him, she longs for a past age. This film is Woody Allen's love letter to Paris, and the filmmaker demonstrates his love for it and for art and literature at every opportunity. He also can't resist a political comment or two. Owen Wilson is excellent as Gil, the character Allen would have himself played in the past. Thankfully, Wilson doesn't give us a Woody Allen impersonation. He plays Gil as a nice, insecure guy who is engaged to the wrong woman (Rachel McAdams), and who feels there is something missing in his life. He manages to avoid the jittery shtick that he has used in previous films. You'll recognize Michael Sheen as a pedantic friend, Adrien Brody as the eccentric Salvador Dali, and Kathy Bates as Gertrude Stein. The movie charmed me a bit more than it did Gary, so I have added a plus to his grade of B. **GRADE B+/B**

The past is never dead. It's not even past. ~~~William Faulkner

THE MIDWIFE (Sage Femme): 2017 *Two of French cinema's biggest stars shine in this bittersweet drama about the unlikely friendship that develops between Claire (Catherine Frot), a talented but tightly wound midwife, and Béatrice (Catherine Deneuve), the estranged, free-spirited mistress of Claire's late father.* (from *Rotten Tomatoes*) Most critics were apparently seduced by Frot and Deneuve and gave this movie high marks. Both these celebrated actors are definitely worth watching. Deneuve, still beautiful at 74, has the more flamboyant character. Frot, who charmed us in 2016's *Marguerite*, is at first reluctant to let Beatriz back into her life after an absence of 30 years. Gradually, she is charmed by Beatriz, and their growing friendship helps loosen Claire a bit. The film is about forgiveness and understanding people for, rather than in spite of, their differences. It is a pleasure to watch these two exchange dialogue, but not everyone will appreciate it for the whole two hour running time. Gary falls into this group. He had a bit of trouble keeping his eyes open. I'm more on the fence: I did like seeing two women carry a film and did enjoy watching their expressive faces. However, at times I, too, got a bit sleepy, so I can't give the movie a high grade. **GRADE B-/C+**

A MIGHTY HEART: It is difficult for a filmmaker to maintain tension when everyone knows the outcome of the story. We thought Paul Greengrass was successful in doing that in *United 93* (2006) and gave that film an A. We didn't think Michael Winterbottom was as successful in *A Mighty Heart*. Both movies were filmed in documentary style with a lot of hand-held camera work, which lent an air of realism to both films. But, in *A Mighty Heart*, the wait for the inevitable was sometimes tedious. It is worth seeing, though, for Angelina Jolie's performance. She is Mariane Pearl, the wife of journalist Daniel Pearl who was kidnapped by terrorists in Pakistan. After nine gut-wrenching days of waiting for news, Pearl was executed. We live through those days with Mariane and the people who desperately searched for her husband. There are some genuinely touching moments in the film and Jolie handles them expertly. Dan Futterman plays the kidnapped journalist and although his role is small, he is very effective in it. We also liked Irfan Kahn (*The Namesake*) as the Captain of the Pakistani police. We were disturbed by a scene that shows a suspect being tortured for information about Pearl. It makes the good guys look too much like the bad guys. We can't give this movie higher than a B. **GRADE B**

A MIGHTY WIND: This is Christopher Guest's fourth Mockumentary, and in this one he parodies folk singers. When a legendary folk promoter, Irving Steinbloom, dies, his son, Jonathan (Bob Balaban) wants to stage a memorial concert in his honor at New York's Town Hall. He re-assembles three folk song groups, and we see them in past performances, present interviews, and performing at the memorial concert. All the hilarious Guest regulars are present: Michael McKean, Eugene Levy, Harry Shearer, Catherine O'Hara, Parker Posey, Fred Willard, and Guest himself. Levy and O'Hara, as Mitch and Mickey, are the centerpiece of the movie. Their scenes are both funny and poignant. As usual, Guest and Levy collaborated on the script, although I have read that they merely outline characters and situations and let the actors improvise their own dialogue. What fun it must be to work on a Guest film! Such funny people! In addition, much of the music in the film was written by Guest and others in the cast. Such talented people! The Washington Post said this film is subtler and gentler Guest's earlier films, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting For Guffman*, and *Best In Show*. Their reviewer said, "You may not laugh as uproariously as you did with the other comedies, but you'll love the characters more." We, too, don't think it is quite as funny as Guest's previous films, but we still laughed a lot. Gary says that "the bottom rung of Christopher Guest's ladder is a lot higher than the top rung of many other filmmakers' ladders." We are devoted fans of all his films and we give this one an A. (Note: If you have missed his three earlier films, by all means rush to your nearest Video Store and rent them.) **GRADE: A**

MIKE WALLACE IS HERE: This film title is made up of words that struck fear into the hearts of many politicians, world leaders, celebrities, and people on the wrong side of the law. It is an expertly crafted time capsule entirely assembled from archival television footage. Therefore, this legend of broadcast journalism is viewed through the medium that he helped define. Mike Wallace, who died in 2012 at the age of 93, was a fearsome newsman who for over half a century went head-to-head with the world's most influential figures. Wallace is best known for his decades-long regular appearance on CBS's "60 Minutes," but his tough interviewing techniques were first honed on ABC's "Night Beat." The tribute to Wallace shows dozens of clips from his memorable interviews. None, though, are quite as nerve-wracking as when he confronted Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, quoting others who called the ayatollah a "lunatic." On a more personal note, the documentary also deals with Wallace's struggles with depression, culminating in a suicide attempt that he admitted on TV after years of public denial. Israeli director Avi Belkin should be commended for exceeding expectations covering the wide scope of Wallace's long career. Amazingly, this was Belkin's first English language feature. Barbara and I liked the documentary and felt it was, at 90 minutes, the perfect length. It left us wishing we could have heard even longer clips from many of the interviews. We must never take for granted the privilege of a free press. **GRADE A**

MILES AHEAD: (2016) Produced, directed, starring, and co-written by Don Cheadle, I guess any praise or criticism has to be aimed mostly at him. *Miles Ahead* is an unconventional biopic featuring one of the most influential and innovative musicians of the 20th century, Miles Davis. Cheadle chose to emphasize an ugly and dark side of Davis in a meandering impressionistic and artistic film that for Barbara and me was not a happy experience. In an interview, Cheadle said he wanted the movie to feel like a musical composition that captured the "essence" of Davis as a person and artist. I think I would rather have spent time with a sound track of the fantastic music than in a film that failed to capture the timeless appeal of a giant in the music industry. I have always admired the film work of Don Cheadle and must give him credit for taking a chance on this wild, experimental and improvisational film. Many movie critics liked it and the movie received a respectable 73% on the Tomatometer, but I can recommend it only to fans who want to see everything available about Miles Davis. **GRADE C**

MILK: Barbara and I were hoping to be blown away by *Milk*. Perhaps our expectations had grown too high from pre-publicity, trailers, glowing reviews, and just wanting it to be great. But we weren't blown away. It is a good film about eight years in the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person elected to public office in the United States. "Openly gay!" It is a sad commentary on our history to have to point out that there were, no doubt, hundreds of gay office holders prior to Harvey Milk, but they were afraid to publicly admit their sexual orientation. Milk's election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977 and his murder in 1978 literally changed history. Sean Penn brilliantly plays the role of Harvey Milk and it is his movie. Director Gus Van Sant said in an interview that he just tried to stay out of Penn's way. I am trying to think if I ever saw Penn when I haven't been impressed by his brilliant acting. Characters he brought to the screen like *Dead Man Walking*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Mystic River*, and *Sweet and Lowdown* are just a few that have seared their way into my memory. Milk is certainly a film worth seeing, even going out of your way to see. **GRADE B+**

MILLION DOLLAR ARM: (2014) One thing this film has going for it is that it is based on a true story. Otherwise the plot would be dismissed as frivolous and too far afield of reality. If you should choose to see this heartwarming, feel-good baseball movie, be sure to stay for the ending credits where you will see several photos of people portrayed in the film. Another thing the film has going for it is a talented and charming cast led by Joh Hamm who gained wide recognition as a Golden Globe Award winning actor for his performance in a very successful TV Series, *Mad Men*. Lake Bell plays the romantic lead. She won Barbara's and my high marks when she wrote, directed, and starred in a 2013 comedy, *In A World*. Always good for a few laughs, multi-talented Alan Arkin plays a cantankerous baseball scout. J.B. (Hamm), a once-successful sports agent has lost his most important talent and finds his agency about to go under. In a last ditch effort, he hatches a bizarre scheme to find baseball's next great pitcher(s) in an unlikely place, India. Can young men who have never even held a baseball be shaped into major league players in less than a year? Well, if Disney decides to make a film titled *Million Dollar Arm*, I think you can guess the answer to that question. But knowing the outcome still leaves room for enjoyment. Reviews have been mixed and it isn't a great film, but we liked it. **GRADE B**

MILLION DOLLAR BABY: Movies about boxing are my least favorite sports films, but this is so much more than a movie about a fighter. It's about getting respect and living your dream, but mostly it's about love and redemption. It is a truly wonderful movie. Some critics believe that this film is Clint Eastwood's masterpiece, and they may be right. I am so impressed with Eastwood's ability to tell a story with no frills and no resorting to clichés. His scenes are perfect and beautifully spare: they have exactly what they need—no more, no less. And his acting isn't bad either. Eastwood is Frankie Dunn, a former cutman who runs a down and dirty gym. When approached by an eager would-be fighter named Maggie (Hillary Swank), he says, "I don't train girls." Morgan Freeman is Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris a former fighter who manages the gym for Frankie. The two men have some wonderful scenes together, but it is the growing relationship between Frankie and Maggie that gives this movie its heart and soul. I don't want to ruin it by telling too much about the story. Just see it for yourself. Both Gary and I were incredibly moved by *Million Dollar Baby* and have no trouble giving this film an A. **GRADE A**

A MILLION WAYS TO DIE IN THE WEST: (2014) Barbara and I rather liked MacFarlane's first movie, *Ted* so we decided to take a chance on this one in spite of the many negative reviews. Hope springs eternal and a cast featuring Charlize Theron, Liam Neeson, Amanda Seyfried, Sarah Silverman, Giovanni Ribisi, Neil Patrick Harris and of course Seth McFarlane sounded promising. I thought the film might be good for a few chuckles. And indeed it was.... Very few! By the end I was questioning whether the movie's title referred to the longevity of the local citizens or the fate of what were designed as humorous lines or bits in the film. I admire one reviewer's wit when he wrote, "Yes, there are a million ways to die in the west but boredom shouldn't be one of them." The plot of a Western spoof carries little significance, but in case you are interested here is a summary. A mild mannered sheep farmer (Seth McFarlane) loses his girlfriend (Amanda Seyfried) to a slimy moustache twirling fop (Neil Patrick Harris). The arrival in town of beautiful Anna (Charlize Theron) perks up the depressed sheep farmer until he finds she is actually the wife of a snarling Clinch Leatherwood (Liam Neeson) the most ruthless killer in the territory. Set in 1882 in Arizona, the scenery is flawless: Monument Valley of course. I have to wonder whether there will ever be a Western Comedy that can approach the high standards set by Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*. We keep hoping, but this one doesn't come close. Barbara is slightly more forgiving than I. **GRADE D/D+**

MILLIONS: The most remarkable thing about this film is that it was directed by Danny Boyle who gave us very dark and, for us, unwatchable *Trainspotting* (1996). This film is eminently watchable. An adorable young actor, Alex Etel, plays Damian, a young boy who finds a satchel with over 265,000 British pounds. The satchel bounces off a train and on to Damian's playhouse, and he thinks it is a gift from God. Damian's older brother (Lewis McGibbon) wants to spend the money; Damian wants to give it to the poor. This takes place just a week before the U.K. will convert to the Euro. After that, the money will be worthless. Damian is a devout child whose heroes are the Catholic Saints. He knows everything about them and they frequently appear and talk with him. The story is a charming mixture of fantasy and reality, and Boyle uses creative film techniques to tell us his story. James Nesbitt (*Waking Ned Devine*) is the boys' widowed father. The two boys are terrifically appealing and the movie is both amusing and touching. Gary always has some difficulty hearing heavily-accented British films, so he only gives the movie a C+. For me, it was a delightful B. **GRADE B/C+**

MINARI 2020/2021 (A \$19.95 rental on Amazon Prime Video) We were anxious to see this Korean movie because it won the Golden Globe for Best Picture-Foreign Language. It also got a 98% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, and 91% from audiences. It is harder to watch a subtitled movie on TV, because the closed captioning is in white, and when it's against a light background, it's difficult to read. But in spite of that, we were captivated by a Korean family trying to survive and assimilate in America in the 1980s. The family moves from California to Arkansas, because the father, Jacob, believes that farming will enable them to achieve the American Dream. The family consists of the mother, Monica, the daughter, Anne, and a little boy named David. When Monica brings her mother to the trailer in which they live, David insists that she isn't a "real grandmother." A "real grandmother bakes cookies, David asserts, and this grandmother doesn't even cook. Besides, she teaches the children card games! David finally learns to love his Grandmother, and as we watch the immigrant family's many travails, this intimate and unsentimental portrait of a family finally worked its magic on us. **GRADE B+**

MINDING THE GAP 2018/2021 (Streamed on Hulu): It is a strange title that doesn't give a clue about the movie. *Minding the Gap* is the first feature film by Bing Liu, a young Chinese-American documentarian who brings us a story of friendship, peaks and valleys of adolescence, and adjusting to adulthood. It received a rare 100% from critics and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature in 2018. Many critics believe it should have won. The director, Bing Liu, started shooting video of himself and his friends skateboarding when they were in their early teens and continued for over a decade even as he became a cameraman in Hollywood. The film was shot in the director's hometown of Rockford, Illinois. For the opening fifteen minutes you have the impression that the movie is all about skateboarding. But what begins to seep in and eventually engulfs the entire thing, is an awareness of the cycle of abuse — child abuse, domestic partner abuse and how it permeates lives and guides attitudes and behavior. Bing Liu and his friends were all victims of domestic violence and they bonded together to escape volatile families. It is a study of harsh socioeconomic conditions, people struggling with poverty, pervasive prejudice, and the pain of domestic violence. According to national statistics, on average someone is abused by their domestic partner every nine seconds and a report of child abuse is made every 10 seconds. Bing manages to uncover the domestic abuse that affected all his friends. Skateboarding was something they had in common and it filled a need for freedom, temporary as it may have been. Flying down streets and around corners with the wind in their hair gave them moments when nothing else mattered. These escapes were fleeting but crucial to survival. The movie may sound like a downer, but toward the end we see a glimmer of hope. Bing Liu is exceptionally self-aware and even his friends show signs of growth. Runtime was 93 minutes and I liked the film. Barbara was less enthusiastic. **GRADE B+/B**

MINORITY REPORT: This movie is so much more than a futuristic thriller. It does have some amazing special effects, but it also has a human story and thought provoking issues. In addition, there is an engrossing mystery with a satisfying ending. Tom Cruise is splendid as John Anderton, the chief of Washington D.C.'s Pre-Crime unit. He created a character that I cared about. His unit is able to predict murders before they happen. They depend on three Pre-Cogs--modern-day Cassandras who can foresee the future. They drift in a flotation tank, their brain waves tapped by computers. Samantha Morton is Agatha, the strongest of the three Pre-cogs, and she again amazes me with her ability to captivate with little or no dialogue. (She was the young mute woman who loved Sean Penn in *Sweet and Lowdown*.) Anderton is convinced that the pre-cogs are infallible, until they predict that he will murder someone--a man he does not know. I don't want to tell anymore of the story because I don't want to spoil it for you. I was totally engaged from the beginning, but Gary had some trouble getting into it. He can't go higher than B+, but I would have to give it an A. Spielberg has proven once again that he is one of the best, if not the best, director working today. Max von Sydow, Colin Farrell, and Tim Blake Nelson also appear. Roger Ebert loved the film and said, "*Minority Report* is a triumph--a film that works on our minds and our emotions. (It reminds us why we go to the movies in the first place." **GRADE: A/B+**

MIRACLE: I think hockey fans are going to love this movie, and the 135 minute running time will seem short to them. It seemed a bit long to me, but it did have some exciting moments. This is another film where you know the ending in advance, but the game against the Russian hockey team at the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics was still thrilling to watch. The centerpiece of this film is not the individual players on that gold medal hockey team, but on their coach, Herb Brooks. It is interesting to watch how Brooks takes a group of players still focused on old college rivalries and turns them into a cohesive, interdependent team. Kurt Russell does a fine job of bringing this controversial coach to life. His clothes and even his hairstyle make him look remarkably like Brooks. The wonderful Patricia Clarkson is wasted playing a typical coach's wife--the staple of all sports films. She alternates between supporting her man and complaining that he's neglecting the family, but she does it with style. I have read that the filmmakers recruited real hockey players and taught them to act, rather than hire actors who had to pretend to be hockey players. That's what makes the action on the ice look so authentic. This is a standard sports film with the added element of Cold War patriotic fervor. The director Gavin O'Connor's previous film was the 1997 independent film, *Tumbleweeds*. Gary was quite moved by the film and gives it a grade of A-. I'd have to say that, for me, it was a solid B movie., **GRADE A-/B**

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY: It's delightful. It's delovely. It's a fast-talking thirties-style romantic comedy with the adorable Amy Adams and the redoubtable Francis McDormand. Adams is Delysia, a flighty somewhat promiscuous American singer working in London on the eve of WWII. McDormand is an unemployed nanny who maneuvers herself into a job with Adams. Only after a few hours does Miss Pettigrew discover that the job isn't for a nanny, but for a social secretary. The film chronicles Miss Pettigrew's adventures in the glamorous social whirl that is Delysia's life. She helps the young actress manage the three men in her life and along the way, finds

an admirer for herself, played by Ciarán Hinds. Adams and McDormand are wonderful, and we both especially liked Lee Pace (**The Good Shephard**, and TV's *Pushing Daisies*) who plays one of Delysias's boyfriends. The only serious element in the film is the impending conflict with Nazi Germany. The rest of the film could have been directed by Frank Capra or Preston Sturges, considering the sprightly dialogue and the thirties costumes and sets. It's a quaintly old-fashioned movie and extremely entertaining. I loved it. Gary had a bit of trouble hearing the fast-talking women and missed some of the dialogue, so he doesn't feel he can grade the film. I don't have any trouble giving it a B+. **GRADE B+**

MISS SLOANE: (2016) This film was directed by John Madden who brought us *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011). It stars Jessica Chastain in the title role. Chastain blew us away in *The Help* (2011) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Barbara and I have the highest regard for Chastain and she does not disappoint in this film playing a powerful and ruthless lobbyist in a Washington atmosphere riddled with crooked politicians. That seems spot on with the current mood of the country. Miss Sloane plays a largely unsympathetic character willing to do whatever is needed to win. What begins as probe into the world of lobbying ends up a tense political drama with the usual plot twists. The cast is uniformly terrific and it includes some big names like Sam Waterston, John Lithgow, and Gugu Mbatha-Raw. But the success of the movie depends on the extraordinary acting skills of Jessica Chastain. *Miss Sloane* will be ripped, no doubt, by gun-rights advocates but we think it is a gripping tale of dirty tricks and gamesmanship and we think it deserves an above average grade. **GRADE B+**

THE MISSING: I don't care how much Ron Howard denies it, this is a remake of the John Wayne film, **The Searchers**. However, there are a couple of differences. First, it has Tommy Lee Jones as the heroic tracker. Now I like John Wayne, but let's face it, Jones can act circles around him! Second, it has many elements of native mysticism--witches, curses, spiritual healing, etc. The first is a plus; the second is a minus. Cate Blanchett, who was referred to recently as the Meryl Street of the 21st Century, is excellent as Maggie, a woman alone in the West with two daughters to raise. When renegade Indian scouts capture her oldest daughter, she is forced to turn for help to her father, Samuel. He deserted her mother years ago and has lived with the Apaches, even taking an Apache wife. Jones is craggy and weary and wonderful in the role. Maggie cannot forgive her father, but she needs his tracking skills. Excellent acting is a given with these two, but the movie has some problems. It is far too long, and there are too many unbelievable confrontations with the renegades. It almost reminded me of soap opera! Half-way through Gary was ready to give this film a B+, but as the story became more and more implausible, and more and more mystical, he downgraded it. Because we liked the beginning of the film, and because we like Jones and Blanchett, we give it a C+. **GRADE C+**

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE – FALLOUT: (2018) My mission, should I choose to accept it, is to stay awake for this 2 hour and 27 minute movie. I accepted the mission and managed to stay awake. Gary said he enjoyed the first hour and the last 5 minutes. This will probably be the last **MI** movie I will ever see because how much more impossible can they make the missions? Tom Cruise, at a young-looking 56, seems up for it, but I, regretfully, am not. I did like seeing Michelle Monaghan, Ethan Hunt's ex-wife, again. It was interesting to see his old love and his new love, Rebecca Ferguson, in the same movie, but you don't go to these movies for the story. You go for the stunts. And in *Fallout*, the stunts are as impossible as ever. There are the inevitable car chases, leaps across tall buildings, and fights that would render any normal human incapacitated if not dead. There is a fight with helicopters that was so outrageous it was laughable. At least it made me laugh. Ving Rhames and Simon Pegg are back on the Hunt team, and they provide some humorous dialogue. Henry Cavill, Angela Bassett, and Vanessa Kirby join the cast, and Christopher McQuarrie directs this, his second **MI** film. *Fallout* has gotten good grades from critics, and the *Rotten Tomatoes* critical score is 97%. While the action was at times riveting, and Cruise was his usual energetic and indestructible self, for us the movie was only OK. **GRADE B-**

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE 2: Immediately after the movie ended I was ready to give it a B-, but perhaps I was blinded by that Cruise smile. On reflection, I decided it was only worth about a C+. We saw the movie in Laughlin, NV with Willie & Bill Enoch. Both Willie and I liked it a bit better than Gary and Bill who voted for a C. Apparently Thandie Newton didn't do as much for the men as Cruise did for Willie and me. I liked the fact that the story was not convoluted, but I didn't care much for Dougray Scott as the villain. He was too bland. Thandie Newton (*Beloved*) is a lovely girl and I liked the fact that she was more than just a pretty face-she had gumption. Ving Rhames was wasted in the role of a sidekick with little to do. I thought all that pulling off of rubber facemasks got just a bit tedious. We couldn't figure out where Cruise carried all those masks. The movie a satisfying number of car chases and explosions and the opening shots of Tom Cruise rock climbing were spectacular. **GRADE: C/C+**

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE 3: Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to sit through two hours of explosions, deadly gun fights, crashing helicopters and explosive devises—some of them implanted in people's heads. Don't look for much of a plot, or any character development to speak of. There are some good actors here—Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Tom Cruise, Lawrence Fishburn, Billy Crudup, Ving Rhames—but you only see them sporadically through the fire and falling debris. Johnathan Rhys-Meyers, so good in *Match Point*, is wasted here, and the lovely Michelle Monaghan has the thankless task of playing Cruise's girlfriend/wife in peril. This kind of non-stop action stuff works better in a comic book movie like *Superman* or *Spiderman*, where you don't expect any similarity to real life. This third **MI** is all about a doomsday weapon called the "Rabbit's Foot," that is being sold to Middle Eastern terrorists. We never do learn just what the "Rabbit's Foot" is, and we really don't care. I think this franchise has had its day. (Although the theme music is still good.) I don't think either one of us will bother to see *Mission Impossible IV*, if they choose to make it. And let's hope they don't. **GRADE C**

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: GHOST PROTOCOL: (2011) This will probably be my last *Mission Impossible* movie. The stunts keep getting more physically and technically ambitious, the climaxes keep getting more numerous, the stories keep getting thinner, and Tom Cruise keeps getting older. And he's so small it must be getting harder and harder to find actors his size. In this version, Paula Patton looks like she could clean his clock without mussing her makeup. I did like the addition of Jeremy Renner. He can be believably tough. Simon Pegg supplies an occasional humorous comment, and the rest of the ensemble is fine. But the real stars of these movies are the stunts: A Russian prison break, a car chase in a dust storm and fights in many places including a high tech parking garage in Mumbai where moving steel platforms raise and lower cars. Of course, there are explosions a plenty, and incredible, though mostly incomprehensible, tricks with computers. All this takes place as the team tries to avert a World Nuclear War. (And that's about it for story.) It is said that Cruise did a lot of his own stunts. If he did, he must be crazy! Although I must say he looks good doing them. I

thought the best stunt was the one that took place in Dubai. It consisted of Tom Cruise scaling the world's tallest building with the aid of nothing but a pair of sticky gloves. Unfortunately, that one came early in the movie, and the rest of the climaxes failed to excite me. Gary found the whole thing boring and feels he can't even give the movie a grade. I say C+. **GRADE C+**

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE – ROGUE NATION: (2015) We have seen all of Ethan Hunt's (Tom Cruise) missions to save the world from evil-doers, and we actually enjoyed this, the fifth movie of the *Mission: Impossible* franchise. Christopher McQuarrie both directed and wrote the story for this one, and I think Cruise would be wise to sign him up for the sixth. He keeps the action going with some remarkable stunts. My favorite scene was on the catwalks of the Vienna Opera House during a production of *Turandot*. I loved the fact that the scene's climax came as the tenor hit the high note at the end of *Nessun Dorma*. There were the predictable gun, fist and knife fights, car and motorcycle chases, and one good explosion. Another exciting scene involved some underwater work, and was appropriately tense. An aging Tom Cruise is still credible in the unbelievable situations that this genre demands. Jeremy Renner, Simon Pegg (providing some humor) and Ving Rhames once again appear, and Alec Baldwin plays the CIA chief who wants to disband the IMF group. We both think Rebecca Ferguson, as a MI-6 agent, all but stole the movie. She is beautiful and she is tough! Her knife fight toward the end was terrific. (She played Elizabeth Woodville in the TV series *The White Queen*.) She was a good match for Cruise and I was glad to see that the women in the *Impossible* movies are no longer just pretty faces. In an interview on the *Daily Show* Cruise said that he planned to shoot the sixth movie next summer. The previous films have been separated by at least 4 years—1996, 2000, 2007, 2011—but at his age, Cruise would be wise to narrow that gap. Gary would have gone higher than a B if the movie had been a bit shorter. He has a low tolerance for interminable chase scenes, but I liked this movie, so I say B+. **GRADE B+/B**

The "Mission: Impossible" franchise has grossed a combined \$2 billion at the worldwide box office.

"Rogue Nation," which carries a \$150 million price tag, will open in 40 international markets including the U.K., Australia, Mexico and South Korea.

MISSISSIPPI GRIND: 2015 (Streaming is available on Prime Video for \$3.99 rental or on Showtime Anytime for free.) *Mississippi Grind* is a fairly traditional two-character road film. It was critically well-received, garnering uniformly good reviews, plus earning three nominations for small awards and winning two of them. It was, however, a financial flop, grossing just \$130,000 in its five weeks of release. I agree with the critics (91% on Rotten Tomatoes) it's a terrific film, but it came and went in cinemas before many people could discover it. Down on his luck and facing financial hardship, Gerry teams up with a fascinating poker player, Curtis. In this freewheeling road movie, Emmy Award-nominee Ben Mendelsohn plays Gerry, a terrible gambler whose fortunes begin to change when he meets Curtis (Ryan Reynolds), a younger, highly charismatic gambler. The two strike up an immediate friendship and they plan a gambling-fueled road trip to a legendary high stakes poker game in New Orleans. They set out with visions of accumulating enough cash to buy in to the big-money game, and winning back all that they have lost. In *Mississippi Grind*, we deal with gambling addiction and the constant thrill that comes with the knowledge that the next hand of cards or roll of the dice or bet on a horse can either make you or break you. There are no sure things in gambling, but if you are a poker player and looking for an enjoyable film to stream, *Mississippi Grind* is a good bet. Barbara agrees. **GRADE B+**

THE MOLE AGENT 2020 (A \$3.99 rental on Amazon Prime) With *The Mole Agent*, filmmaker Maite Alberdi set out to make a film noir documentary about a spy in a nursing home. She did not expect it to transform into an aching meditation on isolation and loneliness. She set up a camera crew in the nursing home, telling the staff that she was making a documentary about day-to-day life in the home. She had already contacted Detective Aitken. He's a former federal police investigator turned private eye who had already handled four cases in nursing homes. Eventually, a client contacted the detective because she wanted her mother watched to make sure she was being treated well inside a long-term care facility. Now they had to hire an 80 to 90 year old to be a spy, and put an ad in the paper. In the movie, we see various seniors in the interview chair responding to the help wanted ad. They're baffled anyone would want to hire someone over 80, but they jump at the opportunity. They found their spy in an octogenarian and, after learning the technical aspects of the job, the camera followed him around as he attempted to discover if the client's mother was being well cared for or not. As the gentle spy befriended the people in the home he came to care for them and to pay attention to them, and what began as a *Pink Panther*-type spy story became a treatise on the loneliness and playfulness of the residents in the long-term care home. They were being well cared for, including the client's mother, and blossomed under the attention of the Mole Agent. Gary felt the ending of the movie was touching, but it was a long wait, and can't give it higher than a grade of C. After reading about the film, I probably would grade it a bit higher than Gary. After all, the critics on Rotten Tomatoes gave it a 95%. I think it is easier to see a subtitled film on a large theater screen, and watching at home probably affected our appreciation of the movie. **GRADE B/C**

Alberdi explained that the gender breakdown in this particular nursing home is not common in Chile. (There were only 4 men and many more women.) Men are usually dumped in homes, while women are kept with the children or grandchildren they raised. However, this particular home goes back decades, with a clientele largely made up of women who never married, had children or found their independence with careers.

MOLLY'S GAME: (2017) The movie, featuring Jessica Chastain, is based on the true story of Molly Bloom, an Olympic-class skier who when an accident ended her sports career ran the world's most exclusive high-stakes poker game. The talented Jessica Chastain (*The Help, Zero Dark Thirty*) is in nearly every scene and, as always, is a joy to watch. Her poker players included Hollywood royalty, sports stars, business titans and finally, unbeknownst to her, the Russian mob. Aaron Sorkin wrote and directed the film. Sorkin has been a favorite in our house ever since he conceived the political drama *The West Wing* for TV in 1997. He also wrote nearly every episode during the show's first four Emmy-winning seasons. So if you admire the versatile characters of Chastain, or the rat-a-tat dialogue from Sorkin, or just the pleasure of excellent filmmaking, Barbara and I think *Molly's Game* would be a good choice. You don't have to be a poker player to appreciate the film. Moviegoers are taken on an exciting trip through the world of underground poker where millions of dollars change hands in one session. Kevin Costner plays Molly's father and Idris Elba plays her criminal defense attorney when federal prosecutors get involved. This is a compelling drama about an improbable but true story worth seeking out. **GRADE A-**

MONA LISA SMILE: When a woman went to college in the 1950's it was common to hear people say, "She's going for her Mrs. Degree." I know, because that's when I went to college. In this movie, Julia Roberts is Katherine Watson, a Californian who comes to

Wellesley to teach. Because she introduces her students to modern art and tells them they must consider it and decide for themselves if it is good or not, she is considered "subversive." Imagine-- she wants the students to think for themselves! This film is a good depiction of that era and it is enjoyable. Julia Stiles, Kirsten Dunst, and Maggie Gyllenhaal are three students who are most influenced by Watson. It's a bit hard for me to believe they actually had classes in table setting and dinner planning at Wellesley. It's also a bit hard for me to believe that any teacher can have such a powerful influence on an entire class in just one year. And I thought that the Kirsten Dunst character was such a bitch that she hardly seemed human, although an attempt was made to soften her by the end. I liked seeing Juliet Stevenson in a small part, and Marcia Gay Harden is perfect as a woman who has bought the whole fifties package. Toward the end of the film, a colleague tells Watson that he thinks she didn't come to Wellesley to teach the girls to think for themselves, but rather to think like she does. And there is some truth in that. The film does advance the idea that getting married and staying home to raise children should not be viewed as some sort of failure. Gary liked this film a lot and he thinks it deserves an A-. I don't think the script is anywhere near the "A" category and couldn't grade it any higher than B-. **GRADE: A-/B-**

MONEY MONSTER: (2016) This is the time of year when movie buffs are not looking for Oscar contenders, just entertaining films. A film directed by Jodie Foster, starring George Clooney and Julia Roberts sounded like it might be a perfect fit. *Money Monster* is a financial thriller sprinkled with comic overtones. Critics gave it mixed reviews and it came in at a modest 58% on the *Tomatometer* based on 121 reviews. The reviews ranged from near raves to near hatred, possibly because the plot touches on Wall Street and the film's villain is a greedy corporate CEO. Barbara and I tend to agree with the more positive reviews and we were totally engrossed for the 1 hr. 30 min. run time. George Clooney plays a T.V. personality who hosts a popular financial show offering investment advice. It is hard to imagine, but think of a hyped up version of Jim Cramer who is featured on T.V.'s "Mad Money" only with the charm and good looks of George Clooney. A pretty typical day in front of and behind the cameras is shattered when a man walks into the studio with a gun and a vest full of explosives. The man has lost everything, \$60,000, after investing in stock touted to be a sure thing. He demands answers and a tense hostage drama unfolds. We think investing in tickets to this fast-paced thriller is a good investment. **GRADE B+**

We were both impressed and delighted that Foster did not try to stretch this hour and a half movie into the now more common choice of a two hour or longer film.

MONEYBALL: Hollywood has produced several memorable baseball films. *Bull Durham*, *The Natural*, and *Field of Dreams* come to mind. *Moneyball* is a well-written and well-acted baseball film that may prove to be the best film you will ever see about baseball statistics. That sounds like a very dry subject, and it could be if it weren't for the exceptional chemistry between Brad Pitt and Jonah Hill. They make an odd couple: a handsome middle-aged hunk and a young overweight nerd. Even if you don't care for sports stories, you may be drawn into the real story of defying conventional wisdom in pursuit of a long-range goal. Based on a true story, Pitt plays Billy Beane, a promising baseball prodigy who didn't quite make it as a professional player but ended up as general manager of the Oakland Athletics in the early 2000's. Oakland didn't have the budget to buy big name players, but Beane and his nerd friend came up with a strategy that changed baseball. Barbara and I both enjoyed the film but didn't feel it quite knocked the ball out of the park. **GRADE B+**

MONEYBALL 2011/2021 (We recorded from TV on STARZ, but it is available for streaming on Prime Video.) Gary and I saw *Moneyball* in 2011 and we remembered liking it. It starred Brad Pitt as Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane. He built a winning team on a lean budget by employing computer-generated analysis to acquire new players, mostly at the urging of Jonah Hill's character, Peter Brand. But Peter Brand wasn't the real name of the person who devised the computer program used by Beane. His real name is Paul DePodesta, and he serves as the direct inspiration for the analytics approach at the center of *Moneyball*. In the movie Beane hires the young computer wizard, and is so committed to the analytic approach that he trades popular players for ones that can get on base. Film critics agree that Pitt gave one of the best performances of his career as Billy Beane. In spite of the fact that Oakland did not go to the World Series in 2002, they did win 20 straight games. That American League record still stands today. The A's went on to win the AL West that year with a record of 103-59, and their success with the analytic approach would go on to influence professional sports of all kinds for years to come. Beane is still General Manager of Oakland and is still trying to win the last game of the season. We agree with the *Newsday* critic who said "*Moneyball* is a winner, one of the freshest and smartest sports movies in years." **GRADE A** (Gary wrote the original review. It is in the Archives. Although we originally gave the movie a B+ grade, the fact that it held up so well for us is responsible for the A grade now.) **GRADE A**

MONGOL: This epic film shows us a kinder, gentler side of Genghis Khan—well, at least a more human version of the legendary conquerer of half the world. We see him as a devoted son, family man, lover and faithful friend and husband. He's also portrayed as a man who can control the thunder and as a Moses to his people, uniting them with a set of rules he wrote on a mountaintop. But along with these occasional softer glimpses, we see the brutality of the Mongol tribes in some incredibly bloody battles. Born in 1162 as Temudjin, the young Khan had a tumultuous and harrowing life. Captured and almost killed several times, he was once a slave. In 1206 he united the nomadic tribes of northeast Asia, and it is there that the film ends. Gorgeously filmed in the very lands that gave birth to Genghis Khan, the film was directed by an award-winning Russian filmmaker Sergei Bodrov. He gives us sweeping shots of the starkly beautiful landscape along with several bloody but exciting battle scenes. A Japanese actor, Tadanobu Asano, is excellent as the charismatic Khan. We were also impressed with the actress who played Khan's spirited wife Börte. While not quite in the category of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Mongol* is an engrossing and spectacular look at the life and legend of Genghis Khan. In spite of the violence, I appreciated the majesty and the cunning of the final battle scene. The script is based on scholarly accounts, one of which was written by the director. **GRADE B+**

Historical Note:

Genghis Kahn conquered half the world including Russia. He died in 1227 and his descendants went on to stretch the Mongol Empire across most of Eurasia, conquering all of modern-day China, as well as substantial portions of modern Russia, southern Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

MONOS (2019) This subtitled foreign film had its world premiere at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival where it won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award. It was also recently named Columbia's official Oscar submission. It is a thought-provoking survivalist saga set on a remote Colombian mountaintop. Eight young kids with guns watch over a female hostage and a conscripted milk cow. The teenage commandos perform military training exercises by day and indulge in youthful play by night. It reminds one of a 1954

novel, *Lord of the Flies*, a critically acclaimed work by Nobel Prize-winning British author William Golding. It is unclear whether these kids are orphans or street kids or maybe kidnapped and pressed into service—and then brutalized by military discipline and indoctrination. The kids seem to be a part of a rebel group called the Organization, but what they are fighting for is unknown. *Monos* (Spanish for monkeys) gives us an unsettling look at human nature. The film leans heavily cinematography and spectacular scenery rather than on plot. The dysfunctional group of young militants engages in savage behavior as the strong begin to prey on the weak, but motivations are never revealed. *Monos* is directed and co-written by Alejandro Landes. He seems to love withholding information from his audience and only hinting at what the total story might be. He drops us in the middle of bizarre situations with no explanation. Barbara and I agree that it makes the movie very difficult to grade. Critics seemed to like it. It earned 92% on the Tomatometer, but I have a feeling many would not be as kind. **GRADE B**

MONSIEUR IBRAHIM: It's wonderful to see Omar Sharif on the screen again. He is terrific in this French film about the friendship between a French Jewish boy and an elderly Muslim shopkeeper. Ibrahim has taken a kindly interest in the motherless Momo (Pierre Boulanger), even to the point of overlooking the boy's shoplifting. Momo's mother ran off years ago and the boy has been doing all the shopping and cooking for his humorless, depressed father. The film is set in the early 60s, and, in this more innocent time, we completely accept the friendship between the man and the boy. Ibrahim acts like a surrogate father to Momo, and without him, the lonely boy's life would be bleak indeed. The local prostitutes also befriend Momo. They introduce him to sex and treat him with motherly affection. This is a charming film and we hope you will get the chance to see it. **GRADE B**

MONSIEUR LAZHAR: (2011) You may have noticed that Barbara and I tend to admire independent and foreign films, sometimes more than Hollywood films. Films like *Monsieur Lazhar* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* are responsible for this apparent bias. Both are excellent films and we wish more people had an opportunity to view them on a large screen. *Monsieur Lazhar* is a subtitled Canadian film that was nominated for Best Foreign Language film at the 2012 Academy Awards. It lost to *A Separation*, a film from Iran. It did, however win six Genie Awards. (Canadian equivalent to Oscars) This heartwarming story unfolds slowly. It deals with the aftermath of tragedy. Lazhar is an Algerian immigrant dealing with his own personal tragedy while helping students cope with feelings of loss and abandonment. All this while trying to balance an educational policy which requires that teachers relate to children at a physical and emotional distance. I never cease to be impressed if not awed by the acting prowess of children and young adults. Nothing is overdone in this film. It avoids melodrama and focuses on realism. I can only hope you have an opportunity to see this excellent film. **GRADE B+**

MONSOON WEDDING: *Monsoon Wedding* is a colorful and lively look at a family in Delhi as they prepare for their daughter's wedding. Everyone speaks English, although they also speak Hindi, and, occasionally, Punjabi, sometimes in the same sentence. There are subtitles for all the non-English dialogue. The parents have arranged the marriage. The groom has traveled here from Houston to marry in a traditional ceremony, and the bride is still involved with a former married boyfriend, but that is not the only story here. There are multiple subplots. One of most entertaining of them involves the wedding planner, P.K. Dube, who falls in love with the family's maid, Alice. Apparently a traditional wedding demands several parties leading up to the main event. And these people love to party! We had a problem identifying all the characters and their relationships, and that meant we really didn't get into the story until almost 1/3 of the way through it. Once I got the people straight, I enjoyed the film, but Gary never really identified with any of the stories. This movie did not make me want to visit India, and it confirmed my dislike of Indian music. But those are my problems. Many others have enjoyed this look at another culture. (See Readers' Views) **GRADE: B-/C**

MONSTER: There just aren't enough words to describe the extraordinary performance of Charlize Theron as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*. *Powerful, riveting, intense, compelling, unforgettable*--all these words apply. It will be a travesty if Theron does not win an Oscar! There is no other female performance this year that can match hers. Wuornos was severely abused as a child, became a prostitute by age 13, and in 1989 began to kill her customers. In *Monster*, we meet her before the first murder. When Wuornos fell in love with a young woman, Selby Wall (Christina Ricci), she dreamed of earning enough money to set the two of them up in a "normal" lifestyle. She vowed to give up hooking but, unable to find work, the need for money drove her back to prostitution. The hurt and rage that Wuornos felt toward men ever since a friend of her father's raped her repeatedly at the age of eight, finally burst forth in violence. From 1989 to 1990, Wuornos murdered seven men. Wuornos was executed in October 2002. Theron wore false teeth, gained 30 lbs. and wore makeup that made her skin look sun damaged in order to look remarkably like the ungainly Wuornos. Theron dominates the screen. She is unrecognizable and totally inhabits the role. We agree with Roger Ebert that "this is one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema." **GRADE A; ACTING GRADE A+++**

MONSTER'S BALL: Our local critic praised this film's "gritty realism" and said it was "hard to watch but impossible to ignore. We don't usually agree with him, but this time he got it right. *Monster's Ball* is painfully realistic. It is an unlikely love story, bringing together Hank (Billy Bob Thornton), a racist Corrections Officer, and Leticia (Halle Berry), the widow of a man whose execution Hank supervised. Leticia is black, and Hank has learned to hate African-Americans from his father, Buck (Peter Boyle). Nothing is prettier up here: We see these people with all their flaws. Thornton is his usual understated self as Hank, a man who undergoes amazing changes in his attitude. Berry is splendid. She has long been one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood, and, with this performance, she joins the ranks of one of the best actors in Hollywood. Boyle is effective as the epitome of redneck racism, spewing forth hatred at every opportunity. Heath Ledger is Sonny, Hank's son and a third generation Corrections Officer. Sonny apparently takes after his mother, because he is not racist and his father and grandfather despise him for his "weakness." This is not a "nice" movie and I suspect many people will not like it. It is not a film we will soon forget; especially Halle Berry's Oscar caliber performance. **GRADE: B+ (Barbara)/B (Gary)**

THE MONUMENTS MEN: (2013) Professional reviews of this movie were negative. Typical audiences were more forgiving, but far from enthusiastic. The screenplay and the book it was inspired by give us a glimpse of a true WWII story that desperately needed to be told. George Clooney co-wrote, directed, produced, and stars in this film about efforts to save Europe's art treasures. It features the considerable talents of Matt Damon, Bill Murray, John Goodman, Cate Blanchette, and what seems like a cast of thousands. Toward the end of WWII the German army was under orders to destroy everything as the Reich fell, including thousands of art treasures Hitler

had been collecting for his dream of a huge museum. In 1943 President Roosevelt and General Eisenhower created the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives government program (MFAA) to try to avoid the destruction of some of mankind's greatest cultural achievements. It was an admirable effort as was the film's effort to show us the race against time. Sadly, as we left the theater, Barbara commented that we might have had a better experience reading the book on which the film is based. The movie was under two hours, but seemed much longer. We believe a film with such a stellar cast and important story to tell should have been better. **GRADE C**

MOON: We are not fans of science fiction but we are fans of Sam Rockwell, so we were looking forward to *Moon*. Rockwell (*Frost/Nixon; Snow Angels*) did not disappoint. He is terrific as an Astronaut named Sam Bell who is living on the far side of the moon, completing a three-year contract with Lunar Industries to mine Earth's primary source of energy, Helium-3. Sam's only companion is a computer named Gerty, a 21st Century version of Hal. Gerty, perfectly voiced by Kevin Spacey, has only one job: to take care of Sam. Three years in isolation is a long time and Sam is looking forward to going home to his wife and young daughter. But, his health seems to be deteriorating and he has had a couple of strange experiences. As the film progresses, things get a lot stranger. This is only the second film for director Duncan Jones, who also wrote the original story. He created a striking lunar landscape and directed with a sure hand. Gary has difficulty suspending disbelief in science fiction movies. He can't stop trying to make logical sense out of what's happening. I, on the other hand, had no trouble accepting Sam's world. Even the human-like Gerty seemed perfectly believable to me. While Gary had a bit of trouble staying focused, I was totally captivated by *Moon*. Rockwell is so good that even Gary would give the film a B. I liked it better and say B+. **GRADE B+/B**

MOONLIGHT: (2016) This Indie coming-of-age movie is the current darling of the critics. It chronicles the life of a young black man from childhood to adulthood set against a rough neighborhood in Miami. The characters are not stereotypical, but instead show us people we don't usually see on the screen: A kindly drug dealer, a young boy struggling with his sexuality, and a drug-addicted mother who loves her son. However, it is an Indie, so the dialogue is spare and much of the story takes place off-screen. The actors who play the main character as he experiences three defining moments of his life are all excellent. As the kindly drug dealer, Mahershala Ali is memorable and Naomi Harris shines as the mother. The movie is based on a play by Tarell Alvin McCraney titled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. McCraney has tried to give a voice to the untold stories of the America he grew up in—the rat-infested Miami projects he refers to as “the other America.” We were moved by Stray Cat's production of another McCraney play titled *The Brothers Size*, so we looked forward to this movie. We were mildly disappointed with the low-key dialogue which we had a bit of difficulty understanding. We can't give the movie an A, but do believe that McCraney has important things to say, and we wouldn't hesitate to see any anything else he writes. Gary is a bit less enthusiastic. **GRADE B/B-**

MOONLIGHT-- A Second Look: After it won an Oscar for Best Picture and Mahershala Ali won an Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Barbara and I decided to give this movie a second look. That is rare for us. We are glad we did, even though our grades only changed slightly. Moonlight uses one man's heartbreaking struggle to find himself portrayed in three chapters of his life. Three fine young actors play the boy at age 9, 16, and 26. It is a haunting drama of a young boy emerging from a world of fear, isolation and the guidance of a crack addicted mother into adolescence and adulthood. It is a compassionate look at an ugly existence. Although Barb and I changed our grades from **B-/B to B/B+**, and we agreed the film was very well made, neither of us would have voted for it as Best Picture.

THE MOONLIGHT MILE: Brad Silberling has given us a realistic picture of grief in this film that is based on his own real-life experience. Silberling's girlfriend, actress Rebecca Schaeffer, was murdered by a stalker in 1989. *The Moonlight Mile* is based on Silberling's relationship with Schaeffer's parents. The movie introduces us to Ben and JoJo Floss (Dustin Hoffman and Susan Sarandon) at a terrible time in their life. Their daughter, Diana, has been killed. She was sitting at a lunch counter when she got in the way of a man shooting at his wife. They are devastated by their daughter's death, and the presence of Diana's fiancée, Joe Nast (Jake Gyllenhaal), seems to be the only thing that helps Ben and JoJo deal with their grief. The film opens as the three of them are getting ready for the funeral. We see that Jake planned to leave after the funeral, but he winds up staying with the bereaved parents. Jake's subsequent relationship with Ben and JoJo forms the basis of the story. Sarandon and Hoffman are wonderful. They have some scenes that will touch your heart. Gyllenhaal plays his usual shy, boyish character, but he plays it well. Holly Hunter is the D.A. who is prosecuting the shooter. . For some inexplicable reason, the movie is set in 1973, and that bothered me a bit. I wish I knew why Silberling chose that time period. We both thought the ending of the movie was strong and we appreciated the fine acting. However, something I can't quite articulate seems to be missing from the script. **GRADE: B**

MOONRISE KINGDOM: Put a bunch of well-known actors into a quirky comedy and you ought to have a hit. Or maybe not. This movie from the fertile mind of Wes Anderson has some undeniable charm, but often it feels quirky merely for the sake of being quirky. There doesn't seem to be a point. Of course, Anderson does point his finger at Scout camps and at Child Protective Services, but I'm not sure what else we were supposed to “get” from the film. In 1998 Anderson gave us *Rushmore*, a movie that delighted us with its quirkiness. Perhaps we are getting jaded, but we need a bit more than quirky to give high marks to a movie. The performances are very good and make the movie worth watching. The cast includes: Bruce Willis, Ed Norton (in uniform as a scout leader), Frances McDormand, Bob Balaban, Harvey Keitel, Tilda Swinton and Anderson favorites Bill Murray and Jason Schwartzman. All seem at home in the movie, even Keitel as the commander of the boy scouts. The story is simple. Two pre-teens fall in love and run away together, the boy from a scout camp, the girl from her quirky (there's that word again) home. Jared Gilman and Kara Hayward were charming, well directed and, of course, rather quirky. Gary was less than thrilled with the movie and can't go higher than a C. I added a plus to that grade because I liked it a bit more than he did. **GRADE C+/C**

MOONSTRUCK: 1987 (Recorded from HBO) When you have perfect writing (John Patrick Shanley), Norman Jewison as a director, and the music of *La Bohème*, you have a movie for the ages! No wonder it won the Oscar for Shanley, and Jewison considers this movie his favorite of all the films he has directed. After watching Nike Cage redeem himself as an actor in *Pig* we decided to watch Cage romancing Cher in *Moonstruck*. We both remembered the movie fondly and were not disappointed to learn it was better than we remembered. Gary said, “They don't make movies like that anymore,” and more's the pity that they don't! It has everything: family, fidelity, the quirkiness of the human heart, and why it's always wrong to settle. The story is this: No sooner does Italian-American widow

Loretta (Cher) accept a marriage proposal from her dorky boyfriend, Johnny (Danny Aiello), whom she does not love, than she finds herself falling for his younger brother, Ronny (Cage). Cher and Cage are marvelous! Cher won the Oscar for Best Actress for playing Loretta in the film. Loretta's mother is played by Olympia Dukakis, who died last year. She had wonderful lines and delivered them deftly, as she always did. Chicagoans will be interested to see John Mahoney in a terrific scene with Dukakis. Mahoney was an actor with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, and others will recognize him as the father in *Frazier*. We agree with the critic who said that *Moonstruck* is "A movie that makes you want to sing *"Bohème"* and walk in the moonlight and move to Brooklyn." **GRADE A**

An interesting bit of trivia:

The opening title sequence was originally from *La Bohème* opera but was changed to the Dean Martin track "That's Amore" because the preview drew negative test audience reaction. Many shifted uncomfortably on their seats, thinking that they had been lured into an art film.

MORNING GLORY: I found this a mildly amusing film with a few laughs, but it received greater appreciation from Barbara and her visiting sister, Judy. The main thing the movie had going for it was the charming Rachel Mc Adams. The camera and most of the men in the audience love her and when she smiles, she controls the screen. In the male lead is Harrison Ford who I have always liked, but I guess am not ready to see playing grumpy old men at the end of their careers. The movie starts with Mc Adam's playing a TV producer whose progress on her career path looks as bleak as her unsuccessful love life. She stumbles onto a job trying to save a last-place national morning news show. In a supporting role, Diane Keaton plays a former beauty queen who is the morning show "personality." When a legendary, but fading TV anchor (Ford) comes aboard, sparks fly. The action is fast paced and not to worry, the two best-looking people in the film find each other, the failing show will improve and all will end happily as it should in a romantic comedy. **GRADE C+/B**

A MOST VIOLENT YEAR: (2014) "I always choose the most right path." Abel Morales is fond of saying this as he defends his business practices in the cut-throat and notoriously corrupt home heating oil business. His company is less corrupt than his competitors, but following standard business practices may not entirely absolve him from wrongdoing. Set in the winter of 1981, reportedly the most violent year in New York history, the film is dark and gritty as it explores the story of a man trying to do right when all around him people are doing wrong. Jessica Chastain apparently lobbied hard for Oscar Issac to play Abel, and the movie benefits from her campaign. Issac is a dominating presence whenever he is on screen. Chastain plays his wife, the daughter of a Brooklyn gangster from whom Abel bought the oil business. At heart, she is a bit of a gangster herself and that causes problems between husband and wife. Their relationship is a fascinating one. Our local critic compared it to Michael Corleone married to Lady MacBeth. (Indeed, in *A Most Violent Year*, Issac does resemble Pacino in *Godfather II*.) It was a pleasure to see a movie told in a linear fashion. We have become used to storylines that play fast and loose with time, but I think that technique is often employed to disguise a thin story line, especially in those movies that rely on multiple explosions to carry the story. Some critics thought the movie was slow in spots, but our interest never flagged as we watched Abel attempt to expand his business in spite of efforts by his competitors and a zealous D.A. to put him out of business. Issac and Chastain are outstanding, but I think two of the supporting actors deserve mention. Albert Brooks is effective as Abel's attorney, and Elyes Gabel is excellent as one of Abel's drivers whose truck is hijacked. We both think this is one of the best movies of the year and were disappointed that it was totally ignored by the Oscars. J.C. Chandor, who recently directed Robert Redford in *All Is Lost*, wrote and directed what we both think is an A movie. **GRADE A**

A MOST WANTED MAN: (2014) Sadly, this was Phillip Seymour Hoffman's final film, though he may have a brief appearance in a later installment of *The Hunger Games*. One of the most admired actors in Hollywood, he died earlier this year from a drug overdose at age 46. He will be missed. This film, a spy thriller based on a John le Carre novel, has been getting positive reviews from critics. Hoffman brilliantly plays Bachmann, a middle-aged, chain-smoking whiskey-swilling German intelligence agent heading a small counterterrorism operation out of Hamburg. Bachmann stands in sharp contrast to spies of the 007 variety who rarely have a hair out of place. Le Carre favors spies with rumpled suits and unkempt hair who spend more time thinking, planning, and waiting than bedding beautiful women. A half-Chechen, half-Russian, brutally tortured immigrant turns up in Hamburg's Islamic community. Is he an oppressed victim or a Muslim terrorist? Competing German security agencies, as well as a CIA agent from America, want to take him down while Bachmann wants to use him to find bigger fish. The film boasts an impeccable supporting cast that includes Rachel McAdams, Willem Dafoe, Robin Wright, and Nina Hoss. It starts slowly, but builds nicely. It is a challenge to follow all the details, but that is characteristic of spy thrillers based on books by le Carre, e.g. *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy*. Barbara and I liked it and recommend it especially to movie fans who have loved the work of Hoffmann, or who just like the spy thriller genre. **GRADE B**

MOSTLY MARTHA: (German--subtitled) Martha is, according to her boss, the second best chef in the city. She runs a tight ship in her kitchen, believing that timing and logistics are everything. In fact, the restaurant kitchen is her real home. Away from it, she is lonely and unfulfilled. All at once, two things happen to disrupt her perfectly ordered life. First, her sister dies in an automobile accident and she takes over the care of Lina, her eight-year-old niece. There isn't a recipe so complicated that Martha cannot follow it, but there is no recipe for raising a child and Martha flounders in the unfamiliar situation. What even worse, Martha's boss hires Mario, an eccentric Italian sous chef, to assist in the restaurant. Martha feels that Mario has invaded her kitchen just as Lina has invaded her life. The German actress, Martina Gedeck, is marvelous as Martha, making her completely believable and totally endearing. The ending is predictable, but getting there is a delight. I particularly loved the restaurant cooking scenes--I want to eat there! Gary enjoyed the movie, but the cooking scenes didn't do much for him. He gives the film a B, but I think it deserves a **GRADE A-**

MOTHER (Madoe): This film explores the lengths to which a mother will go to protect her child. An elderly mother, fiercely devoted to her somewhat retarded but handsome son, is distraught when he has been accused of killing a young girl. Convinced of his innocence, she determines to find the real killer and bring her son home. This is both a suspenseful thriller and a study in a mother's unswerving love for her only child. The film has received much critical praise especially for the brilliant acting of Kim Hye-je who plays the mother. The imagery used by director Bong Joon-ho is equally brilliant. The haunting ending will stay with me for a long time. But the film is also a bit slow to draw you in. Like many foreign filmmakers, Joon-ho explains little and leaves you to draw your own conclusions. The film is in Korean with excellent English subtitles. I was considerably more entranced with the film than Gary, who can't go higher with his grade than C+. I say B+. **GRADE B+/C+**

MOTHER! (2017) Is it a metaphor for the all-consuming power of fame? Is it a nightmare dreamed by the wife of a celebrity? Is it, as our local critic said, "about everything?" Or is it really about nothing? Darren Aronofsky makes many films that define the words "not for everybody." The main characters are "Mother" (Jennifer Lawrence) and "Him" (Javier Bardem). They are a married couple who live in a remote and very creepy house that "Mother" has restored after it was destroyed in a fire. Aronofsky's camera work, consisting of a lot of close-ups, adds to the creepy effect. "Him" is a poet/writer who has achieved fame but is currently suffering from writer's block. Enter the unexpected visitors, identified only as "man" (Ed Harris) and "woman" (Michelle Pfeiffer). Making themselves at home, they disrupt "Mother's" tranquil life, and she is puzzled that her husband is so welcoming. But that's only the beginning. The movie gets weirder and weirder, and I'm not just talking about the horror elements. It all culminates in an event that reminded me of Shel Silverstein's poem, *Dreadful in Where the Sidewalk Ends*. The poem is charming; the event in the film was beyond dreadful. The film didn't make much sense to Gary and me, but we do agree that it was definitely not for us. **GRADE D**

The National Review advised that "pregnant women, those with nervous constitutions or heart conditions, and anyone who happens to be burdened with good taste" should stay far away from *Mother!*

MOTHER OF GEORGE: The critics loved this artistic movie. We know it's artistic because of the many out-of-focus shots, the slow-motion walking, the obsession with feet, and the fact that when two people are talking one is almost always out of the frame. Here is a synopsis of the story: A Nigerian couple living in Brooklyn is having trouble conceiving a child--a problem that defies cultural expectations and leads the wife, with the prompting of her mother-in-law, to make a shocking decision. *Mother of George* may have won the Palm d'Or at Cannes, but we were not impressed. In fact, we agreed with the Detroit News critic who said, *In the end, "George" becomes almost as irritating as that mother-in-law*. The conventional and ultimately melodramatic story is completely overwhelmed by the artistic cinematography. The movie does present some beautiful portraits, and the faces portrayed are striking. In addition, the fabrics of the costumes worn by the Nigerians are gorgeous. As an art exhibit it is stunning; as a movie it is terrible, in our humble opinion. Gary thinks it is generous to give it a D, but as a bow to the acting and the colorful costumes that is what we decided upon.

GRADE D

MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN:(2019/2021) (Available on Amazon Prime for \$3.99 rental) Based on a 1999 bestselling novel by Jonathan Lethem, this film features a private investigator with Tourette Syndrome. Edward Norton plays the private investigator and also directs the movie. He wears other hats in the making of this neo-noir crime film. He co-wrote the screenplay and was one of several producers. Norton plays Lionel who is determined to solve the murder of Frank Minna -- his mentor and best friend. Set in New York City in 1957, Norton spins a twisting narrative that, admittedly, requires concentration. He has assembled an admirable cast of characters, calling on the considerable skills of Alec Baldwin, Willem Defoe, Bruce Willis, Bobby Cannavale and Cherry Jones, among others. We especially liked the work of British actress Gugu Mbatha-Raw whose name is not as well-known as the others mentioned, but is wonderful in her role. Norton liked the book when he read it in 1999 snapping up the movie rights. Twenty years later the riveting mystery finally made it to the big screen. I don't believe making any movie is easy, but one in which the lead plays a detective with Tourette Syndrome must be especially difficult. Barb and I liked the movie a lot. It is a beautiful tribute to "film noir" and was clearly a film Norton was passionate about. The cinematography was especially memorable. Even though *Motherless Brooklyn* only received 63% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*, we think it deserves far better and we thank Cecil H. from Canada for recommending it. **GRADE A-**

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES: In the spring of 1952, two young men set out on a road trip from Argentina to Peru. Their mode of transportation is a dilapidated motorcycle. This is significant only because one of the men was Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The other was his best friend, Alberto Granado. The film is adapted from diaries written by the two travelers. The trip changed Guevara's life. He writes that when he returned he was no longer the same person. The trip showed him both the beauty of the continent and the poverty and injustice that were the lot of the indigenous people. The trip was the making of a revolutionary. Four years after the motorcycle trip, Che, along with Fidel Castro, traveled to Cuba to mount the only successful socialist revolution. Gael Garcia Bernal (*Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mamá También*) makes a very handsome and appealing Guevara. The scenery is breath taking, especially when they visit Machu Pichu in Peru. Also memorable are the people they meet along the way. One of the best segments is their visit to a leper colony on the banks of the Amazon River in Peru. The film does start rather slowly and we both had some difficulty keeping our eyes open. (Note: When you close your eyes in a sub-titled film, you miss everything!) Eventually the film captured our attention, but we can't grade it higher than a C+. **GRADE C+**

MOULIN ROUGE: The story is grand opera and the music ranges from Learner & Lowe to Madonna. The movie is set in 1900 in Paris at the famous Moulin Rouge. The sets and costumes are phantasmagoric. (I think the director, Baz Luhrman was frightened by a kaleidoscope when young.) The opening fifteen minutes were extremely irritating, with too many quick camera cuts and too much anachronistic music. Can you believe "The hills are alive, etc.?" The first scene in the nightclub is a hymn to MTV-style excess and reminded me of a video game. We were tempted to leave, but the movie settled down a bit after that and we did stay until the end. The story is straight out of LA TRAVIATA, with Nicole Kidman as Satine, the beautiful courtesan who is dying of consumption and is forced to give up the man she loves to save him. It's Camille with a backstage setting. Kidman's singing was very adequate and she did look lovely. Ewan MacGregor's singing was impressive. John Leguizamo is an interesting Toulouse-Lautrec and he and his three thespian friends appear throughout as sort of turn of the century Marx brothers. Jim Broadbent, as the nightclub owner, does a chubby Joel Grey from *Cabaret*. At one point he actually sings, "Like A Virgin." I liked the movie better when I figured out what it was trying to do and can give it a C+. Gary can't go higher than C. Neither one of us got emotionally involved with the characters. The movie is all flash and style with little or no substance. **GRADE: C+/C**

MR. 3000: I like Bernie Mac. He's very funny and also a bit vulnerable and he was the perfect choice to play Stan Ross in this baseball movie. Ross was the best hitter on the Milwaukee Brewers team and he was a fan favorite, but he was an arrogant man who played only for himself. When he got his 3000th hit, he quit baseball and opened several businesses trading on his "Mr. 3000" record. However, nine years later he has not been voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame and that bothers him mightily. When a statistician discovers a

recording error that credited him with three more hits than he actually had, Ross joins the Brewers once again to get those three hits. Because his presence brings in fans, Brewers management is delighted to have him back. However, the coach (Paul Sorvino) is definitely not delighted. Angela Bassett appears as a reporter and former girlfriend; Tom Arnold, Jay Leno, and several others appear as themselves. The movie is amusing and surprisingly low-key. Mac gives a funny and rather touching performance as a man who learns something about teamwork. We went with Grandson Nathan and all three of us agreed that it was a B movie. **GRADE B**

MR. BROOKS: (2007 on Video/DVD) This is the opposite of a feel-good holiday movie. Kevin Costner plays a successful and wealthy businessman who also happens to be a serial killer. He kills, not because he enjoys it, but because he is addicted to it. He even attends AA meetings in order to help keep himself from killing, but the evil voice in his head, played by William Hurt, urges him to kill again. Demi Moore is a detective on his trail and Marg Helgenberger is his wife. However, if you don't like seeing a lot of blood splashed around, you should probably avoid this strange but surprisingly intriguing movie. **THUMBS UP**

MR. & MRS. SMITH: This movie has an intriguing beginning. John and Jane Smith have been married for six or seven years. Their relationship has gone stale, perhaps because they both have secrets. Actually, they have the same secret: Neither knows that the other is a paid assassin. When they are both hired by their employers to eliminate the same target, they finally discover the truth. When each one is ordered to eliminate the other, the action really begins. (I noticed that these professional killers were very bad shots when shooting at each other.) This section of the movie has some good moments between Pitt and Jolie and is enlivened by the humor of Vince Vaughn. But we both felt that the gunplay and explosions in the last third of the movie get increasingly tedious. The final scene is clever, but by then we were a bit tired of the whole thing. Brad Pitt and Angela Jolie are quite good together—on film, anyway. They seem to be having fun with their roles, and, of course, they are very pretty to look at. It's not a bad way to spend a hot summer afternoon, but we can only give it a mild thumbs up. **GRADE B-**

MR. HOLMES: (2015) Sherlock Holmes, a fictional creation of Arthur Conan Doyle, first appeared in print in 1887. His first film appearance was in one and two-reel silent films. It has been estimated that Sherlock Holmes is the most prolific screen character in the history of cinema, so coming up with anything new in a Sherlock Holmes film is a difficult task. With a less talented actor than Ian McKellen playing Holmes, the effort might have failed completely. Mc Kellen was ably assisted by Laura Linney, and a refreshing young new comer (Milo Parker) in only his second film credit. In this 2015 crime, drama, mystery we find a frail 93-year-old Sherlock in a race with dementia trying to recall the case that forced him into early retirement some 35 years earlier. Set in 1947, Sherlock lives in a remote seaside farmhouse tending his bees with only the company of his housekeeper and her young son. Struggling with the eroding powers of his once brilliant mind, Holmes comes to rely on the young lad to help him with the unsolved case. It is a well-acted drama, but I confess that I sometimes was uncomfortable with the image of a once invincible detective falling to the ravages of age. Too close to home I guess. On the lighter side, Holmes spends time trying to rid himself of the characteristics hung on him by Dr. Watson who is the story teller in the published accounts of Holmes. He explains that he never wore the famous deerstalker hat nor smoked the famous pipe. He preferred cigars. Barbara and I agree that this is a film worth seeing, especially for those who enjoy a good mystery or the evolving image of Sherlock Holmes. **GRADE B**

MR. TURNER: (2014) Let me confess that before seeing this film, I knew nothing about William Turner, a 19th Century British Romanticist landscape and seascape painter who often specialized in paintings of storm-tossed seas and ships in peril. His paintings look vaguely familiar and I am sure I have meandered by several of them in my ridiculously long life of meandering through museums. I am reminded of a quotation often attributed to Martin Mull, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture". The quote may extend to "writing about painting is like dancing about architecture." The film focuses on the last two decades of Turner's life and the sharp contrast between the perfection of his paintings and the imperfection of his personal habits as he grunts his way through an inspired outpouring of art. British actor Timothy Spall, who has appeared in over a hundred films and TV productions, brings Turner vividly to life. As a result of this film, I will carry a clear image of William Turner and I hope it will remain as sharp as my image of Mozart after seeing *Amadeus (1984)*, a lifetime top ten favorite of mine. Writer/Director Mike Leigh who, in addition to this film, brought us *Topsy Turvy (1999)*, loves working with Timothy Spall and has used him in many of his films. What is special about this movie for both Barbara and me is its visual beauty. You could freeze-frame it at nearly any point and think you are viewing a beautiful painting that could be featured in a museum. **Mr. Turner** is undeniably slow paced and thin on dialogue, but the 2 ½ hour running time seemed shorter to me than many that clock in at under 2 hours. It is a masterful performance from Timothy Spall and brilliantly directed by Mike Leigh, but it may not appeal to everyone. It has received high praise from critics but has been less warmly received by typical audiences. Barbara and I liked it. **GRADE A-/B+**

(**Barb:** Beautiful, indeed, but it didn't have the emotional impact for me to grade the movie in the "A" range.)

MRS. PALFREY AT THE CLAREMONT: Now here's a film that those of us in the "advanced age" group can identify with. It's a three-hanky movie about an elderly widow (Joan Plowright) who moves into a London residential hotel so that she won't be a burden to her daughter. She also wants to live an independent life. The Claremont doesn't live up to its advertising brochure, but Mrs. Palfrey makes the best of it. One day, stumbling on the street, she meets Ludovic (Rupert Friend), a young writer and they develop an "unlikely friendship." The scenes between Plowright and Friend are lovely. Every elderly widow should be lucky enough to find a young friend like Ludovic. When Ludovic has dinner with his new friend at the Claremont, he looks around the room at the handful of elderly characters and says to her, "We've been trapped in a Terence Rattigan Play. (From Stephen Holden, NYTimes critic: *The Rattigan play to which Ludovic refers is "Separate Tables," and the scenes set in the Claremont dining room . . . are ur-Rattigan in their air of embattled gentility. The oddly old-fashioned characters, who might have been extracted from a game of Clue, epitomize a particular breed of British eccentric.*) BoxOffice Magazine called this movie a "tedious heart-tugger." However, the on-line Move Chicks review calls it "an absolute delight." We're with them. **GRADE B+**

MRS. HENDERSON PRESENTS: I am the designated hitter on this review, although Barbara agrees with the grade I've given it. As I expected, Judi Dench and Bob Hoskins are splendid together and make the film even more enjoyable than I expected. The story takes place mostly in London's Windmill Theatre, famous for tasteful nude tableaux and for being the only theatre to remain open during the

Nazi bombing of London in the 1940's. The British have the same nostalgic fondness for the memory of the Windmill as older Americans do for the Ziegfeld Follies, perhaps more. The film was inspired by a true story, though I'm sure it takes the usual liberties with history. It is funny and at times extremely moving. Director Stephen Frears has given us excellent films in the past such as *The Grifters*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, and *Dirty Pretty Things*, and adds to his diversity with *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. Unless you are offended by nudity (both male and female) even when it is tastefully done, I think you will find the time (1 hour and 43 minutes) well spent. (Barb's comments: I got teary several times during the film. I also want to mention Kelly Reilly, because we both thought she was particularly good. Reilly was Caroline Bingley in the recent *Pride & Prejudice*, although she looks quite different in this movie. Here, her hair is lighter and her clothes are fewer.) **GRADE B+**

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING: (2012/2013) This is generally regarded as one of Shakespeare's best comedies and, of course, Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. So why were Barbara and I underwhelmed? To state the obvious, Shakespeare is not for everybody. Barbara has never tried to hide her often unpleasant reactions to the Bard's plays, especially the comedies. My interest in Shakespeare was sparked by a High School teacher and through the many productions we have seen through the years, I must confess that I probably "appreciated" them more than "enjoyed" them, especially the comedies. **Much Ado...** tells the tale of two pairs of lovers with different takes on romance. Claudio and Hero fall quickly and deeply in love, as often happens in Shakespeare's comedies, and Benedick and Beatrice who detest one another in the beginning, but ultimately fall in love. Joss Whedon directed and wrote the screenplay for this film and shot it in just 12 days in his Santa Monica house using a bunch of his actor pals in the key roles. The idea was to transplant Shakespeare's yarn of love and deception from a 15th century Sicilian port town to a 21st century California beach town. Whedon did some judicious cutting to bring us an abridged version while using most of Shakespeare's original dialogue. I am not a purist, so the judicious cutting sounded good to me. Much of Shakespeare's witty repartee, especially between Beatrice and Benedick, worked well, but the rigid 15th century morality when a woman's virginity was prized above her humanity seemed out of place in 21st century California. Perhaps I was seduced by the excellent trailer, so my expectations left me wanting more. Most critics generally had high praise for the film, but Barbara and I were both sadly disappointed. **GRADE C/C+**

MUD: (2012) *Mud* is an intriguing adventure about two young boys and a charming outlaw on the run. The setting is so real you can feel the humidity rising out of the Mississippi mud. Perhaps because it was shot on the Mississippi, the film reminded me of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. For Barbara it was more reminiscent of *Stand by Me*, perhaps because of the coming of age elements. This is not to say the story is not a brilliant original. It is. And even though it is relatively long at 2hr and 10 minutes, the story swept us up and we completely lost track of time. Casting for the movie was flawless. Matthew McConaughey with leathery suntan, body tattoos, and chipped front teeth plays Mud, a charismatic drifter on the run for killing a man who clearly "needed killin'." The movie really belongs to Ellis (Tye Sheridan) and Neckbone (Jacob Lofland) names of two lads I have never heard of before, but expect to in the future. They were both believable, but Sheridan just blew me away with his extraordinary performance. Important supporting roles went to Sam Shepard, Reese Witherspoon, Sarah Paulson, and Ray McKinnon. I won't tell any more of the story in hopes it will rivet you as it did us. The film has received rave reviews from most critics and we concur. **GRADE A**

MUD: 2012/2020 (Amazon rental) If you have never seen this eight-year-old movie I highly recommend it. Barbara and I saw it on a big screen when it was first released and we loved it. We loved it enough to pay the \$1.99 rental fee on Amazon Prime to see it again while we wait for the Covid-19 pandemic to lighten its ugly grip. The movie held up well for us. Following is my 2012 review: (See review above)

MUDBOUND: (2017) Netflix streams this powerful historical epic that captures the racism of the early 1940's. Set in the muddy swamps in the farmlands of the Mississippi Delta with flashes of WWII we follow two families, one white and one black. Both send a young family member off to fight in the war. The two families live side by side but are utterly separated by experiences dictated by the social hierarchy that shapes their lives. The acting is strong and the story keeps you involved. Sadly, this is the kind of film that will be viewed mostly by people who will have their already enlightened views reinforced. It will be mostly avoided by those whose views would be challenged by viewing the harsh history of racial inequality that still affects us today. **GRADE A**

MULHOLLOAND DRIVE: When we look at clouds in the sky, we try to find familiar shapes. When we look at an abstract painting, we try to find meaning. So it is with a film by David Lynch. Our linear minds try to make sense of it. Roger Ebert said in his review, "If you require logic, see something else." That's good advice. Like Hollywood itself, this film about Los Angeles and the movie industry is a mixture of fantasy, dreams, and reality, and it's almost impossible to tell which is which. Gary theorized that this film could be the ramblings of a demented woman. I believe it shows us the fantasies of a young girl who came to L.A. with ambitious dreams--She was determined to be a movie star, or at least a great actress. Real life intruded on her dreams and when her lover betrayed her, it tipped her over the edge. We are asked to join the disappointed actress in her abyss. It is quite a journey. Naomi Watts is very impressive, and Laura Elena Harring, who is an Ava Gardner look-alike, is lovely. *Mulholland Drive* is beautifully photographed and all the acting is top notch. We liked this movie, but then, we also liked Lynch's very strange 1985 film, *Blue Velvet*. If you are uncomfortable with ambiguity, we suggest you avoid this one. Gary gives the movie a B and I vote for B+. **GRADE B/B+**

THE MULE: (2018) Clint Eastwood produced, directed, and starred in this American crime drama. The film is based on the true story of Leo Sharp, a World War II veteran in his 80s who became a drug dealer and courier for the Sinaloa Cartel, an international drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime syndicate. I wasn't expecting anything more than a B movie, so my expectations didn't get in the way of what many critics view as a flawed film. Barbara and I found it enjoyable. Eastwood has won four Academy Awards, the last of which was for directing *Million Dollar Baby* in 2005. This is his first starring role in a film he directed since 2008's *Gran Torino*. Along with Eastwood *The Mule* features Bradley Cooper, Laurence Fishburne, Michael Peña, Dianne Wiest, Andy Garcia and Alison Eastwood who is Clint's real daughter playing his daughter in this film. But make no mistake, this is Eastwood's film. Even at age 88 he can still carry a film on his shoulders and be an entertaining presence. Eastwood plays Earl Stone, a man in his 80s who is broke, alone, and facing foreclosure of his business when he is offered a job that requires him simply to drive. The job turns out to be lucrative, but even as his money problems disappear, mistakes from his past start to weigh heavily on him. There are enough feel good scenes and enough humor you keep you smiling throughout the movie. **GRADE B**

MUMFORD: This one is worth renting. We both enjoyed *Mumford*, which was written and directed by Lawrence Kasden of *Big Chill* fame. Loren Dean is Dr. Mumford, the new psychologist in the town of Mumford. No, that's not a misprint. Mumford, the doctor, rapidly becomes the most popular therapist in Mumford, the town. Among his patients are Sofie (Hope Davis), a young woman suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome, Skip (Jason Lee), a young billionaire who can't find a woman who likes him for himself, Althea (Mary McDonnell), who tries to cure her unhappiness with compulsive shopping, and Henry (Pruitt Taylor Vince), whose self-image is so low that he doesn't even appear in his own fantasies.. Mumford, the doctor, simply listens to his patients. What's more, he seems to care about them, and that is a powerful combination. We liked everyone in this movie, and it was particularly nice to see Hope Davis. She is special. Zoey Deschanel, Alfre Woodard and Ted Danson also appear. (We saw the movie first on video and then watched it again on Cable 8 years later. We liked it just as much the second time.) **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

MUNICH: Revenge can be sweet and may be absolutely essential to those harmed by some intentional act of violence. But revenge can also be extraordinarily expensive by whatever measure you wish to apply. Steven Spielberg is wading in moral quicksand with this film. Roger Ebert puts it in perspective when he writes, *Spielberg's film has been called an attack on the Palestinians and he has been rebuked as "no friend of Israel." By not taking sides, he has taken both sides.* Those of you who are old enough, remember with horror the news that came out of the 1972 Munich Olympics. Eleven Israeli athletes were kidnapped by a terrorist group called "Black September." The Israeli athletes were all killed by the terrorists during a failed rescue attempt by German police. The film deals with the Israeli mission to kill all the planners of the tragic Munich events. Eric Bana is very good as Avner, a man who begins his murderous task with patriotic fervor but is ultimately tortured by what he has done. *Munich* is not intended to be a happy film nor a hopeful one. It is efficient filmmaking and the excellent acting makes it an absorbing experience. But one is left with the rather depressing thought that a solution to the centuries old hatred between Palestinians and Jews may never be resolved. **GRADE B**

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS: (2017) British writer Dame Agatha Christie first published the murder mystery titled *Murder on the Orient Express* in 1934. Guinness World Records lists Christie as the best-selling novelist of all time. The book was first made into a movie in 1974 and was nominated in several categories for Academy Awards. Both films used powerhouse casts of well-known actors, but the remake starring in and directed by Kenneth Branagh did not do well with critics and is not likely to do well with Academy members. This is an old-fashioned movie based on old fashioned storytelling and is a bit boring at times. It is a *whodunnit* that left Barbara and me wondering *whydoit?* It is hard to enjoy movies that are so convoluted that the mystery cannot be solved except by the clever detective who explains everything in the last long fifteen minutes. Talented actors like Penélope Cruz, Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Derek Jacobi, and Josh Gad play a series of what are essentially cameos. It is a tale of thirteen strangers stranded on a train, where everyone is a suspect and it falls to the famous detective Hercule Poirot (Branagh) to solve the complex puzzle. I was really hoping to like this movie more, but alas it was not to be. **GRADE C**

MURDERBALL: You can't judge a book by its cover and you certainly can't judge this documentary film from the title. Murderball is a sport played by quadriplegic athletes in armored wheelchairs. It had its beginnings in the 1970's in Canada, but the name of the sport changed to "Wheelchair Rugby" and "Quad Rugby" in order to better attract corporate sponsors. A quadriplegic has some impairment in all four limbs. The makers and participants in this film are not looking for pity. In fact they consciously steer away from the tears and goopy inspirational uplift associated with disability movies. Watching these athletes in competitive World Championship matches is a little like watching a Mad Max movie. And by the film's end, you realize that your attitude toward physical impairments may have undergone a subtle change. One star of the film is Mark Zupan. He is tough, terse, genuine, and ribald. The camera loves him and if you see the film, you will not soon forget him. This sounds like another sports film, but it is so much more than that. The film uses an unusual sport as a way to glimpse the lives of really interesting people. I read several critics who view this as one of the best films of the year. Barbara and I think it is an outstanding documentary but not quite in the superlative range. Barbara says B. I think maybe it is worth a B+. **GRADE B+/B**

MUSIC AND LYRICS: If you appreciate Hugh Grant's charm and you think Drew Barrymore is appealing, then you will enjoy this film. If you don't care for the actors, then you'll want to skip this one. The plot is standard romantic comedy: 1. boy and girl meet cute; 2. boy and girl fall for each other; 3. some problem separates them; 4. boy and girl get back together. The problem with this film is #3. I thought the separating issue was poorly written and not credible. #1, #2, and #4 were fine. Both Gary and I are Hugh Grant fans. There is no one who can throw away a funny line as effectively as he can. Here he plays Alex Fletcher, a 80s music star, relegated to performing at amusement parks. The opening credits play over an 80s music video that is hilarious. When the group, "POP" was high on the charts, Alex wrote the music and his friend wrote the lyrics. Since the group broke up, he hasn't been able to write a good song on his own. His agent, Brad Garrett, gets him the opportunity to write a song for a Brittany Spears type phenomenon, but he needs a lyricist. Enter Drew Barrymore, the plant lady. And, as Elaine would say, Yada, Yada, Yada. Haley Bennett is perfect as the Brittany Spears performer, and Kristin Johnson (TV's *3rd Rock From The Sun*) appears as Barrymore's older sister and an avid Alex Fletcher fan. I agree with the critics who called the movie "bland" and "unoriginal." But I also agree that it is charming. If you do go, be sure to stay for the closing credits. Some of the funniest lines appear over the 80s video of the bands biggest hit, *Pop Goes My Heart*. **GRADE B-**

MUST LOVE DOGS: This romantic comedy will never rank up there with the great ones, but it's a pleasant way to spend a hot summer afternoon. It does have some clever dialogue and some very good supporting characters—Stockard Channing, Elizabeth Perkins, Dermot Mulrooney and Christopher Plummer. Their scenes are some of the best in the movie. But most of all, it has two of our favorites, Diane Lane and John Cusak. Of course you know from the very beginning that they are made for each other and it's only a matter of time before they realize it. Lane is a recently divorced woman whose family is urging her to get back into the dating game. Her sister (Perkins) puts her profile up on a dating website and we see her go out on the requisite bad dates. There's nothing very new here—the plot takes the predictable turns—but until the rather lame ending, we enjoyed ourselves. This one isn't going to make our "Best Movies of all Time" list, but it won't make our "Worst" list either. It gets a B from us. **GRADE B**

THE MUSTANG: (2019) A prison inmate with anger issues meets a horse with anger issues of its own. Robert Redford executive produced this story of Roland Coleman, a violent convict who undergoes a rehabilitation program that teaches him to tame wild horses. The movie won a prize at Redford's Sundance Film Festival in 2015, and has won awards at many other film festivals. Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts stars as Coleman, and Bruce Dern appears as the head of the horse training program. The movie opens with wild mustangs being herded up by a helicopter chasing them into a pen. The horses and the inmates are both penned up and we watch how, through the training process, they rehabilitate one another. At first, Coleman is almost inarticulate as he tells a prison therapist (Connie Britton), "I'm not good with people." She assigns him to outside work and he becomes interested in an angry wild mustang that no one else wants to train, or "gentle." "Gentling" refers to working with a wild horse until it becomes responsive to a trainer's commands, meaning that it no longer wants to kick you in the face. There are wild horse rehabilitation programs in Arizona, Colorado, California, Kansas and Wyoming. It's touching to watch Coleman open up to his daughter as he and the horse begin to gentle each other. Gary and I both liked the movie and the fact that inmates who work with this program rarely commit crimes upon release.

GRADE B

MY AFTERNOONS WITH MARGUERITTE: This is a sweetly sentimental movie and that was a problem for some of the critics. Those of you who are regular readers know that we do not have a problem with sentimental movies when they are well acted and well-conceived. This movie is both. Gérard Depardieu is Germain, a handyman who is overweight and, his friends are convinced, not too bright. We learn through flashbacks that there is good reason for his personality, and that his apparent simple mindedness is rather a complete lack of confidence. One day when having lunch in the park, he meets Margueritte, a charming and well-read 95-year-old woman who likes pigeons as much as he does. As their friendship develops, Margueritte transfers some of her love of books to Germain, reading to him from Camus and other famous French writers. There should probably be a poster of this movie next to the word "heart-warming" in the dictionary. It certainly warmed our hearts. Margueritte is played by Gisele Casadesus who is now 97 years old. She made her first film in 1934 as a member of Comedie Francaise. The only quarrel we had with the film was that Germain's girlfriend was a bit too young and too pretty for the 62-year-old Depardieu. Gary liked the film even better than I and he grades it slightly higher. **GRADE A-/B+**

MY ARCHITECT: (2003) "*The movie begins as the story of a son searching for his father, and ends as the story of the father searching for himself.*" That's the way by Roger Ebert sums up this moving and thought-provoking documentary. Louis Kahn is a famous architect, not because of the number of buildings he designed, but because of the quality of the buildings. Kahn had lofty ideas about architecture, but didn't open his own office until he was almost 50. He died at 73, bankrupt and alone. It was only in the last 10 years of his life that he achieved the stature for which he is remembered. For most of his working life he was supported by his wife—a wife he stayed with, despite fathering two children by two other women. The story is told by Nathaniel Kahn, the architect's son by one of those "other" women. Twenty years after Kahn's death, Nathaniel sets out on a journey of discovery to see his father's buildings and to learn something about the man he knew only slightly. He uses film footage of his father, interviews with people who knew him—including his mother—and views of Kahn's famous buildings. If you join him on his journey, you will discover an excellent film. (We saw it on DVD)

THUMBS UP

MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING: Gary grew up in a Greek neighborhood and he remembers that they really knew how to throw a party. Apparently, they also give vigorously enthusiastic weddings, as evidenced by this film. Nia Vardalos was an actress at Chicago's Second City when she developed this material for a one-woman play, which she performed off-Broadway. One night Rita Wilson, who is a Greek-American, was in the audience and she loved the material. Wilson persuaded her husband, Tom Hanks, to option the piece for a movie, and that's how *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* came about. Vardalos grew up in Winnipeg Manitoba, where even though the Greek population was very small, her father still insisted she marry a good Greek boy. She didn't. And therein lies the story. John Corbett (from TV's *Northern Exposure*) is Ian Miller, the non-Greek with whom Toula (Vardalos) fall in love. The setting is Chicago, where there is a lively Greek population. We are introduced to Toula's father (Michael Constantine) who thinks *Windex* solves every problem, and who can trace any word, even kimono, back to its Greek roots. Lanie Kazan is especially good as Toula's mother. Roger Ebert said: "Everyone in this movie looks like they could be a real person." We, too, enjoyed the joyous & believable ambiance of this movie and we think it deserves **GRADE: B**

MY DOG SKIP: We went to see this movie because Roger Ebert raved about it. Of course, as a young boy, Ebert had a dog that was his best friend, while neither Gary nor are dog lovers. But it didn't matter: we developed great fondness for this sweet film. Made for children, it has great appeal for adults as well. Frankie Muniz (From TV's *Malcolm In The Middle*) is perfect in the part of Willie, a lonely only child who gets a puppy for his ninth birthday. Diane Lane is his mother and Kevin Bacon plays Willie's father, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War who lost a leg and "a piece of his heart". in that conflict. Luke Wilson is Willie's next door neighbor who leaves for the war (WWII) a sports hero and returns a coward. He says to Willie that he did run--that he was afraid. "It's not the dying that scares you; it's the killing," he explains. There are many nice moments in the film, which beautifully handles such themes and love, friendship, courage, and loyalty. It is set in 1942 and nicely recreates Yazoo, a small town on the Mississippi Delta. Even if you never had a dog, we think you will enjoy this film. **GRADE: B**

MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS: (A Masterpiece Theatre presentation that we saw video.) An eccentric family leaves the rain of England for the sunshine of Corfu, and who can blame them. Corfu looks like a paradise. The beautifully filmed story is told by the youngest son, Jerry, who is an unconventional child in an unconventional family. The Masterpiece Theatre presentation is based on the autobiography of Gerald Durrell, a noted zoologist, naturalist and conservationist. The family spends a delightful few months in the sunshine, until WWII approaches and they must return to England. We are treated to the antics and adventures of the family, various local characters and some bohemian visitors. Gary describes it as ***You Can't Take It With You*** in Greece. **THUMBS UP**

MY HEROES WERE COWBOYS 2021 (Netflix) This documentary is very short. It's only 22 minutes. On Rotten Tomatoes there is no critic's score, but audiences gave it a 89%, so we decided to take a look. The story of Robin Wiltshire's painful childhood in Australia, his coming to America and becoming a horse trainer for movies, is a love poem to horses and to cowboys. Especially since he came to Hollywood after ***Star Wars*** came out and everyone said that Westerns were over. But he persevered. After meeting the Marlborough

Man, he trained a horse to rear up with a rider on its back, and his horses became stars in Marlborough commercials. Movies followed, because Westerns are never really over. This Chris Pine produced documentary is filmed on Wiltshire's ranch with the gorgeous Wyoming wilderness as a backdrop. If you have watched the series *Heartland*, you will know how magical the relationship between a human and a horse can be, and will love the documentary short. In fact, if you have any affection for horses at all, you will love it! We are currently watching *Yellowstone*, and the images of horses running free is familiar and beautiful. That's what you'll get plenty of if you watch this documentary. **GRADE B**

MY NAME IS PAULI MURRAY: 2021 (Available on Prime Video.) Before this film, Barbara and I knew nothing about Pauli Murray. This inspiring film does what all good documentaries do: it made us want to learn more about this largely unsung -- yet hugely important woman. In a life spanning 74 years, Pauli Murray was a lawyer, a poet, an activist, a teacher, an Episcopalian priest, and the first Black woman to be ordained. Pauli Murray was well ahead of her time. Fifteen years before Rosa Parks refused to surrender her bus seat, and a full decade before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned separate-but-equal legislation, Pauli Murray was already knee-deep fighting for social justice. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Thurgood Marshall used Murray's ideas and research in many of their famous court cases. In a relatively swift 91 minutes, we got to know this American icon who championed race and gender equity. We're told early on in "*My Name is Pauli Murray*," "You can't teach American history without talking about Pauli Murray." We have to agree. **GRADE A**

MY OCTOPUS TEACHER: (2020) Barbara and I streamed this fascinating film on Netflix. It is not your typical nature documentary. You will, no doubt, learn a great deal about one of nature's most unusual creatures, but the film is also an intimate diary of a marine biologist who emerges from a dark period in his life when he lost his passion for filmmaking. Craig Foster, wildlife filmmaker gives us a gripping tale of a friendship that grew between a human and a mollusk. Retreating from life's problems, he returned to a favorite location from his youth: the stormy South African shore where he spent his boyhood summers decades earlier. Swimming daily in the extremely cold water (around 48 degrees F.) without wetsuit or scuba gear he had to resurface regularly to take a fresh breath. While exploring the kelp forest on the ocean floor, he meets a resourceful and friendly young octopus. He spends nearly a year visiting her daily, and the relationship affects him deeply. He eventually wins the animal's trust and they develop a never before seen bond between human and an octopus. We found the film informative and touching. **GRADE B+**

MY OLD LADY: (2014) Although reviews for this comedy/drama have been mixed, nearly everyone agrees it is perfectly cast. Kevin Kline, Maggie Smith, and Kristin Scott Thomas are terrific playing the three leads and despite any other weaknesses make the film worth seeing. Israel Horovitz is a 75 year-old playwright who has written over 70 stage productions. He adapted one of those stage plays, also titled *My Old Lady*, for the screen and decided he would use it to make his feature film debut as director. Barbara and I think he did a good job, but in the hands of a more experienced director the film might have been even better. The plot is promising. A failed New York writer (Kevin Kline) with three ex-wives and a drinking problem, but no money, arrives in Paris to claim a large apartment in a prime location he inherited from his father. But when he arrives hoping to make a quick sale, he finds a headstrong Englishwoman (Maggie Smith) living in the apartment with her daughter (Kristin Scott Thomas). He finds himself entangled in a complex French contract known as a "viager." Part of the fun of the film is learning the conditions of the "viager" so I won't spoil that for you. The story moves, sometimes unevenly, from comedy, to drama, to pathos, to romance, but we found it entertaining throughout. If you chose to see this one, you will want to stay through the closing credits for the last scene comes at the end of the credits. **GRADE B**

MY ONE AND ONLY: This is one of those rare movies that finishes better than it begins. It takes a while to get into the story of a mother who leaves her cheating husband, bundles her two boys in a new baby-blue '53 Cadillac Coupe de Ville convertible, and takes off on a cross-country search for a new husband. The story is loosely based on the childhood recollections of actor George Hamilton and centers on his relationship with his mother. George Hamilton was the eldest son of band leader George "Spike" Hamilton and his first wife, Ann Stevens, but in the film the family name is Deveraux. Renee Zellweger is appropriately spunky as Anne Deveraux, and in the period clothes, makeup and hairstyle, she looks the picture of a 1950's glamour girl. (*I loved the 50's look—even saw a lamp that I had in my first house.*) Zellweger said in a recent interview that the story was fairly faithful to Hamilton's memories except that several suitors were added to enhance the story. Chris Noth and Steven Weber are two of Anne old boyfriends who fail to qualify as a new husband. Seventeen-year-old Logan Lerman impressed us as George Deveraux, and we expect to see more of him. We also liked Kevin Bacon playing George's father, a moderately popular band leader who was famous for one hit song: *My One And Only*. Robin Weigert, who was so memorable as Calamity Jane in TV's *Deadwood*, is good here as Anne's plain-Jane sister. Yahoo viewers have given this film an average grade of A-, and while we can't go that high, we enjoyed it enough to give it a B+. **GRADE B+**

MY SISTER'S KEEPER: From beginning to end, this film is a weeper. Based on Jodi Picoult's best-seller, it tells the story of a family coping with their teenage daughter's leukemia. The mother (Cameron Diaz) is so obsessed with doing everything possible to keep her daughter, Kate (Sofia Vassilieva), alive, that she and her husband (Jason Patrick) went so far as to conceive another child genetically engineered to be a donor for her sister. When Kate needs a kidney transplant, Anna (Abigail Breslin), now 11, visits an attorney (Alec Baldwin) to sue for medical emancipation: she wants to make her own medical decisions. She does not want to be forced to donate a kidney. Patrick and Diaz create a believable couple—a couple who are in crisis along with their dying daughter. I did have some trouble believing that a mother would consider forcing one child to donate a kidney to the other with no thought to the consequences. I just had to accept that she was so focused on keeping Kate alive that she didn't really think about the effect on Anna, or on anyone else in the family. Breslin, so adorable in *Little Miss Sunshine*, is turning into an accomplished actor. We were also impressed with Vassilieva. Director Nick Cassavetes seems to have a fondness for tear-jerkers. One critic commented that *My Sister's Keeper* requires more Kleenex than his previous weeper-hit, *The Notebook*. He's a creative filmmaker and tries his best to bring some depth to the film, but the story is anything but subtle and fights him at every turn. I must admit, though, that I'm not immune to manipulation. I went into my purse for Kleenex several times. But from the opening to the closing credits, I felt manipulated and so did Gary. Although the film is beautifully photographed and acted, we can't grade it higher than a B-. If you are in need of a good cry, or if you are a fan of the novel, you'll probably want to see *My Sister's Keeper*—sorry, that's *Keeper*. **GRADE B-**

MY WEEK WITH MARILYN: In the summer of 1956, 30 year-old Marilyn Monroe traveled with her newest husband, playwright Arthur Miller, to Great Brittan for the filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl*. It was to star and be directed by Lawrence Olivier. Marilyn was

the female lead, of course, and it was her first time working with Olivier. That same summer, twenty-three year-old Colin Clark worked as a young assistant in his first job on a movie set. He met Marilyn, kept a diary, and years later wrote the book that thankfully resulted in this delightful film. It is a "tour de force" for Michelle Williams who gives a stunning portrayal of the insecurity and incandescence of the gorgeous Marilyn. Both Barbara and I think Williams deserves, at the least, an Oscar nomination. Lawrence Olivier (Larry) is played with humor and justifiable frustration by Kenneth Branagh. Marilyn was famous for her difficulty and long delays on movie sets, but producers and directors were willing to live with it because the camera loved her and audiences adored her. As comes out in the film, "Olivier was a serious actor who wanted to be a movie star; Monroe was a movie star who wanted to be a serious actress." British actor Eddie Redmayne plays the young Colin Clark with wonderful open-faced innocence. The supporting cast included Judi Dench, and Julia Ormond. We think this is a film worth seeing. **GRADE B+**

MYSTERIOUS SKIN: Gregg Araki made this disturbing film in 2004. It stars Joseph Gordon Levitt as a young boy who was sexually abused by his little league baseball coach. Neil (Levitt) was the best ball player on the team and the coach's favorite. The worst player on the team was a boy named Brian. Brian had an amnesia blackout when he was eight years old, and woke with a bloody nose, something that has reoccurred more than once. Brian comes to believe that he was abducted by aliens, and forms a tenuous friendship with a young woman who believes she has been an abductee many times over. But the truth is both more real and far more sinister. Neil has grown up to become a hustler and Brian has become asexual. When the two finally meet again, Brian learns the terrible truth of what happened to him. No surprise that this movie launched Levitt's career. He is incredibly good. Akari has written and directed a difficult, almost pornographic movie, but manages to make both young men sympathetic and vulnerable. The feeling you get watching it, although uncomfortable, is never voyeuristic, and you realize that the scars that are left by sexual abuse never heal. This will not be an easy movie to forget. **GRADE B**

MYSTIC RIVER: This is a beautifully crafted film and a faithful adaptation of Dennis Lehane's novel. It is a murder mystery, but so much more than that. It is also a character study of three men who were damaged by an incident that happened when they were young. Dave, Sean, and Jimmy were playing hockey in the street when a man purporting to be a detective forced Dave into his car. Dave was kept prisoner and escaped four days later, but the horror of those four days haunted him forever. Sean & Jimmy didn't get in the car, but they were deeply affected by the incident. The movie begins with Dave's kidnapping but quickly moves to 25 years later. Sean (Kevin Bacon) is a police detective, Jimmy (Sean Penn), who spent two years in prison, now runs a corner grocery store, and Dave (Tim Robbins) is married with a young son. The three have grown apart, but the violent murder of Jimmy's daughter brings them together. The acting is uniformly powerful but I was particularly impressed with Sean Penn. His performance is stunning and he deserves, at the very least, an Oscar nomination. Robbins is also impressive in a role that is dramatically different from others he has played. Marcia Gay Harden gives a memorable performance as Dave's wife and the always-wonderful Laura Linney is Jimmy's wife. Clint Eastwood's direction is masterful--there are no false notes. And, speaking of notes, he also composed the score! What a guy! Both Gary and I read the Lehane novel recently, so we could not get caught up in the mystery, but we could appreciate the acting, the directing and the look of the film. I expect *Mystic River* will garner multiple Oscar nominations. **GRADE: A**