

Movie Titles that begin with “S”

7 Prisoners * 16 Blocks * 61 * ‘71 * Safe House * Safety Not Guaranteed * Saint Omer * Saint Ralph * The Salesman * Salmon Fishing in the Yemen * Salt * Salt of the Earth * The Sapphires * Sarah's Key * Savages * The Savages * Save The Last Dance * Saving Grace * Saving Mr. Banks * Saving Private Ryan * The School of Rock * Schultze Gets The Blues * Scoop * The Score * The Sea Inside * Sea of Shadows * Seabiscuit * The Seagull * Searching * The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel * Secondhand Lions * Secret in Their Eyes (Argentina) * Secret in Their Eyes (USA) * The Secret Life of Bees * The Secret Life of Walter Mitty * The Secret Lives of Dentists * The Secret of Roan Innish * Secretariat * Seeking A Friend For The End Of The World * Selma * The Sense of An Ending * Sense and Sensibility * The Sentinel * Separate Lies * A Separation * Seraphim Falls * Serendipity * A Serious Man * The Sessions * Seven Days In Utopia * The Seven Five * Seven Pounds * Seven Psychopaths * Sex And The City: The Movie * Sex And The City 2 * Sexy Beast * Shadow Dancer * Shaft * Shallow Hal * The Shallows * Shame * Shanghai Knights * Shanghai Noon * The Shape of Things * The Shape of Water * Shattered Glass * She Said * Sherlock Holmes * Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows * She's Out Of My League * The Shining * The Shipping News * Shithouse * Sholem Aleichem, Laughing In The Darkness * Shirley * Shopgirl * Shoplifters * The Six Triple Eight * The Short History of the Long Road * Short Term 12 * Shrek * Shrek 2 * Shutter Island * Sicario * Sicko * Side Effects * Sidewalks of New York * Sideways * Sidney * Signs * Silver City * Silver Linings Playbook * Simone * A Simple Favor * Sin City * Sin Nombre * Sing * Sing Sing * Sing Street * Sing Your Song * A Single Man * Sr. * The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants * The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2 * Sisters * The Sisters Brothers * Sitting in Bars with Cake * The Sixth * The Skeleton Twins * Sky * Skyfall * Slaughterhouse Five * Sleepless In Seattle * Sleepwalk With Me * Slow West(2015) & Slow West(2022) * Slumdog Millionaire * Small Time Crooks * Smart People * Smashed * Snatch * Snitch * Snow Angels * Snowden * Snowpiercer * Son of the South * The Social Network * Solitary Man * The Soloist * Some Kind of Heaven * Some Like It Hot * Something New * Somethings Gotta Give * Sometimes Always Never * Somewhere * Somewhere In Queens * Son of Rambow * Son of the South * The Song of Lunch * Sophie Scholl: The Final Days * Sorry To Bother You * Sound of Metal * Source Code * Southpaw * Southside With You * The Souvenir * Spanglish 2004&2020 * Spartan * The Spectacular Now(2013) The Spectacular Now(2020) * Spectre * Spellbound * Spencer * Spider-Man * Spider-Man 2 * Splice * Spotlight * Spy * The Spy Behind Home Plate * Spy Game * Spy Kids * Spy Kids 2: Island of Lost Dreams * The Squid and The Whale 2021/2005 * St. Vincent * Stage Beauty * Stan & Ollie * Stand Up Guys * The Stanford Prison Experiment * A Star Is Born * Star Trek * Star Trek Into Darkness * Star Wars: The Force Awakens * Starbuck * Stardust * Starlet * Starsky & Hutch * Starting Out In The Evening * State and Maine * State of Play * The Station Agent (2003 & 2020) * Step Brothers * The Stepford Wives * Steve Jobs * Still Alice * Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie * Still Mine * The Sting * Stoker * Stories We Tell * Straight Outta Compton * Stranger Than Fiction * Strangers With Candy * Stronger * Stuck On You * The Substance * Suburra * Suffragette * Sugar * Sugarcane * Sully * Summer 1993 * A Summer in Genoa * Summer of Soul * Super 8 * Superbad * Supernova * The Sum of All Fears * Sunshine Cleaning * Swan Lake * S.W.A.T. * Sweeney Todd * Sweet and Lowdown * Sweet Country * Sweet Home Alabama * Sweet Land * The Swimmers * Swimming Pool * Swimming Upstream * Swing Vote * The Switch * Sword Of Trust * Swordfish * Synecdoche, New York * Syria

7 PRISONERS: 2021 (Available for streaming on Netflix--set in Brazil and dubbed in English) *7 Prisoners* is a taut thriller that maintains an intensity throughout. It is a dark tale depicting the unholy union of organized crime, systemic corruption and gross classism in Brazil. 18-year-old Mateus hopes to provide a better life for his working-class family in the countryside. Accepting a new job in São Paulo, he is shuttled into the city with a handful of other teenage boys from his town, unaware of what awaits them. The rural Brazilian boys are promised the world in exchange for a 400-odd-kilometre minibus ride to São Paulo and a new job at the end of it: money to send to their struggling families, the chance at a bigger, better life than the one of toil they're being induced to leave behind. What could go wrong? The answer is pretty much everything. Exhausting work in a scrapyard awaits them and their lives are controlled by Luca, a vicious taskmaster and exploiter. The boys are prisoners. At first, Mateus and the crew battle to escape, but Mateus soon realizes that obedience and collusion with Luca may be the only path to freedom. The twist comes midway when Mateus is offered a promotion to join Luca as a walking boss – in essence overseeing his friends. The line between victim and accomplice can be very thin. While one wants to root for Mateus, he has to sell out his own morals for survival, leaving the audience conflicted and troubled. The film is much more concerned with how exploitation works than with any possible solutions. With a runtime of 1h 33m, *7 Prisoners* earned an impressive 98% from 45 reviews on Tomatometer and a 90% Audience Score. Barbara and I liked the film even though we were hoping for a more uplifting ending. Maybe we have been too influenced by Hollywood endings. **GRADE A**

16 BLOCKS: (2006) Bruce Willis is an aging, gimpy, probably alcoholic cop who is ordered to pick up a witness and take him to the court house for a grand jury appearance. It doesn't take long for Willis to learn that Eddie Bunker (Mos Def) is going to give testimony against a group of cops on the take, and that those cops will do anything to keep him from testifying. Willis has only his wits and a normal gun to save Bunker's life. It's only a matter of 16 blocks from the jail to the courthouse, but it's a tough trip—a trip we enjoyed taking with Willis and Def. **THUMBS UP**

61: (2001/2014-1) In 1961 Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's long-standing record for the most home runs in a season. The magic number was 61 and Maris was the New York Yankee who was booed, cursed and abused by the press for his achievement. Billy Crystal directed this highly acclaimed made-for-cable drama which brought the story of a neck and neck battle between Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle to life. Barry Pepper and Thomas Jane play the two leads and the large cast is filled with familiar Hollywood faces. This is a 2001 film that should not be missed by baseball fans and is a wonderful trip down memory lane for anyone born before 1950. Barbara and I loved it. **GRADE B+**

'71: (2015) A British soldier is stranded in a section of Belfast that is an IRA stronghold. He is being hunted by young rebels determined to kill him. He is also being hunted by British undercover officers, but that's not necessarily a good thing. The movie is gripping as we watch Private Hook run for his life. It is also very dark—literally. Filmed at night on Belfast streets, the cinematography makes the city look like a war zone. And it is a war zone—a war zone without clear-cut “good” and “bad” sides. Everyone is guilty of treachery and everyone suffers. This was Northern Ireland in the 1970s. As a young recruit, Hook expected to be sent to Germany, but wound up in Belfast instead. Hook is played by the terrific Jack O'Connell whose lead role in *Unbroken* established his acting credentials. He is

excellent in this role, playing Private Hook with touching vulnerability. The movie received a 98% from the *Rotten Tomatoes*' critics and an 84% from audiences. I do have a warning for those readers who have trouble hearing and/or have trouble with accents. Gary said he only got about 50% of the dialogue, although that didn't affect his appreciation of the urgency of Hook's predicament. I, too, missed some of the dialogue, but the movie is well made, well-acted and well-worth seeking out. **GRADE B**

SAFE HOUSE: (2012) *Safe House* is a fast moving conspiracy driven action-thriller with what I would call a first rate cast and a second rate screenplay. I commented to Barbara as we left the theater, "It is extraordinary the length to which screen writers will go to justify a long and improbable car chase. And the number of bullets fired in a movie seems to grow exponentially with each passing year. Denzel Washington and Ryan Reynolds play the leads and supporting roles go to Brendan Gleeson, Vera Farmiga, Sam Shepard, and Robert Patrick. Ryan Reynolds plays a rookie operative in the CIA (the good guy) and Washington plays a former CIA agent who for the past ten years become a dangerous renegade (ostensibly the bad guy). You would expect excellent performances from these two talented actors and you get it to the extent allowed by the screenplay. After seeing this film, you may have second thoughts the next time someone suggests you seek the shelter in a "safe house." When looking at our final grade on this movie, please be warned that both Barbara and I have grown a little weary of extended car chases, totally unrealistic fights, ear-splitting explosions, and flying bullets which are easily dodged. If you still love movies in this genre, automatically raise our grade. **GRADE C+**

SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED: This is an off-beat little independent film that is quirky, genial, warm-hearted and very, very funny. I think it is one of the smartest and best written screenplays I have seen this year. I understand the movie was a big hit at this year's Sundance Film Festival. A cynical magazine employee and a couple of interns look for the story behind an unusual classified ad. They uncover a mysterious eccentric who believes he has solved the riddle of time travel and is looking for someone to accompany him on his next journey. But, of course "safety is not guaranteed" and you should bring your own weapons. I guess you could say the film is a charming blend of sci-fi and rom-com, but mostly it is an endearingly funny romance between two likable oddballs. The male lead is brilliantly played by Mark Duplass, actor, director, writer, and producer, who has been making huge waves in the film industry this year. The female lead is ably played by Aubrey Plaza in her first major big screen role. I will be looking forward to the next film in her promising future. You may have guessed that Barbara and I loved this film and highly recommend that you seek it out. It is pure fun. **Note:** The movie was inspired by a real classified ad that appeared in a 1997 *Backwoods Home Magazine*. The original ad was featured on a Jay Leno show.) **GRADE A**

SAINT OMER: 2022 (Available for streaming on Prime Video rental \$3) The film's title, *Saint Omer*, is the name of a French criminal court as well as the name of the small village where the trial is set. The film is in French with English subtitles. The story is rooted in fact. French writer-director Alice Diop was inspired by the trial of a French-Senegalese graduate student in 2016. The girl had been charged with murder, after she left her 15 month-old daughter asleep on a French beach at night as the tide was rising. Alice Diop is an acclaimed documentary director. *Saint Omer* is Diop's first venture into fiction. She takes a simple court procedural format and ever so slowly builds it into rumination on motherhood and racial expectations. She puts a mother on the stand and the audience in the jury box to find humanity in the inhumane. The film premiered in-competition at the 79th Venice International Film Festival on 7 September 2022, where it won the Silver Lion Grand Jury prize. Critics, liked the film as evidenced by 94% on the Tomatometer from 131 reviews. An audience score of 49% from a small sample of 50 viewings suggests a less than enthusiastic reaction. Barbara had difficulty reading the subtitles and we were both expecting to like *Saint Omer* more than we did. I felt the 2h 2m run time was longer than it needed to be and a little judicious cutting might improve the pace of the story. **GRADE B-**

SAINT RALPH: We went to see this one because Ebert & Roeper both gave it a thumbs up on their review show. Roeper said that of all this year's sports movies, this one got to him the most. I can certainly understand that reaction because this is a wonderful film. To say it is heart-warming doesn't begin to cover it. Ralph Walker is a 14-year-old Catholic schoolboy living in Canada. When his hospitalized mother slips into a coma, a nurse tells him it will take a miracle to wake her up. When he is forced to join a cross-country track team as a penance for some school infraction, he hears the coach mention the Boston Marathon. The coach quickly tells Ralph that he was "only joking," and says that "if one of you wins the Boston Marathon it would be a miracle." Then and there Ralph decides that he must win the 1954 Boston Marathon because that is the miracle that will bring his mother out of her coma. Now that's heart-warming. But the movie never becomes maudlin. There's plenty of humor, and Adam Butcher is terrific as Ralph. He is such a believable ninth grader: He commits all the venal sins of adolescence: swearing, impure thoughts and self-abuse—lots of the latter. We also especially liked Campbell Scott as the priest who defies orders to help Ralph train for the marathon.* Jennifer Tilly is a nurse who cares for Ralph's mother and helps Ralph get in shape for the race. This is the movie that young people should be going to see rather than spending their time and money on junk like *The Dukes of Hazard* and *Herbie: Fully Loaded*. The film is loosely based on the true story of the youngest contender in the Boston Marathon. To those critics who disliked this movie for it's "sentimentality," I have a word of advice: Get a heart! **GRADE A-**

THE SALESMAN, Forushande: (2016) This movie won Best Foreign Film at the Oscars last night, and also won Best Actor and Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival, plus it earned a 97% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes*. We decided we should see it, especially because the same director won an Oscar for his 2011 film *A Separation*, which we saw and liked enough to give it a grade of A-. The director and writer, Asghar Farhadi, skipped the Oscar ceremony "out of respect for those of six nations whom have been disrespected by the inhumane law that bans entry of immigrants to the U.S." Politics aside, I quite enjoyed the movie. It tells the story of an Iranian couple forced to leave their apartment because the building is in danger of collapsing. They find another apartment in the building of a friend, but are distressed to learn that the previous tenant has left her belongings in a locked room. The couple is involved in what I assume is community theatre, and the current production is *The Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller. The husband and wife are starring as Willie and Linda Loman. This quiet drama becomes a tale of revenge when the wife is accosted in their home by a stranger. The attack leaves her afraid to be alone and her caring husband is determined to wrest some sort of vengeance on the man responsible. I was intrigued by the story and impressed with the acting. Gary, however, had a different reaction: He thought the movie slow-moving and boring. I give the movie a B+, but Gary couldn't give it higher than a C. **GRADE B+/C**

SALMON FISHING IN THE YEMEN: Introducing salmon into the Yemen River sounds like a crazy plan, doesn't it? And as the premise for a romantic comedy, even crazier. Yet it all works beautifully. I'm sure director Lasse Hallström deserves some credit for this charming movie, but most of the credit goes to Ewan McGregor and Emily Blunt. With leads less appealing, this would be just another quirky British comedy. With McGregor and Blunt, it is delightful. Blunt is working for a wealthy sheik who wants to spend a ridiculous amount of money to turn the desert into a fisherman's paradise. McGregor is a scientist who works for the British fisheries. At first, he pronounces the plan ridiculous, but when the British government, looking for a way to improve their image in the Middle East, gets behind the project he is persuaded to put aside his reservations. Amr Waked is excellent as the eccentric sheik, a man who loves to fish, but also wants to make the desert green and create an agricultural future for his people. Of course McGregor and Blunt are attracted to each other, and of course, there are complications. But the nice thing about this movie is that it doesn't succumb to tired romantic clichés. Plus, it has Kristen Scott Thomas as the Prime Minister's press secretary who spearheads the salmon project for the government. She is very funny and, as our local critic said, "adds some much needed tartness to the proceedings." We both enjoyed this movie enough to give it a B+. **GRADE B+**

SALT: On *At The Movies*, Michael Phillips said that *Salt* was in the *Bourne* tradition, but not quite as good. I don't agree. It is every bit as good, and Angelina Jolie is as compelling an action hero as is Matt Damon. The action is non-stop, and, because Phillip Noyce doesn't rely too much on computer graphic images (CGI), the stunts look real. And there are stunts aplenty. The pace is so rapid that you don't have time to ponder Jolie's defiance of the laws of physics, you just believe the stunts while you're watching them. I agree with Roger Ebert who called it "gloriously absurd," but "a damn fine thriller." You spend the entire time not sure if Evelyn Salt is a Russian sleeper agent or a patriotic CIA agent falsely accused. Liev Schreiber, who the New York Times recently called the best actor of his generation, once again makes something out of what, in less skilful hands, would be a stock character. And Chiwetel Ejiofor (*Dirty, Pretty Things, Love, Actually, American Gangster*) doesn't disappoint either. But this is Jolie's movie and she is up to the task. Her role was originally conceived for Tom Cruise, but we're glad that Jolie inherited the role. As A.O.Scott said of Jolie in his review, "She is the prime special effect, and a reminder that even in an era of technological overkill, movie stars matter." The ending leaves the door open for a sequel and we will be first in line to see it. **GRADE B+**

SALT OF THE EARTH: (2015) It is difficult to imagine that a documentary consisting primarily of black and white still photos can be electrifying, but this one definitely is. Sebastiao Salgado has traveled in over 100 countries, and his photos provide a hauntingly beautiful look at the human condition. Win Wenders made this documentary with the photographer's son, Brazilian filmmaker Juliano Ribeiro Salgado. The wonderful images captured and held our attention, but we were also fascinated with the man himself. Born in Brazil and educated as an economist, Salgado chose eventually to abandon that career and switch to photography. He has photographed the people of Latin America and brought the attention of the world to the catastrophic drought in parts of Africa. But in the 1990s, when he recorded the displacement of people in more than 35 countries, he spent some time in the refugee camps in Rwanda. The suffering of the people there, and in many other countries, completely demoralized him, and he decided to stop taking photos. He became convinced that the human species is so violent and war-loving that it cannot be saved. It was then that his wife, Lelia, suggested that they return to the farm they had inherited in Brazil—a farm that was now a barren wasteland--and re-forest it. That farm is now a nature preserve filled with more than 2 million trees, and has become a world-wide model for reclaiming damaged land. Water has returned to the area, and Sebastiao has returned to photography. His most recent work, called *Genesis*, is the result of an eight-year worldwide survey. With his striking photographs of wildlife, landscapes, seascapes, and indigenous peoples, Salgado pays homage to a fragile planet he believes we must all protect. *Salt of the Earth* is remarkable and we hope you will make every effort to see it. **GRADE A**

THE SAPPHIRES: (2012) Set in 1967-68 both in Australia and Vietnam, and loosely inspired by real events, this is a warmhearted picture with an uplifting story. Usually this turns critics off, but most critics were charmed. So were Barbara and I. Three young and talented Australian Aboriginal girls harmonize their country-western favorites while performing at a small town talent contest. The girls are obviously the most talented group in the competition, but the bigoted locals view them as little better than performing animals. Dave, the keyboard player at the talent contest, stands up for the girls and is fired for his efforts. The role of Dave is brilliantly played by Irish actor Chris O'Dowd. You may remember O'Dowd who played the sad-sack cop who fell for Kristen Wiig in "*Bridesmaids*," Dave joins forces with the girls and they prepare to audition for a job playing for troops in Vietnam. They are joined by a cousin, change to soul music, and become *The Sapphires*. It was a big hit at the Cannes and Telluride Film Festivals, but, as a small indie film, it may not find its way into many theaters. The story touches on the troubled race relations in Australia, but the real appeal comes from the joy of the music. I think if you find this little gem, you will leave the theater with a smile on your face. **GRADE B+**

SARAH'S KEY: (Released in France in 2010; In the U.S. in 2011) We were very moved by this French movie. Kristen Scott Thomas plays Julia, an American journalist married to a Frenchman. When Julia and her husband move to Paris, they plan to take over his family apartment—the apartment his grandfather acquired in 1942. Julia is researching an article about the deportation of Jews undertaken by the French and the Germans, which, coincidentally, took place in 1942, and she begins to suspect that her in-laws' family home formerly belonged to a Jewish family. She becomes obsessed with uncovering the story, while at the same time coming to grips with a crisis in her own marriage. As the film opens, the first people we meet are the Starzynski family. We meet them in 1942 on the day the police came to round up all the Jewish families. Ten-year-old Sarah tries to protect her little brother from being taken by the police, but her good intention has drastic consequences. As Julia begins to uncover the truth, the film moves between the two stories, a fact that seemed to bother many of the critics. Roger Ebert, for example, thought the cutting back and forth "diminishes the impact of the earlier (Sarah's) story." Another critic thought that the film trivializes history." We couldn't disagree more! The structure of the film in no way trivializes the impact of Sarah's experience. Instead, for us the presence of today's story made us realize how the past influences the present, and how important it is to remember the past so that, in the words of George Santayana, you will not be "condemned to repeat it." Both Thomas and the young actress playing Sarah are terrific, and we enjoyed seeing Aiden Quinn in a small but important role. The film moves between English and French and is partially subtitled. We give it an enthusiastic A-. **GRADE A-**

SAVAGES: (2012) This thriller is a battle between evil and maybe more evil. Both sides refer to the other as "savages." Be warned that if you prefer to avoid film violence, you would do well to avoid this film which opens with a dimly lit scene showing several bound

prisoners and the sound of a chain saw starting. Director Oliver Stone has never been one to avoid blood. He is, possibly, the most controversial director in Hollywood and has brought us films like **Platoon**, **Scarface**, **Natural Born Killers**, and **W** to prove it. Barbara and I were rather taken with the story and favorably impressed with the acting, especially by Benicio Del Toro whose career we have followed for years. A couple of close friends in Southern California have developed some of the best marijuana ever grown and a Mexican Drug Cartel has decided to make them an offer they can't refuse. The Drug Cartel is headed by Elena (played by the beautiful Selma Hayek) and her merciless enforcer (Del Toro). The three leads are played by Taylor Kitsch, Aaron Johnson, and Blake Lively and they have a relationship that could be compared to the three leads in **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid**. John Travolta has a supporting role as a local DEA agent who takes money from all sides and provides what little humor exists in the story. There was a curious twist at the end of the film that we thought creative and helpful to our enjoyment, but which many critics hated. If you chose to spend 2 hr. 9 min. on this violent thriller, we would love to hear your take. **GRADE B**

THE SAVAGES: (2007) Writer/Director Tamara Jenkins must be commended for her intelligent writing and equally intelligent independent film. It is a story that could easily have been turned into a Hallmark Card, but it is not only smart, funny, and touching, but also painfully realistic. Philip Seymour Hoffman has always been fun to watch on screen, but this year has been especially kind to him. In addition to this film he opened in **Before The Devil Knows You're Dead**, and **Charlie Wilson's War**. His on screen excellence is matched by the always wonderful Laura Linney. Together, I think they are the most natural actors in Hollywood. They play brother and sister who are thrust into the reality of caring for a parent who never really cared for them and can no longer function in a retirement community. The aging father is admirably played by Philip Bosco, a gifted character actor you will recognize on screen even though you may not remember his name. The title of the film refers to the family name, though it was, no doubt, chosen for it's other meanings as well. The film focuses on the middle aged children facing their demons. Author/director Jenkins calls it a "coming of middle age" story. Hints of childhood abuse are never overplayed and though the material can be sad and touching, Jenkins is a master at finding the humor. I liked this movie a lot, but Barbara liked it even more. **GRADE A/A-**

SAVE THE LAST DANCE: We went to this film because we like Sean Patrick Thomas in TV's *The District*, and also because we thought Julia Stiles shows promise. The two actors didn't disappoint us, but the script did. It was utterly predictable and obviously written for the teenage crowd. (The NY Times reviewer said it could have been taken from a Judy Blume novel.) Stiles is Sara Johnson, a budding ballet star who gives up dancing when her mother is killed in an accident. She must move from her comfortable suburban home to live with her father in Chicago's inner city. She attends a High School where she is one of only a few white students. After a rocky beginning, Sara and Derek (Thomas) become more than friends. Derek teaches her hip-hop dancing and rekindles her love of ballet. We enjoyed seeing Terry Kinney as Sara's jazz musician father, but regret that the script-writers didn't do much to develop his character. He was forced to play the typical uninvolved father. We liked all the actors and the hip-hop dancing, which reminded me a lot of dirty dancing. We only wish the story had been worthy of the actors' talents. **GRADE: C+**

SAVING GRACE: We got a kick out of this gentle English comedy about a woman who is left in dire financial straights when her husband dies. She finds an unusual solution: She and her gardener grow a huge crop of marijuana in her greenhouse. Brendy Blethyn (Secrets and Lies is the economically challenged widow and Craig Ferguson, from The Drew Carey Show is her gardener. We quite liked the character of the local doctor played by Martin Clunes. There are many laughs in the film although the director relies a bit too much on the sight of elderly Englishwomen high on weed for humor. Ebert gave the film only two stars and said, "We're left with a promising idea for a comedy, which arrives at some laughs but never finds its destination." **GRADE: B**

SAVING MR. BANKS: P. L. Travers wrote her famous *Mary Poppins* in an effort to deal with her childhood and her memories of her father. Travers Goff, who worked as a bank manager, was a hero to the young Helen, but he was also a man who liked drink so much that he got fired from at least one job. **In Saving Mr. Banks**, we see flashbacks to the young Helen, who, as an adult, took her father's first name as her pen name. We also hear a bit about Walt Disney's childhood and his relationship with his father. Both had some "father issues." Tom Hanks is excellent as Disney, and Emma Thompson, in crabby woman mode, is memorable as Disney's adversary. The film mogul had spent over twenty years trying to get P.L. Travers to sign over the rights to her novel so that he could fulfill a promise he made to his daughters—the promise to bring Mary Poppins to life on the screen. Over the final credits, we hear the original tape recordings of Travers and the movie's writers. It seems that Thompson perfectly brought to life the woman who was afraid that Disney would ruin her book, and destroy her memories of her father. About half-way through the film we grew a bit weary of how difficult Travers was being, but the ending was wonderful, so we left the theatre feeling good about the movie. A slew of familiar faces populate the movie, including Paul Giamatti, Bradley Whitford, Kathy Baker and Jason Schwartzman. In the flashback scenes, Colin Farrell is superb as Travers Goff, as is Ruth Wilson as Helen's mother. Rachel Griffith appears briefly as a relative who must have been the inspiration for the umbrella wielding nanny who became an iconic figure for children everywhere. **GRADE B+**

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN: 1998/2023 (Recorded from HBO) I started my 1998 review like this: *Spielberg has once again proved that he is a master filmmaker. He may also be the world's moral conscience. He has produced an amazing movie that is arguably the finest and realistic WWII film ever made. The D Day scenes are stunning. They are harrowing to watch and difficult to forget. Who will ever be able to forget the blood red waves lapping on the shore of Omaha beach.* It still stunned us today! And Tom Hanks, as Captain Miller, and Matt Damon as Private James Ryan are remarkable, as are all the men in Miller's company. It's an ensemble piece, as the men in Miller's company storm the beach in the first wave to hit the coast. Capt. Miller is charged with finding Private Ryan because his three brothers have died in combat and the powers that be don't want another Sullivan's disaster. (The five Sullivan brothers were all assigned to the same ship. They were all killed in action when the ship was torpedoed and sunk off Guadalcanal.) The last fight in the movie was defending a bridge in a town in France, and it perfectly shows both the horror of war and the courage and bravery of the men that fight the battles. Gary and I agreed on a grade of A in 1998. Today, we agree on A+. **GRADE A+**

THE SCHOOL OF ROCK: Richard Roeper called this movie "a love letter to pure Rock and Roll," and that's a pretty good description of **The School of Rock**. The irrepressible Jack Black (**High Fidelity**, **Orange County**) plays Dewey Finn, a man who lives to play rock and roll and whose only dream is to win the Battle of the Bands. When Dewey's band fires him because of his erratic behavior, he is devastated. When his roommate, Ned (Mike White), gets a call to report for a substitute teaching job at a private grade school, Dewey

decides to use Ned's name and report for job, despite the fact that he has absolutely no teaching training or experience. But he needs the money. On his second day of "non-teaching," Dewey is startled to learn that some of these fifth graders have real musical talent. Forming a rock band becomes the class project--the only class project. The movie has some genuinely funny moments and is ultimately rather touching. The kids are terrific and Black's performance is one of the most exuberant you will ever see. He does remind me a bit of John Belushi. Watch those eyebrows. Mike White (**Chuck and Buck**) wrote the script and is also perfect for the role of Dewey's nebbishy roommate. Joan Cusack is the tightly wired school principal. If you long for some good old-fashioned rock and roll, you're sure to enjoy the music and the movie. **GRADE: B**

SCHULTZE GETS THE BLUES: (2003 Release) We went to see this German film because the trailers look like it would be very funny. It does have some chuckles, but it wasn't quite what we expected. Horst Krause is, apparently, a popular actor in Germany and his movie is quite a hit there. Shultze has just been forcibly retired from the salt mines (either a real salt mine or a metaphor--I'm not sure). He and his two friends have nothing to do in retirement except drink a lot of beer and argue over chess games. One night, the lonely Schultze catches a station on his radio that is playing zydeco music. Shultze is an accomplished accordion player and he is fascinated with this new sound. Eventually, he travels to the United States and finds his way to Louisiana. The pace of the film is so measured and slow that it probably won't appeal to most moviegoers. **Schultze Gets The Blues** is definitely a film festival kind of movie, and we can't recommend it except to those who are partial to film festivals. **GRADE C**

SCOOP: It's hard to believe **Scoop** is from the same author/director who made last year's brilliant **Match Point**. One big difference is Woody Allen's absence in **Match Point** and his tiresome presence in **Scoop**. In the past, we have enjoyed Allen's one-liner schtick, but here it is not funny and, by the end of the movie, quite irritating. Another big difference is the script: **Match Point** was sophisticated and clever; **Scoop** is simplistic and banal. Allen is a mediocre magician performing his tired tricks in London. He selects a young American journalism student (Scarlett Johansson) to participate in his vanishing act, and while she is being "dematerialized," she is visited by the spirit of a recently deceased reporter (the wonderful Ian McShane). He gives her a potential scoop: The Tarot Card Killer, a serial murderer plaguing London, may be Peter Lyman, a prominent socialite (Hugh Jackman). Johansson and Allen investigate and spend much time discussing whether Lyman is or is not the killer. Jackman is beautifully cast as a wealthy Londoner, but we can't understand why Allen would cast Johansson in a part so unsuited to her unique talents. There are any number of young actresses who can play a bumbling teenager-type. Johansson should be saved for roles with more depth and mystery. Plus, she looks positively frumpy in the dowdy clothes she wears in **Scoop**. This one was a big disappointment. **GRADE C**

THE SCORE: This is a crime caper movie with a difference: We see all the painstaking preliminary work that the team does to prepare for the heist. The heist itself is exciting, but the planning takes up most of the two hours and some will find it too slow, but it kept our attention. We found it quite interesting. The prize is an antique scepter worth millions. It is being kept in the basement of the Montreal Customs House. Max (Marlon Brando) initiated the plan and he has placed a man inside the Customs House. Jack (Ed Norton) is masquerading as a palsied night-shift janitor. Max convinces Nick (Robert De Niro), a master safe-cracker, to join the team because Nick's share will guarantee his retirement from the "business." Brando is very fat, but mildly interesting as Max, De Niro is, well, De Niro, and Edward Norton is, as always, terrific. Angela Bassett, in a throwaway role, is the woman Nick wants to retire with. The lighting in the film is very dark. I think I liked Nick's apartment, but I never got a really good look at it! This movie follows in the tradition of heist movies dating back to the 1964 film, **Topkapi**: **The Score** may not be the best of the genre, but it certainly isn't the worst. **GRADE: B**

THE SEA INSIDE: (2004 Release) Ramon Sampedro was a ship's mechanic who severed his spine in a diving accident. He lived as a quadriplegic for 28 years wanting to die. In 1998, he succeeded. He planned his death in such an ingenious way that no one could be legally charged with the crime. **The Sea Inside** is fiction, based on the final months of Sampedro's life. Javier Bardem received a well-deserved Oscar nomination for his brilliant work as Sampedro. The film, directed by Alejandro Amenabar, won this year's Award for Best Foreign Language Film. An Award also richly deserved. We thought this was a powerful story beautifully acted by everyone in the cast. Belen Rueda is stunning as a physically handicapped lawyer who helps Sampedro sue the government for the right to end his life. The makeup job on Bardem is fantastic. Gary could hardly recognize him as the actor who played the younger Sampedro in flashback scenes. The Detroit Free Press critic called the movie and "inner voyage of high emotion." We both had a strong emotional reaction to the story. **GRADE A**

SEA OF SHADOWS: (2019) This is a National Geographic Documentary that was promoted as a movie with the intensity of a Hollywood thriller. Winner of the Sundance Audience Award **Sea Of Shadows** follows a team of dedicated scientists, high-tech conservationists, investigative journalists and courageous undercover agents as they put their lives on the line to save the nearly extinct vaquitas, the world's smallest whale. If successful they hope to bring a vicious international crime syndicate to justice and save the vaquitas found only in the Sea of Cortez and which now number fewer than 15. In order to understand why the vaquitas existence is threatened, you must know that their fate is inextricably tied to the illegal poaching of another endangered fish, the totoaba. The bladders of these fish are sold for obscenely high sums to Chinese buyers. Their bladders are erroneously believed by many in China to be a cure for pain, skin problems, and even infertility. Poachers use hundreds of nets to catch totoaba, but also snare turtles, vaquitas and other fish. Incredible amounts of money are at stake, so there's always the threat of deadly violence. The documentary is only 104 minutes in length, but unfortunately seems much longer. I support the heroic efforts, and the film seems well made, but the amount of corruption in the Mexican government agencies is disheartening and my hopes for the vaquitas are not high. **GRADE C+**

SEABISCUIT: In the 1930s, three broken men and a screwed up horse came together to create a legend. That legend was a horse named Seabiscuit. Seabiscuit's courageous spirit caught the imagination of a nation numbed by the Great Depression: In 1938, this remarkable racehorse had more press coverage than either F.D.R. or Adolf Hitler. In the words of Charles Howard, "The horse is too small, the jockey too big, the trainer too old, and I'm too dumb to know the difference." It is an American success story. It is the age-old story of David and Goliath. It demonstrates the glory of second chances. It is a wonderful movie. The movie has been perfectly cast: Jeff Bridges personifies Charles Howard, Seabiscuit's owner. No one could have portrayed Tom Smith, Seabiscuit's trainer, better than Chris Cooper. And Toby Maguire is amazing. William H. Macy as Tick Tock McGlaughlin, a radio sports commentator, was not in the novel but he is a welcome addition and adds some necessary humor. People who read and loved Laura Hillenbrand's book might be

disappointed by the things that have been left out. I know I missed my favorite line: An onlooker, watching Seabiscuit walk out onto the track, said to Tom Smith, "Why, that horse can hardly walk." Smith replied, "Runs good though." It's true that many details and information about the racing industry had to be eliminated from the film. But all the heart is there. And heart is what Seabiscuit was all about. **GRADE: A**

THE SEAGULL: (2018) This is a film based on a classic play by Anton Chekhov. Chekhov, a Russian playwright and short-story writer, is considered to be among the greatest writers of short fiction in history. Thus Barbara and I feel almost compelled to see his more famous works. Not only were we not disappointed, but we thought it was one of the best film adaptations we have seen and the casting was flawless. The whole ensemble cast excelled. The most well-known names include Annette Bening, Elisabeth Moss, Saoirse Ronan, and Brian Dennehy. Chekhov's play was adapted by Tony-winning playwright Stephen Karam and directed by Tony-winning Michael Mayer. In many of Chekhov's plays, including *The Seagull*, everybody is in love – but with the wrong people. Set in summer at a lakeside Russian estate, the tragicomedy unfolds the tangled relationships so characteristic of Chekhov's work. Screen adaptations of plays may be an acquired taste, but we feel safe in recommending this one. **GRADE A-**

SEARCHING: (2018) Imagine the movie screen as a huge computer screen, and the action taking place through Google searches, posted videos, Face Time, Facebook, Instagram and other social media sites. That's what you have in *Searching*. The entire movie is seen on a computer, from the background of the happy family, through the death of the mother, through exchanges between the widowed father and daughter to the horrible moment when the father realizes his daughter is missing. The entire search for the missing girl is fraught with suspense. As the father searches for his daughter's friends, he begins to realize that he didn't really know his daughter at all. If you are a parent, you probably understand that parents never really know their offspring. The reverse is equally true. John Cho, as the father, and Michelle La, as his daughter are excellent, as is Debra Messing as the policewoman working on the case. Gary and I were awed by the creativity of the filmmaking. Since the movie got 91% on the *Tomatometer*, the critics must have agreed. Some of the critics were less enthusiastic about the twists and turns of the story, but we appreciated the movie enough to give it high marks. **GRADE B+**

THE SECOND BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL: (2015) Second times are rarely as good as first times, and that is true of this sequel to 2012's surprising hit. It has the same cast, but not the same magic. Richard Gere is a nice addition, and his love story with Sonny's mother was charming, but not charming enough to recapture the charisma of the first movie. In this sequel, Sonny (Dev Patel) is trying to get financing for a second hotel. Meanwhile, his relationship with his fiancée is complicated by the presence of a rival. This subplot was rather silly, and their problem could have been fixed with, as our local critic said, "a few simple conversations and not acting like a complete jackass." Of course, watching Judi Dench and Maggie Smith together on screen is always worth the price of admission, and their scenes are the best. We also liked the presence of a new character, played by Tamsin Greig, who is so good in TV's *Episodes*. We also thought that David Strathairn looked wonderful with his white hair and beard, although his part was very small. Bill Nighy's love affair with Dench was a highlight of the first movie. Sadly, the magic has gone out of that relationship too, although the actors are still fun to watch. A lively wedding dance number injects some excitement into the final scene. Most of the movie is pleasant, but "pleasant" probably isn't what the producers hoped to hear. It's the best we can do. **GRADE B-/C+**

SECONDHAND LIONS: This is a pleasant family comedy about a fourteen-year-old boy who spends the summer with his two eccentric great uncles. Haley Joel Osment is growing up and he does a fine job of playing Walter. Walter's irresponsible mother (Kyra Sedgwick) has dumped Walter with his uncles Garth (Michael Caine) and Hub (Robert Duvall). They spend their afternoons sitting on the porch shooting at travelling salesmen, and much to Walter's amazement, they don't have a TV set or a telephone. The uncles are rumored to have a fortune hidden somewhere in the house, but no one knows for sure if the money is there or where it came from. Caine and Duvall are always worth watching and they seem to be having great fun in this film. Some critics thought the movie was too sentimental, but as someone who gets teary at Hallmark Commercials, I enjoyed the sentimental element. So did Gary. As E Online said, "It's hammy at times, but *Secondhand's* sentiment is first-rate." Not a great film, but enjoyable. **GRADE: C+**

THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES: This film won the Best Foreign Film Oscar this year and I can understand why. It is a terrific film: part murder mystery, part love story. Although Gary thought it was a bit long and, at times, rather slow, I thought the entire two hours and seven minutes were compelling. The story begins in 1999 as Benjamin Esposito (Ricardo Darín), a retired criminal investigator, attempts to write a novel based on a crime that he cannot forget. In 1974 a lovely young woman was raped and murdered. Esposito was able to identify the killer, but when, a year later, the killer is released in a political move, he feels that he has failed the woman's husband. He promised the grieving widower that the killer would spend his life in prison. He visits a former colleague, Irene (Soledad Villamil), now a powerful judge to show her his novel, and the film moves back and forth in time from the original murder investigation to the present. Benjamin and Irene worked together on the investigation and managed to ignore their attraction to each other in 1974. They ignored it, but we can read it in their eyes. The film is full of exciting scenes, most notably the capture of the killer in a crowded soccer stadium. There is an unorthodox interrogation scene that owes much to the fact the director, Juan Jose Campanella, has directed several episodes of *Law and Order: Special: Victims Unit*. The film is in Spanish with English subtitles, so I expect some will avoid it. That's too bad because it is superb. I give it an unqualified A. Gary was not as impressed and says B. The film was released in Argentina in 2009, but not released here until this year. **GRADE A/B**

SECRET IN THEIR EYES: (2015) This movie is a remake of a 2009 Oscar-winning film from Argentina. Hollywood likes to do remakes, but the critics usually don't appreciate them, especially when they are not as good as the originals. That was the case with this movie, but we think the critics were too hard on it. A group of police investigators are shocked when they discover that one of their own teenage daughters has been brutally murdered. Julia Roberts plays Jess, the bereaved mother, and Chiwetel Ejiofor is Ray, her partner. Nicole Kidman plays Claire, an assistant district attorney who works on the case. When they catch the killer but are unable to prosecute him for a convoluted national security issue, they are devastated. For the next 13 years, Ray makes it his life's work to find the perpetrator even though he has left the police force. When he believes that he has located the man, he comes back into Jess and Claire's life. The movie switches back and forth from the murder 13 years ago to the present time. The director does nothing to identify the time frame, but the hairdos of the two women and the slight gray in Ray's beard make it easy to follow the switch. One problem with this remake is

the sexual tension that is supposed to exist between Ray and Claire. Kidman's cool demeanor does little to create any chemistry with Ejiofor. I do remember feeling that tension palpably in the Argentinian original. We had no quarrel with the acting: Roberts is touching in her grief and Ejiofor is always outstanding. Robert's husband, Danny Modor, was in charge of photography, and he did a fine job. The movie is quite good, but not as impressive as the original. **GRADE B**

THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES: This movie is based on the novel of the same name by Sue Monk Kidd. No movie can match the depth of a novel, and lovers of the book may find the movie wanting. I did read the book, but, since I can barely remember the book I finished last month let alone one from 2002, I quite enjoyed the movie version. This very personal story of a young girl longing to learn about the mother she barely remembers is played out against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Struggle. It is set in South Carolina in 1964, the year that Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Dakota Fanning is Lilly, the central character, and Jennifer Hudson is Rosaleen, a young black woman who is the housekeeper for Lilly's father. Queen Latifah is August Boatwright, a bee-keeper who takes Lilly and Rosaleen in when they run away from Lilly's father. Alicia Keyes and Sophie Okonedo play August's sisters, June and May. All are very good, but we were especially impressed with Fanning. She was an adorable little girl and she has grown into a lovely teenager. What's more, she is just as good an actress as she was at the age of seven in *I Am Sam*—maybe even better. She has a long career in front of her. Gary was one of only two men in the audience when we saw the film, but chick-flicks don't scare him. He says: *I think films that threaten to open up one's tear ducts are often avoided by guys, but I like heartwarming films when the acting and writing are good. I think this film will turn out to be an important segue between Dakota Fanning as a little girl and her next step, as a beautiful young woman.* We agree on a B. **GRADE B**

THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY: (2013) Fifteen minutes into this movie we debated erasing it from our DVR, but, when Walter stopped imagining life and started living it, we decided to watch it all the way to the end. And we were glad that we did. Ben Stiller directed and played Walter and the wonderful Kristin Wiig was Cheryl. We loved seeing Shirley MacLaine play Walter's mother. I don't remember anything from the 1947 version with Danny Kaye and Virginia Mayo, but the brief synopsis on IMDB says, "A clumsy daydreamer gets caught up in a sinister conspiracy." Thankfully there was no conspiracy in Stiller's take on the story of a mild-mannered clerk who day dreams that he is an adventurer. In the new story, Walter works for Life Magazine as a negative asset manager. He greatly admires a daring professional photographer who takes amazing photos for the magazine, a part played by Sean Penn. When the real Walter goes in search of Penn, he has real adventures and it changes his life. The happy ending was very satisfying. Professional critics were evenly divided on this one, but we enjoyed it. I like what one critic said about the movie: *Stiller's sensibility creates a movie that's smarter than you think it will be. Kind of like Walter Mitty himself.* **GRADE B**

THE SECRET LIVES OF DENTISTS: Campbell Scott is David Hurst, a competent dentist, a caring father, and a distant husband. He met his wife, Dana (Hope Davis) in dental school, and they now share a dental practice and three young daughters. It is obvious that the two care for each other, but they have severe communication problems. Their life together seems to limit itself to the dental practice and their three children. When David sees Dana in an intimate conversation with another man, he suspects her of having an affair. He only sees the other man from the back, so he does not know who he is. In typical David fashion, he decides not to talk with Dana about it. Instead he imagines what is happening and worries about it. He shows flashes of anger, but never confronts his wife. He is aided in his worrying by an irritating patient played by Denis Leary. Leary acts as Hurst's alter-ego, appearing in David's imagination and expressing fears and anger that David can't bring himself to utter. Scott is excellent, expressing his character's inner thoughts beautifully. Hope Davis is, as always, wonderful, but the story is told from David's point of view, so we never get to know her as well as we do David. A memorable event, that adds a sort of a sick humor to the film, is a case of flu which travels through the whole family and occasions lots of vomiting. Many of us have probably been there and done that. Leary also provides some humor in this story of a complicated, troubled relationship. The final scene seems to indicate that there is little hope the relationship will change for the better. The movie is based on the novel *The Age of Grief* by Jane Smiley. **GRADE: B**

THE SECRET OF ROAN INNISH: (This is a 1995 film, but I'm including it because we liked it so much.) We loved this Irish fable about a Selkie—a creature that is both seal and woman--and the family that lived on the island of Roan Innish. Fiona, a young girl living with her grandparents learns of her family's history and the story of her little brother Jamie, whose cradle was carried off by the waves. She determines to find the lost child. Beautifully photographed and lovingly told. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

SECRETARIAT: I'm not sure what makes horse race movies so irresistible. They are especially so when they are true stories. The races are heart-pounding even when you know the outcome. There's joy in seeing a beautiful race horse running its heart out, and emotional impact in seeing people risk everything on a horse they love. It was true with *Seabiscuit* and it's true here. Called "the greatest race horse that ever lived," Secretariat was special from the moment he was born and immediately struggled to his feet. Diane Lane is perfect as Penny Chenery, the Denver housewife who took over her father's horse farm when he became incapacitated. Against overwhelming odds, and the luck of a coin toss, she became a legend in the racing world. John Malkovich is Lucien Laurin, a horse-trainer who is trying to retire, but not doing well at it when he becomes Secretariat's trainer. He adds greatly to the appeal of the film, along with Margo Martindale as a long-time family aide and Nelsan Ellis as a loyal groom, Eddie Sweat. Also worthy of mention is Robert Fullerton who appears as Robert Kelberg, the jockey who rode Secretariat. It was in 1973 that Secretariat won the triple crown—The Kentucky Derby, The Preakness Stakes, and The Belmont Stakes—so the story pays some homage to the political changes of that era. Lane, one of our favorites, is wonderful in this film. She is not only beautiful, but exudes charm, intelligence and class. They called this remarkable horse, Big Red, and big he was, indeed. In fact, Secretariat had a heart two-and-a-half times larger than any other horse his size. That's a lot of heart for a horse. . .and for a movie. We loved it. **GRADE A**

SEEKING A FRIEND FOR THE END OF THE WORLD: How are people likely to spend their time if faced with an apocalyptic end of the world in a matter of days? An asteroid is on a collision course with Earth and the last scientific attempt to stop it has failed. Steve Carell and Keira Knightley, two seasoned and talented actors play the leads in this thought-provoking romantic comedy, but I strongly believe that your enjoyment of the film will depend on the expectations you carry into the theater. If you expect a "comedy" like Carell gave us in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* or *Little Miss Sunshine*, you will be disappointed. When Barbara and I saw this film, there were only five other people in the theater and one of them walked out in disgust after about a half hour. We, on the other hand found the film

touching, tender, and humorous enough to bring an occasional smile. We were also favorably impressed to learn that it was the feature film debut for Lorene Scafaria who was writer and director. She delivers a movie that is precisely what the title promises. Expect to leave the theater feeling that you need to do something more with your life before it's over. Don't misunderstand. The film is bittersweet, but not depressing. We liked it. **GRADE B+**

SELMA: (2014) I'm afraid I can't do justice to this powerful and important movie. It is unfortunate that the people who most need to see it probably won't. When the poor, even now, are being disenfranchised in the South, we need to be reminded of the brave souls who struggled for equality. I think a bit of background will help. The Civil Rights Act was signed into law in July of 1964, and it was in March of 1965 when the events in Selma, Alabama took place. Local African-Americans together with organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had begun registering black voters in 1963, but white resistance was overwhelming. Early in 1965, they turned to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for assistance. King led a peaceful protest to the Selma courthouse that was dispersed by local police. A month later, a night march was violently broken up by local police, and, in the melee, a young voting-rights activist was killed by a state trooper. To focus the anger generated by the murder, a march from Selma to Montgomery was planned. King was not there when the first attempt at the march took place on March 7th. The 600 marchers were attacked by state and local police with clubs and tear gas, and the images of that "Bloody Sunday" were broadcast around the world. I remember seeing images like that on TV. They were shocking then and equally shocking now. Ever since the Civil Rights Act, King had been working to convince Lyndon Johnson to put forth a voting rights bill. The President felt that his "War on Poverty" was a higher priority, and urged King to be patient. The movie shows King as a skilled politician as well as the talented orator we remember. It also shows him as a man, troubled by the violence that his non-violent policy seemed to generate in others. The threats against his life and the lives of his family were especially alarming. The movie touches on the personal failings of King, but does not dwell on them. The movie was skillfully directed by Ava DuVernay, and I thought the use of newsreel footage of the Selma march was particularly effective. A British actor, David Oyelowo, is dignified and inspiring as the iconic hero of the Civil Rights Movement. He is surrounded by a host of wonderful actors who portray their real-life counterparts with distinction. The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965. It not only secured L.B.J.'s legacy, but also helped prove the power of non-violent protest. **GRADE A-**

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING: (2017) Without question this film is a showcase for one of England's most versatile character actors, Jim Broadbent. And Broadbent responds with a terrific performance as an aging man forced to deal with the devastating consequences of decisions made a lifetime ago. It is a slow moving film that received a respectable 71% from *Rotten Tomatoes* critics. Audiences liked it less giving it only 55%. The movie is about time and memory and forces us to consider how foolish decisions of our youth can have powerful consequences, wreaking havoc on others without our ever knowing. The story moves skillfully between Broadbent's current life and the memory of his youth. Strong performances from the supporting cast are helped by better known actors such as Charlotte Rampling, Emily Mortimer, and Michelle Dockery (Lady Mary in TV's *Downton Abbey*). The story is based on an award winning book by British author Julian Barnes. Barbara and I liked *The Sense of an Ending*, but didn't love it. **GRADE B**

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY: 1995 (Prime) Jane Austen was the author of the novel *Sense and Sensibility*. She wrote books about class (she was not a fan) and her women in her novels were independent for the time in which she wrote. (She lived from 1775 until 1817) Austen began her first full-length novel *Elinor and Marianne*. Her sister remembered that it was read to the family "before 1796" and was told through a series of letters. Without surviving original manuscripts, there is no way to know how much of the original draft survived in the novel published anonymously in 1811 as *Sense and Sensibility*. Perhaps because of her education she became an early feminist. She used some of the same school books as the boys. Austen apparently had unfettered access both to her father's library and that of a family friend. Together these collections amounted to a large and varied library. Her father was also tolerant of Austen's sometimes risqué experiments in writing. : The novel follows the three Dashwood sisters and their widowed mother as they are forced to leave the family estate at Norland Park and move to Barton Cottage, a modest home on the property of distant relative Sir John Middleton. There Elinor (Emma Thompson) and Marianne (Kate Winslet) experience love, romance, and heartbreak. Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, which premiered here in 1995, is best known for its dazzling direction and for Emma Thompson's Oscar-winning screenplay. Less remembered is the radical way the film elevated its two male characters—Colonel Brandon (played by the late Alan Rickman) and Edward Ferrars (Hugh Grant)—beyond their source material. She deliberately imbued Austen's first published heroes with qualities they either didn't have in the novel or didn't have to the same degree: egalitarian attitudes toward women, an affection for children, and emotional sensitivity. In other words, *Sense and Sensibility* used updated versions of early 19th-century heroes to sell emerging ideals of manhood to the late-20th century, at a time when the pro-feminist men's movement was challenging gender norms in the realm of politics and pop culture. I loved it when I saw it in '95, and on several viewings since, and in 2024. Gary and I agree on a grade of A. **GRADE A**

THE SENTINEL: (2006) Since I was more engaged than Barbara while watching this film, the review assignment went to me. We both liked the casting of Michael Douglas, Kiefer Sutherland, Eva Longoria, and Kim Basinger, in this well intentioned thriller, but found the plot contrived and at times implausible. Once again, we find Michael Douglas sleeping with a woman he shouldn't and getting into a world of trouble for it. We see Kiefer Sutherland playing a role almost identical to that of Jack Bauer from his popular T.V. series titled 24. It makes you realize that the writing for T.V. and for films is no longer unbalanced in favor of film. Eva Longoria from T.V.'s *Desperate Housewives* shows some versatility in her role as Secret Service Agent assigned to help protect the President. There used to be little crossover between T.V. actors and film actors. That tradition has thankfully disappeared. Still, I think we expect more from film, and, since we are paying hefty admission, perhaps we should. Barb thought the movie was curiously un-exciting. She thinks TV's 24 is better written and more thrilling. The more we discussed the movie afterwards, the more we agreed on a grade of C. **GRADE C+**

SEPARATE LIES: There's deception, there's betrayal, and there's manslaughter, but it's all handled in a polite British way. James and Anne Manning are a long-married couple who live an orderly life. They have a London residence and a lovely house in the country. Tom Wilkinson displays impressive range in his portrayal of James, a man who thought he was happily married, but discovers that his wife doesn't agree. Emily Watson is equally impressive as Anne, a woman who feels she has never lived up to her husband's expectations. The way in which James and Anne handled the difficult situations that confront them is not what we would expect in an American movie. After all, in *Unfaithful*, the cuckolded husband kills his wife's lover. But this is a British film, and it is much more

civilized. Rupert Everett is William Bule, the third member of the triangle. He displays the rude arrogance that I suspect is typical of some members of the British Peerage. All three actors are excellent. Maggie (Linda Bassett) is the Manning's cleaning lady, and it is her husband who is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Bassett holds her own with the three more well-known actors. This movie may be a bit too tame for American audiences, but if you appreciate British reserve, you will enjoy it. It was described as *intriguing but chilly*, in one review, and *quietly unsettling* in another. It is both. Because of the memorable performances and the unpredictable script, we think the film deserves a B. **GRADE B**

A SEPARATION: (2011) The culture may be different, but we can certainly identify with the emotions. This film from Iran has been nominated for two Oscars—for Best Foreign Film, and for Best Original Screenplay. It tells the story of a marriage that is breaking up. It also provides a look at the Iranian court system, where there seems to be an absence of lawyers; where plaintiff and defendant speak for themselves in front of a judge. The story begins with a divorce hearing as husband and wife each tell their side of the story to a listening judge. Simin wants to leave Iran with her husband Nader and 11-year-old daughter, but Nader refuses to leave his father behind. His father suffers from Alzheimers and lives with the family. When the divorce is not granted, Simin moves in with her parents. Simin's daughter chooses to stay with her father, knowing that her mother won't leave the country without her and hoping that her parents will make up and get back together. Without his wife, Nader must hire someone to care for his father when he is at work. The woman he hires is overwhelmed with the care of the elderly man, and when she leaves him alone and tied to his bed, Nader becomes enraged. His reaction starts a chain of events that test the honesty and dignity of everyone involved. The story is told with no bias toward anyone. Because of this, we could empathize with everyone, but found it impossible to blame anyone. These are all people trying to do the right thing, although sometimes that involves not telling the whole truth. The camera lingers on faces and the actors are able to help you see into each character. The movie is particularly valuable because it offers a nuanced picture of life in Iran today. We haven't seen any of the other Oscar-nominated foreign films, but we could understand why this one might win a Golden Statue. **GRADE A-**

SERAPHIM FALLS: How do you feel about Westerns? You should let your answer determine whether you want to spend a couple of hours with this film. The motives of revenge and survival power this violent action/adventure. The story takes place just after the Civil War. Liam Neeson plays an embittered ex-Confederate colonel tracking down an ex-Yankee captain (Pierce Brosnan). The scenery, as would be expected, is spectacular and the opening scenes are brilliantly done. The dialogue is sparse, as it should be in a Western, but I confess that after an hour and a half, we were ready for the end. Even a brief appearance by Anjelica Huston as a medicine woman who may or may not represent the devil did nothing to save the ending for us. Barbara and I cannot give the film higher than a C+. **GRADE C+ (Barb:** Which one of the men is the bad guy and which is the good guy is intentionally ambiguous. The opening scenes are the best part of the movie with Brosnan behaving much like Rambo, finding inventive ways to kill his pursuers. We also learn that running through snow heals bullet wounds, much like running through the jungle cured spear wounds in *Apocalypso*.)

SERENDIPITY: I guess I'm just a sucker for a romantic comedy. I kind of liked this movie, but Gary thought it was bad. The romance didn't interest him and, although he laughed a few times, he didn't think the script was funny enough. Now I admit *Serendipity* is no *Sleepless In Seattle*, but I thought it was pleasant and I enjoyed the actors--especially John Cusak and Jeremy Piven. I even thought Kate Beckinsale, so boring in *Pearl Harbor*, was reasonably interesting here. Of course the story is totally predictable. We know that Jon (Cusak) and Sara (Beckinsale) will eventually get together--it's their destiny. After a "meet cute" that takes about fifteen minutes, the rest of the film details all the things that conspire to keep them apart. Roger Ebert ended his review a hope that "this movie never has a sequel, because Jon and Sara are destined to become the most boring married couple in history. For years to come, people at parties will be whispering, "See that couple over there? The Tragers? Jon and Sara? Whatever you do, don't ask them how they met." The critics are all over the map on this one: Ebert gave it only 1 and 1/2 stars, E Weekly gave it an A-, The New York Times thought it was "the cinematic equivalent of a plate made of spun sugar," but the Cranky Critic, who usually hates everything, said it was "a sleek, sexy, sophisticated, superior date flick for grownups." I give it a B-. Gary says he has to stretch to give it a C. **GRADE: B-/C**

A SERIOUS MAN: Joel and Ethan Coen are known in the industry as simply "the Coen Brothers." For a quarter-century they have given us films that sometimes dazzle and sometimes confuse. Barbara and I were both blown away in 1984 when we first experienced the cruel, but creative genius of the Coen Brothers in *Blood Simple*. Their cinematic gifts have included *Fargo*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, and *No Country For Old Men*. Occasionally they release a film we don't like or don't get (*Barton Fink*), but we are always anxious for their next release. Before we saw *A Serious Man*, we knew it was a dark offbeat comedy that received uniformly high marks from most professional critics. Larry Gopnik, brilliantly played by Michael Stuhlbarg, is a soft-spoken physics professor in a quiet mid-western suburb in the late 1960's. His life is starting to fall apart and will soon devolve into a series of catastrophes that bring to mind the biblical Job. Gopnik turns to his Jewish faith and community looking for answers. But, in the words of critic Ty Burr of the Boston Globe, "God is either absent, absent-minded, or mad as hell." Being a Goya may be a handicap when it comes to appreciating the subtle humor in this film. In a nearly full theater, we heard several chuckles where the subtle humor was lost on us. If you abhor ambiguity, you may want to avoid *A Serious Man*. The Coen brothers seem far more comfortable raising questions than suggesting answers. The film opens with a puzzling narrow-screen dramatization of a folk tale and closes with a puzzling offbeat ending. As we left the theater, Barbara said she was 'underwhelmed.' I rate it marginally higher than she does. **GRADE C+/B- Mazel Tov!**

THE SESSIONS: (2012) Mark O'Brien was a polio victim who spent most of his life in an iron lung. In spite of these limitations, he graduated from college and became a professional writer. This movie is based on a 1990 article O'Brien wrote titled *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*. It is a sensitive portrayal of O'Brien's experiences when his desire to experience sexual intercourse with a woman at least once in his life drove him to hire a sex therapist/surrogate. John Hawkes, who plays O'Brien, has proved his acting skills in TV's *Deadwood* and in *Winter's Bone*. Here he manages to make a warm and appealing character using nothing but his face, head and voice, the only things over which O'Brien had any control. Helen Hunt is wonderful as Cheryl, a sex therapist who insists that hers is a profession not at all like that of a prostitute. The scenes between them are full of charm, warmth and delightful humor. And yes, there is some transference and counter-transference involved. There are excellent supporting performances by Robin Weigert and Moon Bloodgood, but the standout supporting actor is William H. Macy as a sympathetic priest who becomes O'Brien's friend. *The Sessions* has received high praise from almost every critic. Here is what Stephen Holden of the New York Times had to say about the

relationship between O'Brien and Cheryl: "Their extraordinary connection while re-enacting the true story of a disabled, virginal 38-year-old writer and his sexual surrogate infuses the movie, written and directed by Ben Lewin, with a piercing depth of humanity and no small amount of humor." We think this movie is remarkable. While there may be some who are uncomfortable with the subject matter, we feel confident most will agree with Roger Ebert, who closed his review with these sentences: "This film rebukes and corrects countless brainless and cheap sex scenes in other movies. It's a reminder that we must be kind to one another." **GRADE A**

SEVEN DAYS IN UTOPIA: (2011) If you find golf boring or if you agree with Mark Twain who wrote, "Golf is a good walk spoiled," you would do well to skip this movie. On the other hand, it is hard for avid golfers like Barbara and me to pass by any film devoted to golf and especially if it features one of our favorite actors, Robert Duvall. Lucas Black, a talented actor, has the finest golf swing I have ever seen brought to the big screen. He plays a short-tempered young rookie who falls apart on the final hole of his first professional tournament. Needles to say, his ego is in need of healing. Fate takes him to a small village, Utopia, and the healing hand of a wise old golfer (Robert Duvall.) The cast is filled out by Oscar winning actress Melissa Leo and veteran actress Kathy Baker. The plot will seem familiar. You might say it is an amalgam of several films: *The Legend of Baggar Vance*, *Tin Cup*, *The Karate Kid*, and all the mentor and sports films you have ever seen. I would like to give any film about golf a glowing review, and if you like predictable scripts that are filled with clichés and faith-based platitudes, you may find *Seven Days in Utopia* appealing. I found it a little appealing because I rarely see a golf movie I don't love. Critics, however, have been uniformly harsh in their evaluations. Roger Ebert writes, "I would rather eat a golf ball than see this movie again." **GRADE C**

THE SEVEN FIVE: (2015) This documentary is a compelling true crime saga about the dirtiest cop in New York City history, Michael Dowd. Dowd was a cop, but he also headed a ruthless criminal network that stole money, guns & drugs and was even put on retainer for providing information to drug lords. Barbara agrees with me that this corrupt-cop documentary is a Hollywood movie waiting to happen. Rumor has it that Sony Pictures has enlisted *Get Shorty* screenwriter Scott Frank to work on a screenplay for an upcoming feature adaptation, so we will watch for it. Dowd tells it all with what comes off as complete honesty as the story unfolds. The title refers to Brooklyn's 75th Precinct, home to corrupt officer Michael Dowd. He eventually served 11 and a half years in prison, which seems to me extraordinarily lenient when you realize that there are people now in prison for life due to unfairly harsh drug laws and three counts of possessing small amounts of marijuana. Dowd is out now and has little to hide. A colorful cast of characters on both sides of the law tell their stories and I found it enlightening as well as troubling. It raises troubling questions about the law and those that society assigns to enforce it. But they are questions we need to be asking ourselves. **GRADE B**

SEVEN POUNDS: (2008/2009) Wil Smith gives a strong nuanced performance as Ben Thomas, but you should know that this film is the opposite of a feel-good Holiday movie. Ben seems to be suffering from severe depression, yet at the same time he is going out of his way to help seven strangers. It takes quite a while to figure out why he's so determined to improve the lives of these seven people, and we felt manipulated by the fragmented non-linear story line. Eventually, we began to understand Ben's motivation, and I thought the ending was powerful and emotional. But, as Ben Mankiewicz said on *At The Movies*, it's not about the ending; it's about getting there. And getting there sometimes seemed painfully slow. I do agree with Roger Ebert that a character is more interesting when his nature isn't made clear in the first five minutes of a film, but we felt that here the screen writer was determined to keep us in the dark far too long. Rosaio Dawson is Emily, one of the people Ben is helping. Her story is the most fully explored—in fact, it is the only fully explored story. She is marvelous; reminds us of how impressed we were the first time we saw her on screen. Ben and Emily's story is quite lovely, but the relationship is puzzling since we don't fully understand what Ben is all about. However, because of the powerful ending, because of Dawson's performance, and because in my eyes, Wil Smith can do no wrong, we give this film a B. **GRADE B**

SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS: (2012) In 2008 Barbara and I were delighted by an offbeat film titled *In Bruges*. It was written and directed by Martin McDonagh, an award-winning playwright who was bringing his genius to the big screen. Now McDonagh has written and directed his second offbeat but inspired film that blends comedy and violence. Yes, it is an unusual combination, but we think McDonagh makes it work. If you saw and enjoyed *In Bruges*, I feel confident that you will like *Seven Psychopaths*. If you didn't chose to see or didn't like his first film, I feel less confident. The film has a fantastic ensemble cast: Colin Farrell, Sam Rockwell, Christopher Walken, Woody Harrelson, and Tom Waits. A struggling writer (Farrell) is working on his screenplay, but at the movie's beginning has only a title: *Seven Psychopaths*. In a series of stories-within-stories, twists and turns that are more interesting on the screen than I could make them on paper, he finishes his screenplay. It is a nutty ride and not everyone will like this film. We didn't like the film quite as well as his first film, but we did like it. **GRADE B+**

SEX AND THE CITY: THE MOVIE: I loved the TV show and I loved the movie. It's exactly what a fan of the show expects: girlfriends doing girltalk; fantastic fashions; great shoes & handbags; a goodly amount of sex, and much discussion of the perils of love and marriage. Oh, yes—and lots of New York. It doesn't break new ground and it doesn't attempt to become great literature, and in my humble opinion, it shouldn't. It is set four years after the TV series ended. Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Big (Chris Noth), reunited at the end of the TV series, take their relationship to the next level with disastrous results. Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) and Steve struggle with marriage and with living in Brooklyn. Charlotte (Kristin Davis) is happy with her husband and adopted daughter, and Samantha (Kim Cattrall) has moved to Los Angeles to manage the career of her young, hunky TV star boyfriend. Jennifer Hudson is the only major new character, appearing as Carrie's personal assistant. Surprisingly, Gary, who gave up on the TV show after a couple of seasons, liked the movie a lot. He thought the story was entertaining, he enjoyed the ups and downs of the four women, and he tolerated the fashion stuff. Although many critics have been lukewarm about the film, we think it deserves better. **GRADE A-**

SEX AND THE CITY 2: It's all about the clothes; and the shoes; and the bags; and the hats. The girls are getting older and it shows in their faces and in their situations, but they still look marvelous. The story isn't much, just an excuse to see Carrie and Big's fabulous New York apartment along with some stunning desert settings in Abu Dhabi. Carrie is bored because she's finished decorating the apartment; Miranda is stressed because her boss hates her; Charlotte is a worn out mother of two little girls; and Samantha is going through menopause. They all still live in the city, but it's no longer about sex, except, of course, for Samantha. We were getting tired of her uninhibitedness at the end of the TV series and we were tired of her in this movie, too. The husbands appears, but, except for Big, only as accessories. So it's off to Abu Dhabi for a fabulous stay at a fabulous hotel wearing fabulous clothes, etc., etc., even when

riding on camels! The movie makes an attempt to explore feminism in two scenes. In one, the four friends sing *I Am Woman* in an Abu Dhabi nightclub. In the other, they meet some burka-clad women who love fashion. Naturally. If you were a fan of the TV series and the idea of an over two hour fashion show is appealing, you'll enjoy it. Gary was one of only two men in the theatre. He said he's seen worse films, but couldn't grade it higher than C+. I did enjoy the fashions and vacillate between C+ and B-. **GRADE B-/C+**

SEXY BEAST: This is a beautifully made film with powerful visual images. Gary Dove (Roy Winstone) is a former London mobster who has retired to a villa in Spain. He and his wife are living a peaceful life when suddenly a boulder tumbles down the hillside behind their house and plunges into their swimming pool, narrowly missing Dove. The boulder is symbolic of the beast that will soon enter their lives in the person of Don Logan (Ben Kingsley), a former associate who comes to Spain to enlist Dove's help on a "job." Kingsley is brilliant as the manic and evil Logan. This is one scary guy! The scene in which we first lay eyes on him reminded us of Bob Hoskins' introduction in a 1980 British crime caper movie, *The Long Good Friday*. Hoskins was shown striding through an airport with pounding background music. In *Sexy Beast*, Kingsley is also striding through an airport, only here we see him from behind. I wonder if the director is a fan of the earlier picture? It would spoil the movie for you if I told you much about the plot. It would be best to let you experience the energy and power of the film for yourself. The only problem we had was some difficulty understanding the accents. **GRADE: B+**

SHADOW DANCER: (2012/2013) This dark British thriller is set in the early 1990s during the troubles between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British government. The British and Irish accents are thick so neither Barbara nor I felt we heard all the dialogue. Still, we were able to follow the troublesome story. A single mother is arrested after an IRA bomb incident and is offered the difficult choice of going to prison for 25 years and saying goodbye to her young son, or becoming an informer for the British and spying on her own family. The two leads are very well played by Clive Owen and Andrea Riseborough. In case you are wondering, the film's title refers to a code name used by the British to identify informants. Wisely, the film doesn't try to dig too deeply into which side occupies the higher moral ground. In fact we clearly see the ugly sides of both groups. The price of blind loyalty, regardless of political position can be painful. The film was directed by James Marsh, best known as the Academy Award winning director of *Man on Wire*. Barbara grades this movie slightly higher than I, perhaps because she captured more of the dialogue. **Grade B/B-**

SHAFT: What's his name? John Shaft. And he is way cool! Samuel Jackson was born to play the 21st century Shaft. I predict that you will see a lot of black leather jackets with turtlenecks this winter. Unlike *Mission Impossible 2*, the villains in this movie are interesting. Christian Bale (American Psycho) is great looking and plays nasty beautifully. Jeffrey Wright was an intriguing bad guy, though we sometimes had difficulty with his heavy Hispanic accent. Toni Collette (The Sixth Sense, Muiel's Wedding) is a waitress who witnesses a hate crime but is too intimidated to testify. Shaft makes it his mission to see the rich-kid murderer brought to justice. Disgusted with the system, he quits the police force and becomes a private detective in association with his uncle, played by Richard Roundtree, the original Shaft. Vanessa Williams appears as a cop and Shaft's friend. There is no love story here and there are no sex scenes. We thought the crime story was OK, but the final shoot out was totally preposterous. Otherwise, it was capably directed and I loved the opening credits and theme song. **GRADE: B**

SHALL WE DANCE? I'd like to know how the American gigolo turned into a middle-aged attorney overnight! A white-haired Richard Gere stars in this remake of an earlier Japanese film with the same title. We saw the original film in 1997. It's the story of a repressed businessman who is intrigued by a woman he sees through the window of a dance studio. Jennifer Lopez is the woman that Gere sees from his commuter train. (Actually, it's the "L," since the story takes place in Chicago.) He winds up taking ballroom dancing lessons and keeping it from his wife because he is embarrassed. That was enough for a Japanese audience, where the culture would frown on a man dancing with a woman who is not his wife. But an American audience needs more of a story, so in this new version, Gere is embarrassed to tell his wife (Susan Sarandon) because he hates to admit that he wasn't happy. He was afraid the admission would hurt her. In the Japanese film, the wife played a small part, but in this new version, Sarandon is a bigger part of the story. Suspicious of Gere's evening absences, she hires a sleazy private detective. This provides an opportunity for some humor. The detective and his colleague (Richard Jenkins and Nick Cannon) are quite amusing. In an unbelievable coincidence, one of Gere's lawyer colleagues is dancing at the same studio. Stanly Tucci is very funny as a man who pretends to like football but really loves to dance. Bobby Cannavale and Omar Miller are two other men in Gere's beginning dance class and they are both excellent. Lopez was a bit too withdrawn for my taste and I thought she was the least interesting person in the movie. I much preferred Lisa Ann Walter --a Bette Midler type--who plays an aspiring dancer. She's very interesting. This version has some scenes that are wonderful, and some plot contrivances that are not. The weaknesses in the plot keep us from grading it as highly as we did the Japanese version. We gave that one a B+, but this one is only worth a B-. **GRADE B-**

SHALLOW HAL: Hal (Jack Black) may be the shallowest man alive: He chooses women based solely on their looks, and if they don't look like a supermodel, he isn't interested. His friend, Mauricio (Jason Alexander) is just as bad. He actually dumps a gorgeous woman because her second toe is longer than her big toe. Naturally, they have no real relationships with women. When Hal meets Tony Robins, the self-help guru, he asks for help. Robins, played by Robins himself, hypnotizes Hal into seeing the inner beauty as outward beauty. When Hal sees Rosemary (Gwyneth Paltrow) he sees her as slim and beautiful, although everyone else sees her 300-lb. body. When Hal gets to know Rosemary, he realizes that she is a beautiful soul, and for the first time in his life, he falls in love. The Farrelly brother gave us *Dumb And Dumber*, which we disliked, and *Something About Mary*, which we thought had some funny moments. In *Shallow Hal* they celebrate their sentimental side and back off on the gross-out jokes although there are plenty of funny moments. Consequently, we liked this film. It is a sweet, sentimental love story, and what keeps it from being cloying is Jack Black. He is outstanding. We noticed him first in *High Fidelity* and he didn't disappoint us here. Paltrow is fine, but this is Black's film *Shallow Hal* encourages us to accept people for who and what they are and not for how they look. Once actor who impressed us was Rene Kirby. This is what the New York Times review had to say about his role: "A minor character in 'Shallow Hal' is a man named Walt (Rene Kirby), who has spina bifida and who walks around on all fours (as Mr. Kirby, who has the condition, does in real life). Walt is an incorrigible ladies' man with a sly sense of humor, and his character's self-acceptance (and his social acceptance) are worth a dozen high-minded lectures on tolerance and dignity." We couldn't agree more. The film is rated PG13. We took our grandson, Nathan, with us and he liked it. Nathan agrees with our grade of B. **GRADE: B**

THE SHALLOWS: (2016) What's summer without a good shark movie? And this is a good one. Blake Lively is on screen all the time and she is terrific. For most of the movie, it's the classic tale of woman against shark, as Lively clings to an outcropping of rock, all that protects her from one pissed-off shark. It reminded me of *Open Water*, a 2003 movie that was based on a true story. *The Shallows* is not grounded in truth, but Gary and I were totally caught up in this battle, and Lively plays it with such sincerity that it seemed like a true story. Some critics called it "cheesy," but it's a summer shark movie so what did they expect? It isn't *Jaws*, but it may keep you out of the ocean for a summer or two. We were delighted to briefly see Brett Cullen as Lively's father. It was about 25 years ago that we enjoyed playing golf with him. He was in Tucson filming TV's *Young Riders*, and we have followed his career with interest. *The Shallows* is a fun popcorn movie and we thought it was a nice break from those ubiquitous summer blockbusters. **GRADE B+**

SHAME: (2011) To be an addict is to surrender oneself to something obsessively. We have seen many movies about addiction to alcohol or drugs but few about addiction to sex. And no actor before Michael Fassbender has ever given us such a penetrating look at the loneliness and pain of a man who needs sex constantly, but never finds any pleasure or relief from it. Fassbender's Brandon is a handsome New Yorker with a great apartment, a good job and a compulsive need for sex with or without a partner. Because he shuns intimacy with everyone, his partners are usually prostitutes. He does have a sister, played beautifully by Carey Mulligan, but their relationship is complicated by what we assume was a troubled childhood. I say "we assume" because director Steve McQueen doesn't tell us much about these two people—not in words, anyway. He simply allows us to watch them and observe their behavior. McQueen tells us everything we need to know about Brandon by lingering on his unsmiling face. The pace is definitely that of an Independent film. Some of the scenes are very long. For example, Mulligan sings *New York, New York* at such a slow pace we thought it would never end—but ultimately we were sorry to see it end. Mulligan is that good. There is a scene of Michael running, running, running the New York streets at night to escape the sound of his sister having sex. There is also a long sex scene toward the end of the movie that is quite remarkable. It is erotic without being overly specific, and it is completely joyless. This is a film for those who appreciate unusual movies made by a talented filmmaker. It is definitely not for everyone. But if you see *Shame*, you will witness two outstanding performances. Michael Fassbender has won a host of awards for his portrayal of Brandon, and was nominated for a Golden Globe. Carey Mulligan won a Hollywood Film Award as Supporting Actress of the Year in 2011. This is not a movie I will soon forget. **GRADE B+**

SHANGHAI KNIGHTS: We got a kick out of the first movie with Jackie Chan and Owen Wilson--*Shanghai Noon*, but we didn't enjoy this one as much. Ebert and Roeper thought it was better than the first, but for us the novelty had worn off. Too much karate and kickboxing for us. The two leads are still appealing and we liked the actress who played Chan's sister, but the best we can do is give this one a **GRADE: C**

SHANGHAI NOON: This movie is impossible to categorize: It's a comedy/adventure kung-fu western buddy picture. The story isn't much, but the martial arts fighting is what you would expect from Jackie Chan, and Owen Wilson (*Bottle Rocket*, *The Minus Man*) is adept at the humor. Chan is an Imperial Palace Guard who travels to Carson City Nevada to rescue Princess Pei Pei (Lucy Liu). Along the way he meets an articulate but inept train robber who calls himself Roy O'Bannon (Wilson). The two become unlikely partners. I've never been to a Jackie Chan film but I can see why his fans like him. He uses unlikely props to flatten his enemies and has a great sense of humor about it. Wilson is incredibly charming and fun to watch. The movie pays homage to western movies and movie stars. One of the last scenes is a funny parody of the closing scene from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. One critic, Sergio Mims, claims to have spotted 24 references to other movies. See how many you can find. **GRADE: B-**

THE SHAPE OF THINGS: Neil Labute directed and wrote the screenplay for this movie after first writing it in play form. You may remember Labute's *Nurse Betty*, a film he directed but did not write. The films he writes are quite dark in tone. He seems to see the worst in people. *In The Company of Men* is one example. *The Shape of Things* stars Paul Rudd, Rachel Weisz, Gretchen Mol and Fred Weller, and they are the only characters in the film. Gary liked this one more than I did, so I'll give you his comments: *This is a film that would be best discovered on your own. To go because I, or anyone else, recommends it could be disastrous because this is a film many will hate. On the other hand, I liked it quite a lot. The action focuses on four intelligent and articulate young people. Unfortunately their gifts lead them mostly to narcissism and cruelty. The film won me over because I found the acting flawless and almost every scene interesting. This coupled with the fact that I found the film totally unpredictable led me to a grade of A-.* I don't think I can go higher than a **B** on this one. I agree with Gary that the acting is superior, but it just didn't grab me enough to grade it any higher. **GRADE: A-/B**

THE SHAPE OF WATER: (2017) This is a story of love, passion, and beauty. It is an adult fairy tale with moral overtones. It is magical and romantic to the core and critics as well as audiences seem to love it. Barbara and I agree. The story revolves around Elisa, a lonely, dreamy woman in the early-1960s. She works the night shift as a janitor in a mysterious high-security government lab set against the backdrop of the Cold War era. Though her hearing is unimpaired, Elisa has been mute since childhood. When not working, she watches old movies with an equally lonely friend and neighbor. She is an orphan with no family and seems to exist on the fringes of society. The difficult role is brilliantly played by Sally Hawkins who in my opinion is one of the few Hollywood actresses who can carry a lead without speaking a word. It rarely happens, but some performances don't need words. She is helped by a uniformly excellent supporting cast that includes Richard Jenkins, Octavia Spencer and Michael Shannon but it is Hawkins who must win the audience... and she does. The movie is directed and co-authored by film prodigy Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, *Hellboy*) who is highly regarded as a master storyteller and filmmaker. Del Toro's principal inspiration for this film was the 1954 monster-movie classic *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, which he remembers seeing when he was 7 years old. Yes, this is a film about an amphibious monster, but it is so much more than that. *The Shape of Water* is a creative blend of comedy, romance, horror, drama and musicals. It touches on areas like racism, sexism, and homophobia but it is mostly a love story. Barb and I will eagerly take a chance on any future Guillermo del Toro films, and we will try to locate *Hellboy* because we missed it in theaters. **GRADE A**

(Director Guillermo del Toro has been quoted as saying, "I think every movie ever made should have Sally Hawkins in it.)

SHATTERED GLASS: (Reviewed in 2012-5) In 1998 a story broke on the Forbes internet site that Stephen Glass had fabricated a story that had appeared in *The New Republic* magazine. The title of the fabricated story was *Hack Heaven* and told about a supposed

15-year-old computer hacker who had been hired by the very company that he had hacked into. Investigation by *New Republic* editor, Chuck Lane, revealed that Glass had not only fabricated the hacker article, but in addition had partially or totally fabricated 27 of 41 articles of his that had been published in the magazine. *The New Republic* subsequently issued an apology to its readers. Stephan Glass is portrayed by Hayden Christensen and Peter Sarsgaard is Lane, the editor of *The New Republic*. Both are excellent. The cast is rounded out by Chloë Sevigny, Hank Azaria, and Steve Zahn as the Forbes reporter who uncovered the deception. Stephen Glass subsequently graduated from Georgetown Law School and fictionalized his own story in *The Fabulist*, a 2003 novel whose protagonist is named "Stephen Aaron Glass." We never saw the film when it came out in 2003 despite generally good reviews, but we were delighted to find it on HBO the other day. **GRADE B**

SHE SAID: 2022 (Available in theaters only) Starring Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan spotlighting the women who helped take down Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood producer and a Tinseltown legend. By now, there can't be too many movie watchers who don't (A) know who Weinstein is, (B) what he did, and (C) that he's now in jail. *She Said* is a dramatized chronicle of the journalistic reporting that helped put Weinstein in prison. A New York Times article shattered decades of silence around the subject of sexual assault in Hollywood and altered American culture forever. The shocking fact-based story served as a launching pad for the "MeToo" movement. Weinstein, was a large and bombastic man who used his power and persona to assault women. The movie also exposes a vast network of people who enabled him. Weinstein, who is briefly portrayed in the film, is currently serving a 23-year sentence in New York while also standing trial in Los Angeles on additional charges of sexual assault. The film scored 88% from critics on the Tomatometer and an 86% Audience Score. *She Said* takes its title from the expression "he said, she said," which is, sadly, still how rape cases are sometimes viewed. At a time when journalism is under siege, there is value in displaying its' nobler qualities and loftiest aspirations. *She Said* achieves that central mission. We also get a glimpse of how an investigation is built, sources confirmed and protected, and documents uncovered. It can take weeks and months of hard work to break a story. We get to experience the nuts and bolts of reporting which is not easy to depict since so much happens in emails, texts, & phone calls. As its title suggests, the focus of *She Said* is not on Weinstein but on the women he victimized and how they used their voices to bring him down. Barbara and I believe this is a movie worth seeing. Runtime: 2h 15m. **GRADE A**

SHERLOCK HOLMES: Leaving the theater, Gary said, "There are probably people who would enjoy this film. Sadly, I am not one of them." Nor am I. Director Guy Ritchie has taken a classic and turned it into a modern action thriller. Sometimes that works. This time it didn't for us. It takes place in a dark and dismal London, and the story isn't any brighter. It concerns black magic and a plot to kill all the members of Parliament, take over England, return America to the Commonwealth, and ultimately rule the world. Holmes (Downey) is assisted by Dr. Watson (Jude Law) and the beautiful Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams). I can find no fault with the acting, but I had no emotional connection to the characters. After being raised on the very proper Basil Rathbone Holmes, it was hard to see Downey playing the famous detective as a drug-addicted bare knuckle fighter. (And he never once said, "Elementary, my dear Watson.") I did like the way Ritchie showed us how Holmes came to his conclusions through observing the seemingly insignificant details. There are some energetic fight scenes—especially the one on the partially constructed Tower Bridge—that will no doubt please fans of action thrillers, but I found them rather boring. Our granddaughter, Carie, commented on Facebook that she had seen the movie, and wrote, "A snoozer." I must agree. Since the evil Professor Moriarty is introduced in the movie, there's bound to be at least one sequel in the works. We'll pass. **GRADE C-**

SHERLOCK HOLMES: A GAME OF SHADOWS: Neither Barbara nor I were taken with the 2009 Sherlock Holmes film directed by Guy Ritchie. Leaving that movie, I commented, "There are probably people who would enjoy this film. Sadly, I am not one of them." We were planning to miss this one but, on the recommendation of a trusted **Movie Views** reader, we decided to try the sequel. I am afraid our evaluation remains about the same. Perhaps we are too influenced by our fond memory of Basil Rathbone playing Sherlock in a more cerebral way or possibly we just have no tolerance for relentless unrealistic action. Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law again play the roles of Holmes and Watson and both are splendid actors. Sweden's Noomi Rapace, who skyrocketed to fame as Lisbeth Salander in the first film release of *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* plays the role of a gypsy fortune teller. Rachel McAdams returns with a very small role and Jared Harris, plays Holmes' evil nemesis, Professor Moriarty. For me the most engaging scene in the film came near the end when Holmes and Moriarty face off in a battle of wits over a chess board. But the Sherlock Holmes stories I remember and love were a celebration of the powers of deduction. I do not pretend to be unbiased in my evaluation of this film and if you are one who frequently enjoys science fiction and/or high energy, big budget films with fast action heroes, and especially if you liked the 2009 Sherlock Holmes, please ignore this review. **GRADE C-**

SHERRYBABY: (2006 release on DVD) Maggie Gyllenhaal shines as a young woman who has just gotten out of prison, sentenced for three years because she stole to support her heroin habit. She is desperately trying to stay clean and reconnect with her 5-year-old daughter. She also must find a job and deal with her stern parole officer. Gyllenhaal is masterful at playing a person who seems to have stepped out of real life. Her Sherry is sympathetic yet at the same time, maddeningly selfish and self-destructive. It is a tour-de-force for this young actress who we predict is going to become one of the very best. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

SHE'S OUT OF MY LEAGUE: There nothing new in this film about a loser who find himself dating a hottie. All of Kirk's (Jay Baruchel) friends agree he's not more than a five, but that Molly (Alice Eve) is a "hard ten." Kirk's self esteem is so low that he can't believe Molly really cares for him. Needless to say, the course of love does not run smoothly. Baruchel is good playing insecure and Eve is quite cute, but Kirk's family is so awful that they go beyond caricature, if that's possible. And his friends aren't much better. Gary smiled once or twice and said that a couple of nice scenes raised his grade to a C-. At first, I thought I could go a bit higher but, on reflection, I agree with his grade. This is a completely forgettable movie. Not worth your time. **GRADE C-**

THE SHINING: 1980 (Prime Video rental \$3.99) In honor of Shelly Duvall, who died at 75 (7/7/1949-7/11/2024) we decided to watch *The Shining*, one of her most famous movies. Discovered by Bernard Altman, she went on to make 7 movies for Altman, but will always be remembered for playing Jack Nicholson's wife in *The Shining* and for Olive Oyl in *Popeye*. The movie is based on the 1977 novel of the same name by Stephen King. The book is a gothic horror story that takes place in Colorado in the 1970s and follows the Torrance family, including alcoholic Jack (Jack Nicholson), his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and their five-year-old son Danny (Danny

Lloyd), who is plagued by psychic premonitions. King's personal experiences, such as his visit to the Stanley Hotel in 1974 and his struggles with alcoholism, influenced the novel's setting and characters. *The Shining*, first published in 1977, was King's third published novel and his first hardcover bestseller, helping to establish him as a leading horror author. Stephen King has been known to dislike Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaptation of his 1977 horror novel *The Shining*. King has called the film "maddening, perverse, and disappointing", and has said that the book was "warm" while the movie was "cold". King's criticisms stem from several factors, including differences in genre expectations. King's version was a traditional horror story with supernatural elements, while Kubrick's adaptation was more of an exploration of a psychopath's mind. I read the book before seeing the movie and remember I was terrified by both. Seeing the movie now, however, is only interesting from an historical perspective. It didn't scare me or Gary today. In fact, Kubrick seemed to drag out the ending unnecessarily. The movie should have been only two hours long, instead of 2 hours and 22 minutes. **GRADE A for historical interest and C for a horror movie, but maybe I was remembering the first time I saw *The Shining*.**

THE SHIPPING NEWS: I can certainly agree with Kevin Spacey's Golden Globe nomination for Best Actor. I think he is excellent as Quoyale, a "lump of a man" who has been broken by life. The movie is faithful to the novel by Annie Proulx, although she describes Quoyale as a grotesque and homely man. Spacey does look beaten down by life, he can't look grotesque. Flashbacks show us Quoyale's marriage to Petal (Cate Blanchett) and her ultimate demise. Quoyale and his daughter Bunny travel with Quoyale's Aunt Agnis (Judy Dench) to try and forge a life in New Foundland--not an easy place in which to live. (I must warn you that you will feel cold and damp for most of this film.) The threesome tries to live in the ancient Quoyale house--an unfriendly building with a dark past. Secrets are revealed and new friendships are formed, and the movie ends with a bit of hope for Quoyale and Bunny. Julianne Moore is her usual luminous self as Wavey, a widow with a young son, and Scott Glenn and Rhys Ifans ("Spike" in 1999's *Notting Hill*) create interesting characters. The director, Lasse Hallstrom, is a talented filmmaker. His previous credits include *Chocolat* and *Cider House Rules*. We liked this film quite a bit, but we didn't love it. So far this year, we have yet to see a movie to fall in love with. **GRADE: B+**

SHITHOUSE: (2020 on Amazon) Available for a nominal fee on Amazon Prime, this film proves to be more sensitive than you would think from its vulgar title. On brightly lit marquees the scatological title is more likely to be billed **as S#!%house**. The first thing that people should know about this drama is that even though the title refers to a party fraternity house on a college campus, it isn't going to be like Animal House. It is a coming-of-age tale more reminiscent of the 1995 talkative romance classic *Before Sunrise*. Cooper Raiff wears several hats in the making of S#!%house. He is not only the writer and director but also the co-producer and lead male actor in the film. Fifty-three critics wrote reviews that earned the film 96% on the Tomatometer. It is Raiff's feature film debut and it took top prize at this year's virtual SXSW film festival in Austin, Texas. They had to shift to a virtual model amidst the worsening COVID-19 crisis. For the most part it is a simple story taking place in an unnamed college in Los Angeles. The story centers on Alex and Maggie. Alex is a homesick freshman played by Raiff and Maggie is a sophomore who seems more socially comfortable with college life than Alex played by Dylan Gelula. After a bit of awkwardness, they settle into a long night together talking and walking around campus. Their conversation feels genuine and is sprinkled with enough humor to keep it interesting. Shithouse is by no means a groundbreaking movie, but at just 99 minutes of running time, it offers a good look at a new young filmmaker who has a promising future in the industry. Barbara and I enjoyed the movie even though we saw little of ourselves in the characters. Maybe, at our age, we have forgotten how hard it is to be 19. **GRADE B**

THE SIX TRIPPLE EIGHT: 2024 (Available for streaming on Netflix) This historical drama from writer-director Tyler Perry shines a spotlight on the 6888th Central Postal Directory of Army Corps Women consisting of predominantly Black women serving overseas during WWII. Kerry Washington stars as Captain Charity Adams, who became the Army's highest-ranking African American. The story of African American women in the armed forces has rarely been told. Their mission was sorting through a three-year backlog of letters and packages sent to millions of servicemen. At least six warehouses piled full from floor to ceiling greeted the battalion. Because many packages contained spoiled food items such as cake and fried chicken, they grew mildew and attracted scavenging rats. The women were given six months to clear the backlog of undelivered mail. While the task was daunting enough, the battalion also confronted racism and misogyny. The deadline was intended to ensure their failure. It didn't. Barbara and I found film fascinating. **GRADE B+**

SHOLEM ALEICHEM, LAUGHING IN THE DARKNESS: For me, the hour and a half spent with this rich documentary was a great learning experience. It is not surprising that a "goy" like I am, would not be well acquainted with the life and writings of Sholem Aleichem whose real name was Solomon Rabinovich. He is best known as the writer whose short stories were the basis of the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. When he died at age 57 in 1916, an estimated 100,000 mourners lined the streets of New York for his funeral procession. Aleichem is celebrated throughout the world with statues, street names, coins, and stamps. There is even an impact crater on the planet Mercury that bears his name. During his life he was often called the Yiddish Mark Twain. Supposedly Twain, upon hearing this, said to tell Aleichem that Twain was the American Sholem Aleichem. Critics loved this movie even more than polled audiences, perhaps because documentaries rarely have spectacular chases and explosions. The movie captures the spirit of the man and the troubled times in which he struggled. A half-dozen actors, led by Peter Riegert, help move the story along. Though documentaries are not widely viewed and are often difficult to find, Barbara and I agree this is one you may wish to consider. **GRADE B**

SHIRLEY: 2024 (Netflix) Considering what's happening in politics today, made us want to watch the story of the first Black congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm, and her trailblazing run for president of the United States in 1972. She deserves a better movie! Rotten Tomatoes called the movie a fairly standard biopic. It was pedestrian at best. Chisholm was an American politician who, in 1968, became the first black woman to be elected to the United States Congress. Chisholm represented New York's 12th congressional district, a district centered in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn for seven terms from 1969 to 1983. In 1972, she became the first black candidate for a major-party nomination for President of the United States and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. In her presidential announcement, Chisholm described herself as representative of the people and offered a new articulation of American identity: "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and equally proud of that. I am the candidate of the people and my presence before you symbolizes a new era in American political history." (Wikipedia) Her campaign slogan was Unbought and Unbossed, and she was that! Throughout her career, she was known for taking a resolute stand against economic, social, and political injustices," as well as being a strong supporter of black civil rights and women's rights. But her running for President was ignored by the

Democratic political establishment, and her black male colleagues provided little support. She later said, "When I ran for the Congress, when I ran for president, I met more discrimination as a woman than for being black. Men are men." She said, "They think I am trying to take power from them. The black man must step forward, but that doesn't mean the black woman must step back." (Wikipedia) McGovern won the nomination, but Chisholm's run demonstrated her refusal to accept the status quo. (Maybe the documentary **Shirley Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed** (2005) is a better film. I'll have to watch it. The film is on Prime Video.) Gary and I give Shirley Chisholm an A+ but the movie, unfortunately, only deserves a B or C. If you don't know Chisholm, it's not bad film to start getting acquainted with her. **GRADE B/C**

SHOPGIRL: One criterion for a good film is leaving the theater intending to read the book on which the film was based. Barbara asked me to write the review because that is the way I felt. With the exception of one flawed scene, I loved this charming and thought provoking film. Steve Martin wrote the screenplay as well as the novella on which it was based. He also produced and starred in the film. Although many associate Martin with quirky comedy, and this film certainly has several chuckles, it aims more for the heart than the funny bone. Claire Danes is excellent in the title role, playing a fragile and lonely young woman who is trying to make it as an artist in Los Angeles. She spends her daytime hours clerking behind the glove counter at Saks Fifth Avenue. Two men are attracted to the shop girl: Ray (Steve Martin) a wealthy older man and Jeremy (Jason Schwartzman, **Rushmore**) a rather strange young man. The story is touching, but not predictable and I challenge anyone who sees the film to guess which scene I found to be flawed. I have to give the film a B+, but Barbara says B. **GRADE B+/B**

SHOPLIFTERS: (2018) This is a subtitled Japanese film. It is the kind of film that critics tend to love as evidenced by the 99% score it received from 115 critics on the *Rotten Tomatoes* Tomatometer. It also won the coveted Palme d'Or at Cannes this year and was Japan's entry for the best foreign language film at the Academy Awards competition. The movie was written and directed by the admired Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda who has made 17 features in the last 25 years. **ShoPLifters** examines what life is like for people who have been thrown away by society. It asks the profound question, "What is the true meaning of family?" In a tenderhearted way it suggests that we may be born into families of strangers (or worse) and that we may find our true families, the people who genuinely care for us, among strangers we meet in the world. The cast is uniformly brilliant; especially an adorable five-year-old called Yuri, a girl victimized by abusive parents. As is often the case with foreign films, the pace is slow moving at first, but is unexpectedly powerful by the touching end. Barbara and I liked the film, but fear that most of our readers will not have the opportunity to see it. **GRADE B+/B**

THE SHORT HISTORY OF THE LONG ROAD: 2020 (Included with Prime) The movie was recommended by **Holly V., IL** and that was enough for Gary and me. We knew we would like it—and we did! I checked it out on RT and the movie got 89% from the critics and 82% from audiences. The consensus from the critics was, *A potential breakout vehicle for its writer-director as well as its star, The Short History of the Long Road finds fresh byways along its well-traveled path.* It is the film debut of the former Disney Channel star Sabrina Carpenter, and she is outstanding playing Nola. There have been many movies about road trips, but this one is unique. It starts out with a father (Clint) and daughter (Nola) leaving their foreclosed home with an old VW van. "Freedom" is Clint's refrain, as he does odd jobs to raise money for their "free" life on the road. Nola is curious about her birth mother but she doesn't ask too many questions about Cheryl because her father is reluctant to talk about her. When Nola's father dies suddenly, she is forced to continue on the road trip alone. (Fortunately, Nola knows how to drive.) She has many adventures and meets some interesting people—even her birth mother, but she doesn't find a family until the end of the movie. Or does she? Anyway you interpret the ending, you know Nola will be OK! **GRADE B+**

SHORT TERM 12: (2013) This is a beautifully written and acted independent film that reminds Barb and me why we go out of our way to see so many. It is movies like this that give independent films such a good name. Writer/director Destin Daniel Cretton draws from his own experiences working in a short-term home for at-risk teenagers. Little did he know that his first job after graduating from college would provide him with rich experiences that would lead to a highly acclaimed first feature film. I predict that this is a break-out film for Cretton as well as for the leading actress, Brie Larson. There is not a weak scene in the movie and though many scenes are low key, they are powerful and moving. Larson plays Grace, a young girl who is dedicated to helping kids who have slipped through the cracks of the system while struggling with her own troubled past. She has more therapeutic intuition in her untrained little finger than many trained therapists have after years of formal study. There are no big names in the cast list, but Cretton has assembled a truly believable and memorable ensemble. The title refers to an LA residential facility that houses troubled teenagers, usually fewer than 12 months, while they're between court dates or foster homes. We think this is a rare gem of a film and worth a little extra effort to find. **GRADE A**

SHORT TERM 12: (2013/2020) Barbara and I first saw this wonderful movie in a theater in 2013. Now, seven years later, we streamed it at home on *Amazon Prime Video*. I wrote the review for **Movie Views** then and I don't think I can improve on it except to say we loved it as much the second time as we did the first.

*This is a beautifully written and acted independent film that reminds Barb and me why we go out of our way to see so many. It is movies like this that give independent films such a good name. Writer/director Destin Daniel Cretton draws from his own experiences working in a short-term home for at-risk teenagers. Little did he know that his first job after graduating from college would provide him with rich experiences that would lead to a highly acclaimed first feature film. I predict that this is a break-out film for Cretton as well as for the leading actress, Brie Larson. There is not a weak scene in the movie and though many scenes are low key, they are powerful and moving. Larson plays Grace, a young girl who is dedicated to helping kids who have slipped through the cracks of the system while struggling with her own troubled past. She has more therapeutic intuition in her untrained little finger than many trained therapists have after years of formal study. There are no big names in the cast list, but Cretton has assembled a truly believable and memorable ensemble. The title refers to an LA residential facility that houses troubled teenagers, usually fewer than 12 months, while they're between court dates or foster homes. We think this is a rare gem of a film and worth a little extra effort to find. **GRADE A***

(We did recognize John Gallagher Jr. an actor who has done quite well in Hollywood.

We were especially impressed with his portrayal of Jim Harper in

Aaron Sorkin's drama series, **The Newsroom**.)

SHREK: Shrek is a huge green ogre. He showers in mud and has a major ear wax problem. But, he is exceedingly likeable, and his donkey friend is hilarious. Gary, who usually avoids animated films, said this was the best one he has ever seen. We took our Grandson, Nathan, with us and all three of us pronounced the movie EXCELLENT and VERY FUNNY. It is also a heartwarming fairy tale in which an imprisoned princess finds her true love and her true form. The computer animation is incredible! Eddie Murphy is the voice for Donkey and many of his lines resonate with adults. *Shrek* fractures a lot of fairy tale conventions--look for the Princess/Bluebird duet and the torture sequence involving a Gingerbread Man. It is sometimes naughty but never mean-spirited. (*Shrek* has a PG rating.) I can guarantee that, unless you have lost your funnybone, you WILL laugh. Both kids and adults will enjoy the movie, albeit on different levels. I liked how Producer Jeffrey Katzenberg poked fun at Disney, his former employer and legal adversary--watch for the rope waiting lines at the castle entrance. The sinister Lord Farquaad, voiced by John Lithgow, is extremely short, reminding us that Michael Eisner, the Disney chief, once said of Katzenberg, "I hate that little midget." Cameron Diaz is the voice for the liberated princess, and Mike Myers gives a nice Scottish brogue to the ogre. I do not think we have seen the last of Shrek and his friends. **GRADE: A**

SHREK 2: We loved the original *Shrek* (2001) so we were anxious to see this sequel. Of course, no sequel can reproduce the surprise of the original, but this one is a lot of fun. A bit slow getting started, the film has plenty of laughs once it gets going. The movie pays homage to many films but you'd have to see it several times to notice and remember all of them. Be sure not to miss the *Flashdance* bit in the Fairy Godmother's production number near the end of the movie. Eddie Murphy is hilarious as Donkey, and Antonio Banderas is equally amusing as Puss-in Boots. Mike Myers and Cameron Diaz are charming as Shrek and Fiona. Julie Andrews voices Queen Lillian, Fiona's mother, John Cleese talks for King Harold and, in a surprising bit of casting, Larry King voices the Ugly Stepsister. Many fairy tale characters are used creatively. There's a particularly funny scene involving Pinocchio. We may have to reevaluate our position on animated features after seeing these two *Shrek* movies. **GRADE B+**

SHUTTER ISLAND: Academy Award winning director Martin Scorsese and multi-Academy Award nominee Leonard DiCaprio team up again, but the professional critics are all over the map in their evaluations. Reviews range from declaring the film "dynamic movie magic" to declaring it the "cinematic equivalent of a bait and switch scam." Ostensibly, two U.S. marshals are summoned to an institution for the criminally insane located on a bleak foreboding island miles off the coast of Massachusetts. Scorsese has surrounded his leading actor with a powerful cast including Ben Kingsley, Mark Ruffalo, Max von Sydow, Emily Mortimer, Jackie Earle Haley, Michelle Williams, and Patricia Clarkson. This is a stylized psychological thriller set in the mid-1950's in a fortress-like mental hospital. Even the ominous background music reminds us of films from the 1950's. Oh, I should mention it is a dark and stormy night. Since I don't want to ruin the surprises in this unfolding mystery, I will tell you very little about it. If you are offended by flashbacks, dream sequences, moody photography, or feel manipulated by plot twists that remind you of shell game deception, you may want to avoid this film. But Barbara and I are big fans of Scorsese (*Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, Gangs of New York, The Departed*) and also of DiCaprio (*Titanic, Gangs of New York, The Departed*), and we will go with the critics who liked *Shutter Island*. **GRADE B+**

SICARIO: (2015) "Sicario" is Spanish for "hitman." The drug cartels hire hitmen and, according to this film, the CIA hires hitmen. Are our hitmen more honorable than theirs? See *Sicario* and decide for yourself. The movie opens with an FBI swat team moving on a house suspected of being part of the drug trade. That the house was in Chandler, Arizona brought it close to home for us. A gruesome discovery in the house and an explosion in the backyard give testimony to the evilness of the drug trade. Emily Blunt is Kate, an FBI agent in charge of that opening raid. As a result, she is asked to be part of an inter-departmental task force, combining the efforts of the DEA and the FBI. Josh Brolin is in charge of the team, and his right-hand man is a Columbian national named Alejandro; played by Benicio Del Toro. It isn't long before Kate realizes that things are not what they seem. She suspects that the CIA is involved, and that Alejandro has his own agenda. When the task force ventures into Juarez, Mexico, the sight of headless bodes hanging from an overpass convinced Gary and me to take that city off our travel list. That was only the beginning of the violence. Be warned, *Sicario* is full of bloodshed. It is also full of excitement and powerful performances. Blunt and Brolin are first-rate, but it was Benicio Del Toro's intensity that astonished us. He is terrific. "This is the land of wolves now," says Alejandro, as if that justifies anything that is done to fight the wolves. Does it? **GRADE A-**

SICKO: Both Barbara and I are fond of films that make us laugh, make us cry, and make us think. Using these three criteria, *Sicko* easily qualifies as an excellent film. I am sure some of our readers have prejudged this film, hate Michael Moore, and are as likely to see *Sicko* as they are to vote for a Democrat in the next presidential election. The film focuses on the U. S. Healthcare Industry. It doesn't take a genius to recognize that our Healthcare Industry has many flaws. The genius is in Moore's ability to make a two hour movie that can hold our attention with stories and observations that are heart rending and sometimes funny. Michael Moore is not a humble man, but even many of his critics acknowledge that he is more focused and on target in this film than in his previous efforts. He only briefly mentions the millions of people who are without health coverage in the United States and he refrains from doggedly hunting down C.E.O.'s of Health Insurance Companies for interviews. Instead, he concentrates on the poignant and often infuriating stories of people who have been hurt by an industry designed to generate profit by denying often legitimate claims of people who believed they would be cared for. I believe this is a documentary that deserves to be seen by everyone instead of the small percentage of our population that will actually attend. I say A-; Barb says B+. **GRADE A-/B+**

SIDEWALKS OF NEW YORK: We really liked this movie written and directed by Edward Burns. Burns obviously respects the talent of Woody Allen, and he has created a New York relationship movie for the 21st Century. You can almost hear Allen saying some of the lines, but thank goodness we don't have to see him romancing another much younger woman! The six lovers talk to the camera throughout the movie, and that, combined with the hand-held filming technique, make *Sidewalks* look like a documentary. All the characters are funny and fun to watch. Stanley Tucci is outstanding as a philandering dentist; Heather Graham looks adorable in her tiny horn-rimmed glasses; Brittany Murphy (*Don't Say A Word*) is sort of a young Meg Ryan; and Dennis Farina is letter-perfect as a sleazy womanizer who gives very bad advice to Burns. This is not a great film--it won't go down as a classic like *Annie Hall*--but it is very enjoyable. We laughed a lot and came out of the theater smiling. **GRADE: B+**

SIDE EFFECTS: (2013) Emily (Rooney Mara) is depressed. Her life fell apart when her handsome successful husband (Channing Tatum in a throw-away role) is sent to prison for insider trading. But now he has been recently released, and Emily is still depressed. After an apparent suicide attempt, she begins to see a psychiatrist (Jude Law), who prescribes drugs to help make her feel better—drugs that have serious side effects. And thereby hangs a tale that starts out as an indictment of pharmaceuticals but takes a sharp turn into a very different kind of story. We had some problems with this movie. Some twists surprise and impress us; some make us feel manipulated. The twist in this movie falls into the latter category. I don't like it when a movie shows us scenes that never happened, but are only part of the setup. We also had a problem with what we considered were flimsy motivations. Mara is a hot property since her success in the U.S. version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, but I, for one, am underwhelmed. I kept wishing she would get that hair off her face! It was nice to see Jude Law performing well in a juicy role, and Catherine Zeta-Jones looked fabulous, as usual. *Rotten Tomatoes*' give it 85% on their critics ratings, but only 70% on their audience ratings. Gary can't give this movie more than a C+, but I could go as high as B-. **GRADE B-/C+**

SIDEWAYS: This gem of a film was the hit of the New York Film Festival and we can see why. Paul Giamatti (*American Splendor*) is Miles—a recently divorced failed writer. Thomas Haden Church (TV's *Wings*) is Jack—a B-list actor whose career is fading and is about to marry for the first time. The two are best friends. *Sideways* lets us travel along with them as they take the week before Jack's wedding to visit the California wine country. It is one of the best buddy pictures we've ever seen—funny and touching at the same time. The two actors are splendid and work together beautifully. The women they meet on the trip are played by Virginia Madsen and Sandra Oh and they are equally impressive. Miles is a wine expert and talks about wine a great deal. (It made me long for a glass.) In one memorable scene, Miles tells Maya (Virginia Madsen) why he is attracted to the pinot noir grape, and we realize that in describing the grape he is describing his life. Director Alexander Payne adapted the screenplay with his longtime writing partner, Jim Taylor, from the book by Rex Pickett. Payne has made three other wonderful movies, *Citizen Ruth*, *Election*, and *About Schmidt*. This one makes it four. Ebert said this about Payne: *He finds plots that service his characters, instead of limiting them. The characters are played not by the first actors you would think of casting, but by actors who will prevent you from ever being able to imagine anyone else in their roles.* There's at least one Oscar nomination for Giamatti here but, if there's any justice in the world, Virginia Madsen and Church should also get nominations. **GRADE A**

SIDNEY: 2022 (In select theaters and on Apple TV+) Who can forget that line from *In the Heat of the Night*, "They call me Mr. Tibbs." Or, when a white man slapped him in that same movie, and Poitier slapped him back. That was the slap heard around the world! Directed by Reginald Hudlin (*Marshall* (2017)), it tells the remarkable life of the actor and activist. He was the first black man to win the Best Actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, and became an international film star. The documentary has a deep bench of talking heads: Oprah Winfrey, Spike Lee, Robert Redford, Morgan Freeman, Barbra Streisand, critics Greg Tate and Nelson George, five of Poitier's six daughters, and both of his wives. But the strongest voice is Poitier's, reminiscing directly to the camera in footage shot for Winfrey a few years before his death at 94 last January. In 1967, he told Katharine Houghton, with whom he starred in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, that he had probably made his last movie because "they're calling me an Uncle Tom." Fortunately, it was not true. He went on to make many more movies. Later in his career he became a director famous for *Stir Crazy* with Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor. Some of his memories are intensely moving, while other moments in *Sidney* are unsparing. He was a man who tried every day to be a better man than he was the day before—not a better actor, but a better man! I'll end this with a Ty Burr statement: "The movie's a tribute to a monument that takes care to remind us he was human." (Both Gary and I had tears in our eyes when the movie finished.) **GRADE A**

SIGNS: At the beginning of this movie, everyone talks like they are on a high dosage of Prozac, so you know it's going to be serious and scary. It does have some scary moments and I suspect it will be popular at the box office. However, Gary and I were underwhelmed. Of course, we usually don't care for science fiction/exterrestrial films to begin with, unless they are comedies. M. Night Shyamalan's first film, *The Sixth Sense* established his credentials as a journeyman filmmaker, and we admire his skill at building mystery and suspense. We just don't care much for the stories he tells. You probably know that this film is about crop circles and aliens—although it is actually more about fear and faith. Mel Gibson is Graham Hess, a Protestant Priest who left the church when his wife was killed in a freak accident. He and his two children are still grieving for their lost life. (Maybe that's why they all act as if they were drugged.) Joaquin Phoenix is Merrill Hess, Graham's younger brother. We can admire the mood that Shyamalan creates, and we can't fault the acting, but, considering our enjoyment factor, we can't go higher on this one than **GRADE: C+/B-**

SILVER CITY: Gary and I have been avid fans of John Sayles since his 1980 film *Return of the Secaucus 7*. He structures his stories in a stylish way and populates his films with fascinating characters. His casts include some of Hollywood's best actors, and I suspect that actors rarely say "no" to a Sayles film. He certainly knows how to bring out the best in his actors. *Silver City* is a political film about a candidate, Richard "Dickie" Pilager (Chris Cooper) who is running for Governor of Colorado. It is obvious that Cooper's character is modeled after G.W. Bush. (For example, Dickie is inarticulate without a script.) But Dickie Pilager isn't really the main character. As Sayles did in his wonderful *Lone Star*, he uses a murder to get the story rolling. Danny O'Brien (Danny Huston) is a former journalist/investigator who has been hired by Dickie's campaign manager (Richard Dreyfuss, as a Karl Rove type) to look into things. O'Brien uncovers a twisted story of corporate influence and political shenanigans. Along the way, O'Brien talks with many people: A right-wing conservative radio talk show host (Miguel Ferrer), an anti-environment corporate mogul who has Pilager's political party in his pocket (Kris Kristofferson), Dickie's estranged sister who is trying to make the Olympic archery team (Daryl Hannah), an investigative journalist who is a former flame (Maria Bello), and O'Brien's former editor who now runs an alternative news website (Tim Roth). Michael Murphy plays Dickie's father, Senator Judd Pilager, and Mary Kay Place is O'Brien's boss. Everyone is terrific, but Daryl Hannah is especially so. We also liked Danny Huston (*21 Grams*). John Sayles wrote and directed this R-rated film. We liked it. **GRADE B+**

SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK: (2012) Barbara and I went to this movie with high hopes and we were not disappointed. It is a charming, touching and funny romantic comedy and we were both delighted with the leads and the supporting cast. Bradley Cooper (*The Hangover*) stars as Pat, a just-released bipolar patient from a psychiatric hospital who returns to his family home. Jennifer Lawrence (*Winter's Bone* and *The Hunger Games*) plays Tiffany, a recently widowed "tell it like it is" neighbor with some serious

issues of her own. Robert DeNiro (one of the best actors of our generation) plays Pat's obsessive-compulsive father who rarely has his mind off the Philadelphia Eagles. It may not sound like the ingredients of a good romantic comedy, but it played out well for us. The film is ably directed by David O. Russell who has made a career of making good but rather quirky films. He was the director on the only film set I ever spent any time on when I was a stand in for Alan Alda in *Flirting with Disaster*. *Silver Lining Playbook* is peopled with lovably imperfect characters and smartly written scenes with a good balance between humor and compassion. We think this is an immensely likable movie and hope it is one you chose see. I predict you will see some Oscar nominations coming. It deserves them.

GRADE A

SIMONE: *Simone* hasn't gotten very good reviews, so we didn't expect much. However, we were pleasantly surprised. This cynical comedy about actors and moviemaking amused us. Viktor Taransky (Al Pacino) is a has-been movie director whose current project is about to be shelved because his prima-donna star has fled the set. Taransky's ex-wife, Elaine (Catherine Keener), is the studio head, and she tells Victor that she will not renew his contract. Enter a strange character: Hank Aleno (Elias Koteas) is a computer wizard who has perfected a digital human being, and he leaves the hard drive to Taransky in his will. Nine months later, a new star is born. Taransky inserts his digital creation, Simone (short for Simulation One), into his movie and not only is the movie a tremendous success, but audiences fall in love with Simone. Taransky goes to great lengths to present Simone as a recluse and keep her out of sight, but the press and the public are insatiable. There comes a time when Taransky tries to "put the genie back in the bottle," but this turns out to be difficult. Although some of the technical aspects of *Simone* are unrealistic, it may not be long before such technology exists. Much of what we see now on the screen has been digitized. Pacino plays Taransky with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, and we appreciated the light touch he brings to his role. Keener (*Lovely And Amazing*) is hot these days, perhaps because she is a real "live" actor. And a good one. We think this film deserves a **GRADE B**.

A SIMPLE FAVOR: (2018) When Blake Lively read the screenplay for *A Simple Favor*, she was anxious both to do the part and to work with the director of *Bridesmaids*, Paul Feig. But, she had a question. She asked Feig, "Is this a comedy or a thriller?" He answered, "Yes." And that sums up this entertaining thriller/comedy starring Lively and Anna Kendrick. The two women make for unlikely best friends. They couldn't be more different. The only thing they have in common is that both moms have sons the same age and in the same school. Stephanie (Kendrick) is a widow who hosts a blog in which she demonstrates recipes, crafts and homemaking tips. Emily (Lively) is glamorous and worldly, has a high-powered job and likes her martinis strong. When Emily asks Stephanie to pick up her son from school, and doesn't return for four days, the blogger/mom expresses her concern to all her blog followers. She also, to quote our local critic, "turns Nancy Drew to discover what happened to her missing best friend." What follows is a superabundance of twists and turns that kept us guessing and engaged. It is, indeed, both a thriller and a comedy. Gary thought the movie was perfectly cast and liked Kendrick as Stephanie more than he has liked her in other roles. I thought both the women were excellent, as was Emily's husband, played by Henry Golding, who recently starred in *Crazy Rich Asians*. We liked the movie a lot. **GRADE B+**

SIN CITY: Visually and technically this film is extraordinary. It is a comic book—excuse me, "graphic novel"—come to life. Unfortunately, that technical and visual excellence only interested us for the first half of the movie; after that, it got tedious. The plot and hard-boiled dialogue are also comic book inspired. I agree with EW's reviewer who thought the dialogue sounded like "Guy Noir parodies from Garrison Keillor." Take this line for example: "It's a lousy room in a lousy part of a lousy town." Doesn't that sound just like Guy Noir? The all-star cast did all their scenes in front of a blue screen and the backgrounds were filled in digitally. We were especially impressed by Mickey Rourke as Marv, a hulking tough-guy who got shot multiple times and somehow miraculously recovered. Of course, that applied to most of the guys in the film. The women aren't as lucky. The cast includes Bruce Willis, Rosario Dawson (looking fabulous), Benicio Del Toro, Clive Owen, Michael Madsen, Brittany Murphy, and Michael Clarke Duncan. Creativity of filmmaking—A; Entertainment value for us—C. **GRADE C**

SIN NOMBRE: *Sin Nombre (Without Name)* is in Spanish with English subtitles. Only 96 minutes long, it is a remarkable film, especially when you realize it is the first feature film by director Cary Fukunaga. Fukunaga, an American, decided to make this film after reading a 2003 story about 80 illegals found locked in a truck and abandoned in Texas. Nineteen died. This Sundance prizewinning film is not about that incident, but was inspired by it. It is a gripping story of escape and survival in which a teenage girl, fleeing poverty, meets a boy who is running for his life after killing his gang's leader. You will recognize none of the actors, but you may be moved by the incredible hardship and danger people go through hoping for a better life. It is not a happy film, but as with *Slumdog Millionaire*, you will be exposed to experiences that may change your perception of the world. **GRADE B**

SING: (2016) I know why our friend, and loyal reader, Peg C., liked this animated feature—it's the show business theme. An optimistic koala bear impresario named Buster Moon (Matthew McConaughey) owns a rundown theater. In a last-ditch effort to save it and restore it to its former glory, he stages a singing competition. The story is one of believing in yourself, never giving up, and not letting fear keep you from doing what you were meant to do. I probably didn't like it quite as much as Peg did, but I did enjoy it more than I usually do animated features. That may be because of the music and the animators skill in giving these unlovely animals lovely humanoid personalities. I especially enjoyed Miss Crawley, Buster Moon's lizard assistant with the glass eye she kept losing. And the singing was great. From a mouse who crooned *My Way* (Seth McFarland) to a shy elephant who blew me away with her final number. (That Jennifer Hudson has some incredible pipes!) The movie earned a respectable 69% from critics on the *Tomatometer* and *Sing* got a Golden Globe nomination for Best Animated Motion Picture. However, *Zootopia* bested out *Sing* for the GG, and *Sing* was snubbed by the Oscars. I'm afraid Gary was not as entertained as I was, and declines to participate in a grade. **Grade B**

SING SING (Available for streaming on Prime Video) *Sing Sing* is a 2023 American prison drama based on a real program, RTA, that is still in place at Sing Sing and other New York prisons. RTA stands for "*Rehabilitation Through the Arts*," and centers on a group of incarcerated men involved in the creation of theatrical stage shows. The majority of the cast members are formerly incarcerated men who were themselves alumni of the RTA program during their incarceration. Prisoners in maximum security prisons like Sing Sing are often ignored by society. They are completely written off and treated as inhuman. This movie offers a unique perspective on how this group tried to feel human again. The film's goal was to authentically portray the impact of RTA on the men who found purpose by acting in a theatre group alongside other incarcerated men in this story of resilience, humanity, and the transformative power of art. **Sing**

Sing is more than just a movie based on a remarkable true story. The film features actors playing fictionalized versions of themselves — or, more accurately, the people they were when they lived the story in the script. Barbara and I liked the film. **GRADE B+**

SING STREET: (2016) It's the 1980s in Dublin and Conor's battling parents are cash strapped. They decide to take Conor out of his private school and send him to a nearby inner-city school where the kids are tough and the teachers are tougher. One day, he sees a beautiful girl, and in an effort to attract her, invites her to star in his band's music video. There a problem, though: Coner doesn't have a band. Quickly, very quickly, he reinvents himself as Cosmo and he and a friend put a band together. Those scenes bring back memories of another Irish musical movie, *The Commitments* (1991). *Sing Street* didn't delight us as much as the earlier movie, but it's quite charming in its own way. It's interesting to speculate how many of the famous musical groups began in the same haphazard fashion. Ferdia Walsh-Peelo, appearing in his very first movie role as Conor/Cosmo, is very appealing and quite a good singer, too. The band's music was reminiscent of the early 1980s and very enjoyable. Lucy Boynton is perfect as Raphina, the girl of Conor's dreams. The young love story is winning and we expect to see much more of this talented duo. The companion story of Conor and his older brother adds some depth to a movie that was highly praised by the critics. The romantic ending, with Conor and Raphina sailing off to London so she can become a super model and he a famous singer, was rather clichéd, but how else to end a movie about puppy love and the young urge to become famous? *Sing Street* was written and directed by John Carney. Carney previously wrote and directed *Once* (2007) and *Begin Again* (2013). I'll repeat a comment made in our review of *Once*: *But, we had a problem with the film. The songs in the movie are about feelings and experiences, so it's important to understand the words. However, that was difficult for us, perhaps because of the Irish accents. I missed some of the lyrics and Gary missed most of them.* That's why I'm writing this review. We gave a "B" to both of Carney's previous films, and, mostly because of the difficulty with the accents, that's our grade for *Sing Street*. **GRADE B**

SING YOUR SONG: (2011) This is a terrific HBO documentary about the extraordinary life of Harry Belafonte. We remember him primarily as an entertainer and the singer of songs such as "The Banana Boat Song" and "Scarlet Ribbons. He was dubbed the "King of Calypso" for popularizing the Caribbean musical style, but his life was about so much more. This film unearths his significant contribution to and his leadership in the civil rights movement in America and to social justice globally. It is inspiring to see how many lives he has touched all around the world. He numbered Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela among his friends. Hoping to inspire a new generation of activists, Belafonte allows director Susanne Rostock intimate access to his life to document his many decades as a performer and as a tireless advocate for human rights around the world. The documentary is available from Netflix and we highly recommend it. Even if you are too young to remember him, we think the documentary will be a rewarding look at the history of the Civil Rights movement. **GRADE A**

A SINGLE MAN: Colin Firth once said, *The first actor who really blew me away was Paul Scofield in A Man For All Seasons. I'd never seen such integrity in acting, and it struck me as a fascinating paradox because acting is artifice. It can be argued to be entirely false. I thought, how can an actor suggest such truth?* Firth must have figured out how to do it, because in this film he brings his character to life with remarkable honesty. Firth is George, a man who is struggling to handle the sudden death of his long-time partner. The film follows him for one fateful day during which we catch glimpses of his relationship with Jim (Matthew Goode) through flashbacks as George remembers moments of their life together. One of the flashbacks is a wrenching scene where we watch George learn of Jim's death—a scene I will not soon forget. I am in awe of an actor who can bring such heartbreaking sincerity to such a quiet scene and never appear to be "acting." A transplanted Londoner teaching at a Los Angeles college in 1962, George is an enigma to most of his associates and students, perhaps because in those days homosexuals were, of necessity, an invisible minority. Julianne Moore and Nicholas Hoult are excellent in small but pivotal roles. The story is based on a novel by Christopher Isherwood who was an openly gay writer in a deeply closeted age. One critic wrote that *A Single Man* was about "the pain of the closet," and we see that pain in Firth's eyes. However, the film techniques used by the director are sometimes intrusive, and the sad story may not appeal to everyone. We thought this was an "A" performance in a "B" movie. We agree with the Boston Globe critic who said, *There's a lot, in fact, that keeps this film from greatness. One performance alone recommends it. That's enough.* Indeed, it is! **GRADE B**

SR. 2022 (Netflix) This unusual documentary is like the independent movies that Robert Downey Sr. must have made with titles like *Sweet Smell of Sex, Chafed Elbows, Putney Swope, Pound, Greaser's Palace, Hugo Pool, and Two Tons of Turquoise to Taos Tonight*. I don't want to see those movies because, well, I just don't get it. Gary felt the same way about the documentary, because he gave up ¾ of the through it. Filmed over three years, *Sr.* is an intimate exploration of the maverick director's colorful life and rebellious career as well as his relationship with his son before he passed away from Parkinson's disease. He made nearly 20 indie films in his career and many are featured in the doc. In what could only be called chaotic, the Sr. Downey participated in all aspects of the project until his death in 2021. (Is it any wonder that Paul Thomas Anderson loved Sr.'s filmmaking. I don't get PTA either.) Robert Downy Jr. said in an interview, "This whole project sadly started off for me, honestly, it was an avoidance pattern. How do I deal with the fact that this larger than life character who I spent so many years influenced by, is not well?" He has trouble viewing the last 20 minutes because his father, whom he loved is dying. IMDb has this description of the documentary: *Follow the tender but appropriately irreverent account of the life and career of Robert Downey Sr., the fearless and visionary American director who set the standard for countercultural comedy in the 1960s and 1970s.* I, apparently, don't understand the countercultural comedy of the '60s & '70s. I didn't understand the documentary either. I only watched it to the end because I was going to review it. With apologies to *Rotten Tomatoes* who gave it a 98% from Critics and 91% from audiences. **GRADE D**

A RT critic wrote, "This is one of the best movies of the year, unmissable even if you've never seen a Downey Sr. movie."

THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS: I don't think there's a woman alive who doesn't secretly believe that if she could find the perfect pair of jeans it could change her life. We spend a lot of our lives searching for that perfect pair of pants. When four teenaged friends find a pair of jeans that miraculously fits all of them perfectly, even though they are vastly different in size and shape, they buy the pants and form a sisterhood. During one summer vacation, they pass the pants around, convinced that they are magic. And they may be. Each of their lives does, indeed, change that summer. Two find love—one in an unsuspected place, one learns about herself and comes to grips with her mother's death, and the fourth is able to connect with an absent father. This movie is a delight and

the four actresses are incredibly appealing. Gary noticed that he and one other young man were the only audience members of the male persuasion in the theater that afternoon. But he enjoyed the movie almost as much as I did. It's funny and touching and lovely. It is based on a best-selling and wildly popular teen novel. Not having read the book, we were not hampered in our enjoyment of the movie by comparisons to the printed word. The actresses are Amber Tamblyn (TV's *Joan of Arcadia*), Alexis Bledel (TV's *The Gilmore Girls*), Blake Lively (new to us), and America Ferrera (so good in *Real Women Have Curves*). **GRADE B+**

THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS 2: The magic jeans are still traveling, although the girls are a bit older. Graduated from high school, the friends have separated to different colleges. They are even spending their first summer vacations away from each other. As the pants travel from one girl to another, we get a scene or two bringing us up-to-date on the recipient's life. Amber Tamblyn, Alexis Bledel, America Ferrera and Blake Lively are as appealing as they were in the first film. Ferrera's story was our favorite because most of it takes place at a summer stock theatre in Vermont. We were especially glad to see Blyth Danner playing Lively's grandmother. In another bit of interesting casting, Ernie Lively, Blake's real-life dad, plays her father in the film. In the final scenes we are once again treated to the gorgeous scenery of the island of Santorini, Greece. Although Gary was not thrilled with the first part of the movie, he was eventually drawn in to the stories and thought it ended well. James Berardinelli of Reel Views said, "As chick flicks go, this is one men can attend with the expectation that they might just enjoy experiencing two hours alongside these down-to-earth, appealing characters." Travis Nichols of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* said, "It's enjoyable, even if it's extremely slight – a fine diversion from the Dark Knights and Hellboys of summer." We agree with them both. **GRADE B**

SISTERS: (2015) We like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler a lot and our local paper gave *Sisters* 4 stars, so we decided to give this post-Apatow comedy a try. We were disappointed. (And **that** is an understatement. The two stars have undeniable chemistry and their comedy timing is definitely in-sync. As one critic said "If they can apply that to movies that are actually good, they may still make some classics. We know that the extremely forgettable *Sisters* will never become a classic. It is primarily a party movie—one in which drugs and alcohol fuel the destruction of a house. Instead of finding this even remotely funny, I kept thinking about what a horrendous cleaning job it would be. The party is thrown by Fey and Poehler, two sisters who decide to throw one last house party before their parents sell their family home. I will admit to a few laughs, but for the most part the humor is juvenile and unfunny. It wasn't quite the "depressing, overlong, repetitive slapstick disaster" that critic Richard Roeper thought it was...but it was close. A host of familiar comedians do their best, but sadly, it wasn't enough. Perhaps it looked better to Fey and Poehler on paper. If not, we have to question their taste. I must add that some younger members of our audience seemed to find it hilarious. We did not. Only because of Fey and Poehler do we give this movie a C-, and we admit, it's overly generous. **GRADE C-**

THE SISTERS BROTHERS: (2018) This Western Drama/Comedy is set in the old west, but was filmed in France and Spain by acclaimed French director Jacques Audiard (*Rust and Bone* see Archives) making his English-language debut. He also co-wrote the screenplay. The film stars John C. Reilly and Joaquin Phoenix as two brothers, Eli and Charlie Sisters. Set in 1851, Charlie and Eli are both paid assassins. They grew up in a savage world and became brutal and skilled killers working for a man known only as the Commodore. Charlie, the younger of the two brothers is a hard drinker who loves his violent and unpredictable life. Eli, the older brother, has begun to doubt the wisdom and longevity of their chosen careers. *The Sisters Brothers* has a strong supporting cast including Jake Gyllenhaal, Riz Ahmed, and very brief appearances by Rutger Hauer and Carol Kane. It is a familiar genre, but gives us a new look at the Old West from a French filmmaker's viewpoint. On Rotten Tomatoes critics gave the film a respectable 83% based on eighty-four reviews. Barbara and I liked the movie, but didn't love it. **GRADE B**

SITTING IN BARS WITH CAKE: 2023 (Prime Video) Our local critic gave this movie 4 out of 5 stars, saying "There's nothing sweeter than the family you choose for yourself." The story is unique: Corinne (Odessa A'zion) convinces her baker best friend, Jane (Yara Shahidi), to commit to a year of baking 50 cakes and taking them to bars with the goal of meeting people and developing confidence, and maybe finding a boyfriend for Jane. They have been best friends since childhood and Jane followed Corinne from Phoenix to Los Angeles. They both work at the same talent agency, but Jane delivers mail while Corinne is aiming for a Junior agent. The first part of the movie has them going to bars with Jane's cakes along with several of their friends. It's noisy and Gary and I don't get today's bar scene and courting rituals. We were hoping for better. Then, Corinne develops a brain tumor, and the pair faces a challenge unlike anything they've experienced before. Corinne's parents are played by Ron Livingston and Martha Kelly. Bette Midler is there, but in a throw-away part as the boss of the talent agency. It may sound melodramatic, but it's not. Critics on Rotten Tomatoes were kind to the movie and audiences were kinder. One critic said, "Shahidi and A'zion are part of what makes this movie better than it should be. These actresses embody their characters and have such a presence and chemistry that they make the bond between Jane and Corinne realistic." *Sitting in Bars With Cake* is based on a true story, although very loosely. It takes inspiration from the blog, and then book of the same name by author Audrey Shulman. In 2013, Audrey Shulman started a blog about her attempts to meet a man through Cakebarring. I'll close by quoting another RT critic: "A resonant tale of friendship and loss worth tasting." We agree and give this one a B+. **GRADE B+**

THE SIXTH 2024 (Available for streaming on Prime Video for \$4.99 Rental) 2024) *The Sixth* takes you inside the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. Sadly this film will not be seen by many. Documentaries rarely are. At the time of this writing, only 6 critics had reviewed the film, but they all gave it high praise. With a Run Time of 1hr 46 min, *The Sixth* takes you inside the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol through six personal accounts and never-before-seen original footage. The photographer, Mel D. Cole, took photos right in the midst of the crowd, although he was scared to death at the end. Watching a small band of police officers battle the crowd, emphasizes the question: What took the Army so damn long to sign off on support from the National Guard?? It is a harrowing yet hopeful film and a powerful reminder that the fate of democracy is in all our hands. Barbara found the movie upsetting and she was hoping for footage of senators and congressmen running for their lives. I grade the movie a little higher than Barb but was hoping for footage showing the pro-Trump mob chanted "Hang Mike Pence" as they stormed the Capitol. **GRADE B/B+**

THE SKELETON TWINS: (2014) We first saw SNL alums Kristen Wiig and Bill Hader together in a movie in 2009's *Adventureland* where they played the couple that owned the amusement park. Here they play a brother and sister who, though close as children, haven't seen or spoken to each other in ten years. Milo (Hader) is a gay would-be actor living in Los Angeles. His unsuccessful attempt

at suicide is the crisis that brings the twins together again. Maggie (Wiig) takes Milo back to her home in upstate New York where she lives with her nice-guy husband, Lance, who is splendidly brought to life by Luke Wilson. As the twins seek to reconnect, we learn of the difficult childhood that rendered both of them ill-equipped to live a happy life. We knew that Wiig was as skilled at drama as she is at comedy, but Hader was a surprise for us. He is wonderful! He handles the thoroughly messed-up Milo beautifully, giving him a sense of humor that keeps the movie from being a downer. In spite of dealing with suicidal depression and infidelity, ***The Skeleton Twins*** manages to be both charming and hopeful. I won't soon forget Milo and Maggie's lip-syncing to "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now." It is a delightful scene that demonstrates the nature of their relationship and gives us hope for their futures. It was interesting to see Ty Burrell in a role that is very different than his Emmy-winning turn in *Modern Family*. This is only the third feature for writer/director Craig Johnson but we look forward to his fourth. **GRADE A-**

SKY: (2016) This is the kind of quiet little independent film that you might see at a Film Festival, but might never have an opportunity to see on a large screen. It had its world premiere at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival and was picked up for limited release in France and United States. Netflix started offering ***Sky*** to its US subscribers in August of 2016 and that is how Barbara and I came to see it. While on a holiday in California, Romy--beautifully played by Diane Kruger--leaves her boorish husband and begins a new life where she falls for a complete stranger. This leads to a series of events that will forever change her life. It doesn't sound like much but it is a character study peopled with a supporting cast good enough to hold your interest. I liked it, and so did Barbara. **GRADE B+**

SKYFALL: This is the 23rd official James Bond film in its 50 year history, but I guess **007/#23** was rejected as a title. It opened big with its largest ever opening weekend box-office take of \$87.8 million. If you are a James Bond enthusiast, I am quite sure you will like this one too. Oscar winning director Sam Mendes guides the nail biting action and two people in supporting roles, Judi Dench and Javier Bardem, also have the golden statue on their mantles. Daniel Craig who plays Bond for the third time is a respected actor and regarded by many critics as second only to Sean Connery. Bardem is everything you could ask for in a villain, cunning, twisted, evil, colorful, and then he builds on that start. Bond film villains need to be great and Bardem does not disappoint. Judi Dench playing "M" is tough as nails and gets more screen time here than in her previous appearances. Barbara is more tolerant of the obligatory opening chases in most action thrillers than I am, but I have to confess that the first fifteen minutes of this film left me ready for more. The director skillfully kept the action thrilling without slipping over into the absurd. If you hate Bond movies, you will wisely avoid this one too, but Barbara and I liked it. **GRADE B+**

SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE: Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time in Kurt Vonnegut's tale of time travel and war. We listened to the book on CD as we drove back from Colorado recently and so enjoyed it, we decided to rent the 1972 movie. As a WWII POW, Vonnegut was in Dresden when it was fire bombed and 135,000 were killed. The bombing so affected him that he was determined to write a book about it. In 1969 he wrote *Slaughterhouse Five*. It has been ranked the 18th greatest English novel of the 20th century by the Modern Library, and it is generally recognized as Vonnegut's most influential and popular work. It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim's journeys through time, drifting from his experiences as a soldier, his life as an optometrist, and his life as an alien on the planet Tralfamadore. George Roy Hill (***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid***) directed the film and most critics think it was one of the best movie treatments of a Vonnegut book. We have to agree. The anti-war message, though downplayed in the movie, is still resonant today as our country fights in at least two wars that never seem to end. Valerie Perrine, a sexy actress from the seventies, plays a movie star who is brought to Tralfamadore so that she and Billy can entertain and enlighten the Tralfamadorians by mating. Which they do to great applause. The actor who played Billy Pilgrim was nominated for a Golden Globe that year. I suppose that the jumping back and forth in time was more unusual in 1972. Today, many movies use a non-linear story line, so this film seems current except for the lack of extraordinary special effects. We enjoyed the book and the movie and recommend it to our readers. **GRADE B**

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE: (1993/2020, recorded from *Showtime* on TV) I had to watch this movie for the umpteenth time while Gary was out playing golf. I'd forgotten that in 1993 cell phones didn't play a part and there was a quaint computer that Meg Ryan used to research Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks). Ryan and Hanks made an adorable couple. I remember loving that movie, ***An Affair To Remember***, but ***Sleepless*** is even better. In a year or so I'll probably watch it again. It's that kind of movie. **GRADE A**

SLEEPWALK WITH ME: (2012) This is a semi-autobiographical story of comedian Mike Birbiglia and his rise from bartender to headline comic. He turned his story into a one-man show in 2008, told the same stories in a book, and now has developed it into an 80-minute film which he wrote and directed and in which he stars. The only thing that has changed is his name. In the movie, he goes by Matt Pandamiglio. Birbiglia has a sleep disorder known as REM behavior disorder. According to the story he tells, the symptoms began to appear when his girlfriend of eight years started making noises about getting married. The comic is definitely not ready, but doesn't want to lose his girlfriend either. During this time he begins to improve as a stand-up comedian. Previously his career consisted of tending bar at a comedy club and occasionally filling in when a comic fails to appear. But when he starts using his troubled relationship as material for his routine, he starts connecting with his audience. His line, "I decided I'm not going to get married until I'm sure that nothing else good can happen in my life," does not bode well for his future with girlfriend Abby, nicely played by Lauren Ambrose. The sleepwalking finally results in an accident—one that actually happened in Birbiglia's real life. The comic's parents are well played by Carol Kane and James Rebhorn, two character actors that you will recognize. Birbiglia narrates the story to the movie audience, breaking the fourth wall at will, so that it has an almost documentary feel. In his review, Roger Ebert said, "I like this movie. More important, I like Mike Birbiglia in it. Whether he has a future in stand-up I cannot say, but he has a future as a monologist and actor." We, too, liked the movie and Birbiglia in it, but it's an unusual film that we don't think will be particularly popular with the general movie-going audience. **GRADE B-**

SLOW WEST: (2015) First-time writer/director John M. Maclean gives us a British-American cowboy thriller. It won a jury prize at Sundance Film Festival and scored an impressive 88% on Rotten Tomatoes' *Tomatometer*. Still it will probably not see wide distribution and will be difficult to find other than in small art theaters or later on Netflix. In only 84 minutes of running time Maclean gives us a unique look at violence and survival on the American Frontier, even though the film was shot in New Zealand. A lanky sixteen-year-old Scottish lad, a stranger in a strange land, is in search of the woman he loves who has emigrated to America after an unspecified scandal. The year is 1870, even though the fantastical tale opens with the familiar words, "*Once upon a time.*" The most familiar name

in the cast is Michael Fassbender (**12 Years a Slave**). He plays a cigar-chomping gun slinger willing to take the young boy under his wing. Filled with hope for a romantic reunion, the young lad runs away from his protector and wakes up in the middle of nowhere. His horse and belongings have been stolen and the thief has left him with nothing but a helpful note which reads *WEST* with a drawing of a pointing arrow. Rescued again by his protector, the unlikely duo continues with the boy's quest. Strangely, this stylized Western is both slow and action packed, sometimes grim and dark, but at other times humorous and philosophical. Barbara and I liked it and think Maclean has a bright future as a filmmaker. **GRADE B**

SLOW WEST: 2015/2022 (Showtime) This is an unusual western which critics loved and audiences not so much. Perhaps because it was directed by an Englishman, but Gary commented that the events depicted were probably more like the frontier than those westerns we grew up with. Here is the story: In 1870 a 16-year-old Jay Cavendish (Kodi Smit-McPhee) leaves Ireland to journey across the American frontier in search of Rose, the woman he loves. He is joined by Silas (Michael Fassbender), a mysterious traveler whom Jay pays to keep him safe. The young boy witnesses Native Americans being slaughtered, and Jay muses that when white men get to the moon they will eliminate the indigenous moon people. There is a bounty of \$2,000 on Rose and her father, and Jay and Silas are pursued by the gang of which Silas was a former member. The gang is determined to get the bounty, and Silas, too, is at first after the bounty. However, he has a change of heart when faced with the inevitable climax. We had gone to this movie in 2015, but none of it seemed familiar. We gave it a B then and now. **GRADE B**

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE(2008): This film, made in India, may not have everything, but it has a lot: the excitement of a game show, the stark realism of police brutality, the romantic tugs of a love story, the enlightenment of a good travelogue, and a Bollywood happy ending. There are no familiar faces in this uplifting story of Jamal, an 18 year-old orphan from the slums of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) poised to win the biggest TV game show payoff in the history of India. Is Jamal a genius? Is he a cheat? The answer unfolds in a series of flashbacks that are like chapters in a fast moving novel. You may have to go out of your way to find this film and you may even have to wait and rent it from Netflix, but it is worth the extra effort or the extra wait. We saw the film with **Movie Views** readers Sam & Sharon. Barbara, Sam, and Sharon liked the film, but I liked it a little more. **GRADE A-/B+**

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE:(?) (2008 recorded from *HBO* on TV) This 2008 movie won 8 Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Director for Danny Boyle. In 2008, we didn't know who Dev Patel was, but he is now famous and has starred in many movies. In his review in 2008, Gary wrote: *There are no familiar faces in this uplifting story of Jamal, an 18 year-old orphan from the slums of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) poised to win the biggest TV game show payoff in the history of India. Is Jamal a genius? Is he a cheat? The answer unfolds in a series of flashbacks that are like chapters in a fast moving novel.* That's not surprising because the film is based on a novel by Vikas Swarup titled *Q and A*. I especially enjoyed the closing credits over the two leads dancing, backed up by a throng of dancers. I wondered if they were all the people who had a part in making **Slumdog** Millionaire. The movie holds up beautifully and I liked it even more the second time. I'd give the film an A this time around. Gary wasn't as entranced as I was, perhaps because of the small screen, and he would give the second viewing a B+. **GRADE A/B+**

SMALL TIME CROOKS: This pleasant crime-caper comedy is sort of old fashioned: There are no nude scenes, car chases or gunfights and bodily fluids do not constitute any of the humor. The laughs come from the nature of the people along with some very funny lines. Woody Allen generously shares the funny lines with his co-stars. If you don't like Allen, you probably won't care for the movie. We like him and we definitely liked the movie. It was good to see him playing opposite Tracey Ullman and Elaine May. Both are very funny and not teenagers. Ray (Allen) is a small time crook who gets a big time idea for a bank robbery. He convinces his wife, Frenchy, to open a cookie store as a cover for tunneling into the bank vault. As you can imagine, the bank job never comes off, but the cookies are a miracle success. A year later, Ray and Frenchy are filthy rich and hobnobbing with the social elite. When Frenchy decides she wants to learn to be cultured, she hires David (Hugh Grant) an opportunistic art dealer to teach her. Ray soon learns that money does not guarantee happiness. Once again, the B+ is Garys. **GRADE: B/B+**

SMART PEOPLE: This is a pleasingly quirky little comedy filled with intelligent, but dysfunctional characters, always favorites in independent films. Dennis Quaid plays a self-centered academic snob who has never recovered from the death of his wife. His 17-year-old dysfunctional daughter is brilliantly played by Ellen Page (**Juno**) and Thomas Haden Church inhabits the role of his dysfunctional brother. Church was nominated for an Oscar for his role in the film **Sideways**, and here he reminds us of just how good he can be. Sarah Jessica Parker plays his dysfunctional potential girl friend who just may be a catalyst for change. Funny moments, witty dialogue and interesting character development held Barbara's and my interest enough to make us leave the theater with smiles on our faces and a positive review for first-time director Noam Murro. **GRADE B+ (Barb's note: We were surprised to see Christine Lahti in a minor role. Wonder why she doesn't get more work in feature films. She looks terrific!)**

SMASHED: The one word title refers not to an automobile accident, but the consequences of too much alcohol. When I think of a young married couple whose relationship is built on their mutual love of getting drunk, I think of a 1962 classic starring Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick titled **Days of Wine and Roses**. This relatively short 85 minute independent film is not as dark and will not achieve the critical success of the 1962 film, but it is a good film and the lead, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, gives a tour-de-force performance. She is immensely appealing playing a high-functioning alcoholic who can be a charming first-grade teacher by day and an out of control drunk at night. Equally dependent on alcohol is her husband ably played by Aaron Paul who has proven his acting skills on a TV hit show, **Breaking Bad**. For me one of the more compelling features of the film is how clearly it shows that while quitting alcohol may solve many important problems, it may also open the door on a whole new set. I liked this film marginally better than Barbara, but we both thought it is worth seeing if the subject matter is not repulsive to you. **GRADE B/B+**

SNATCH: It is difficult to review a movie like *Snatch*. The plot is confusing at best. It revolves around a huge diamond, a crooked fight promoter, gypsies and pigs. There are so many low-life characters that it took us halfway through the movie to keep them straight. The film has style, but the low-class British accents slang are almost impossible to understand. Director Guy Ritchie made an earlier film titled *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* that was praised by critics. We did not see this earlier film, but according to Roger Ebert's review, *Snatch* slavishly follows the formula of *Lock, Stock*, etc. Ritchie has obviously been influenced by the Coen Brothers and

Quentin Tarentino. When Joel and Ethan Coen produced *Blood Simple* in 1984, they began the trend of mixing violence with quirky humor—something they brought to award-winning level in *Fargo*. Tarentino has also made of career of the strange combination of horrific violence, killers who have inane conversations, and humor. The best part of *Snatch* is Brad Pitt, playing a gypsy bare-knuckle fighter who speaks in an accent so strange that even the other film characters can barely understand him. Pitt is hilarious. Dennis Farina is also entertaining as an American who is after the diamond. We admit to finding some things to like in this movie, although after the first 15 minutes we were tempted to leave. Even though we're glad that we stayed until the end, we still can't recommend this one. **GRADE: C**

SNITCH: (2013) We haven't done very well with our wars since WWII, and the war on drugs is no exception. What it has succeeded in doing is sending relatively innocent drug users to prison for sentences longer than if they had raped or killed someone. The makers of this movie obviously think that some drug laws need changing, and they manage make their point quite well. *Snitch* stars Dwayne Johnson as the owner of a small construction company whose son, Jason, is arrested for accepting an overnight delivery of a big bag of ecstasy from a friend. When his son faces a minimum of ten years in prison he is offered a choice: take the 10 years or help the DEA by snitching on another dealer. Unfortunately, Jason doesn't know any drug dealers and he refuses to set-up an innocent friend. Johnson, desperate to help his son, makes a deal with the U.S. attorney (Susan Sarandon) to work as an undercover informant and infiltrate a drug cartel in exchange for drastically reducing or even commuting Jason's sentence. Johnson pressures an ex-con employee to introduce him to a dealer, and the game is on—a game that gets increasingly more and more dangerous. Johnson was better than I expected in a role that forced him to play an average guy caught up in events out of his control. He couldn't rely on any superhuman tricks here, but had to act. And act he did. The setup was uneventful, but the final confrontation, in which Johnson uses an 18-wheeler as a weapon, was exciting. Jon Bernthal as Daniel, the employee who helps Johnson, and Barry Pepper as a DEA agent are both worthy of mention. Benjamin Bratt has a small role as a drug cartel bigwig. The story was "inspired by real events," but I was unable to find any information on the story that inspired this movie. As Gary commented afterwards, "You could say that any movie was inspired by real events." **GRADE C+**

SNOW ANGELS: It's about disintegrating relationships, betrayal and a missing child. Clearly, not a comedy. Although the opening scene of a small town high school marching band rehearsing for Friday night's football game is mildly amusing, two gun shots that interrupt the rehearsal foretell the serious nature of the film. The acting is uniformly excellent. For us, the standout performance is that of Sam Rockwell as the troubled (and perhaps psychotic) Glenn. Separated from his wife, Annie (Kate Bechinsale), he is desperately trying to reunite with her and their young daughter. His scenes were challenging for an actor, and he made every one believable. (He was the actor who played Chuck Barris in 2002's *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*.) Amy Sedaris and Nicky Katt are another couple whose marriage is in trouble. The happiest relationship in the film is that of Michael Angarano and Olivia Thirlby two high school students flirting with each other and with the idea of being in love. In his review of the film, Michael Phillips (*Chicago Tribune*) called Angarano the "best screen teen, deadpan male division, since Michael Cera." Thirlby, who played Ellen Page's best friend in *Juno*, is charming. The film is based on a novel by Stewart O'Nan and is set in an unidentified northern town in the dead of winter. It's a dreary-looking town and a decidedly gloomy story, but you will see some fine acting. **GRADE B**

SNOWDEN: (2016) Edward Snowden is undoubtedly one of the most controversial figures to make news in the 21st century. If you missed the 2014 documentary about Snowden, *Citizenfour*, (we gave it a B+) you may want to see Oliver Stone's fact-based Hollywood treatment. In the starring role, Joseph Gordon-Levitt does an impressive job in mimicking the real Snowden's body language and even his voice. The question still remains, was he a heroic whistleblower or a traitor when he exposed illegal surveillance activities by the NSA and became one of the most wanted men in the world. Stone focuses on the untold personal story of Edward Snowden. Oliver Stone is never subtle when he takes sides and if you are familiar with his work you can guess which side he takes. Critical reviews were mixed, which is expected when the subject matter is controversial. Barbara and I are not as enthusiastic about this film as the 2014 documentary, but we did enjoy it and thought the acting was exceptional. Shailene Woodley plays Snowden's often frustrated but usually sympathetic girlfriend and the supporting cast included Tom Wilkinson, Nicolas Cage, Timothy Olyphant, Rhys Ifans, Melissa Leo, and many others whose faces you will recognize. **GRADE C+**

SNOWPIERCER: (2013) Two things drew me to this film in spite of the fact that I generally try to avoid the Science Fiction genre. One was a cast that included Tilda Swinton, John Hurt, Octavia Spencer, and Ed Harris, plus Chris Evans (*Captain America*) whom I had read was excellent in the leading role. The second was that what I knew about the movie left me with the impression that it might be more of an allegory than typical Sci-Fi fare. Forgive me for I am no Sci-Fi expert, but it seems to me that most of the recent films in that genre focus too heavily on special effects, grotesque creatures, and explosions. The screenplay is an updated version of a French graphic novel from 1982. It is a grim story. In a bungled attempt to reverse the catastrophic effects of global warming, the chemical spray solution worked too well and the entire planet was plunged into a new ice age that killed off nearly all life. The human survivors escaped death by being passengers on the Snowpiercer, a train that circles the dead and frozen world, plowing through the ice and snow as necessary. If you want any enjoyment at all from the story, don't ask too many questions. It takes the train a year to circumnavigate the earth, just as it takes the earth a year to circle the sun. The passengers on the train brought with them their former status in life. The wealthy passengers live a life of decadent luxury in cars near the front of the train and the lower classes are jammed into squalid windowless cars at the rear. The low classes eat disgusting protein blocks that are better left undescribed. The masses are controlled and talked down to by the train's grotesque minister, Mason, played by a barely recognizable Tilda Swinton. A revolution is inevitable, but I have to confess that most of the action is unpredictable. The 126 minute running time seemed a little long, but you must remember my negative bias. Critics gave the movie high marks and I am sure Sci-Fi lovers will adore it, but Barbara and I can't give it higher than an average grade. **GRADE C**

THE SOCIAL NETWORK: Mark Zuckerberg was a 19-year-old Harvard student when he created Facebook. Brilliant, socially inept and virtually friendless, he started a worldwide social network that, it is reported, would be worth 30 billion if it goes public. Zuckerberg has, according to Forbes, a net worth of 4 billion. He started Facebook with three fellow classmates, and one of them, Eduardo Saverin, became the CFO of what they first called "The Facebook." The story of how Zuckerman made his billions and how he may have screwed others out of millions is told creatively and at a breathless pace by Director David Fincher. He switches between law suit

depositions and flashbacks with unrelenting energy. Zuckerberg and his friends even talk at a rapid pace, which occasionally makes it difficult to understand all of the dialogue. Jesse Eisenberg plays Zuckerman as though his brain is working so fast he doesn't have time for much facial expression.* Andrew Garfield is excellent as Saverin who started out as Zuckerman's best friend and ended up his adversary in a law suit. If there is a villain in the story, it would be Sean Parker who co-founded, and then lost, Napster. He charms Zuckerman into a share of Facebook ownership. Justin Timberlake is terrific in the role of Parker. I think this story about brilliant and energetic young people may be a young person's film. I'm afraid we "got" it about as much as we "get" Facebook. The lowest grade the film has gotten from Yahoo critics is A-, but, based on my enjoyment, I can't go higher than B+. And Gary says, B. **GRADE B+/B**

SOLITARY MAN: I don't think I can be alone in this opinion, but it seems to me that Michael Douglas, like a fine wine, is improving with age. No one can play a self destructive hedonist spiraling out of control without messing up his hair as well as Michael Douglas. Here he plays Ben Kalman, a once a hugely successful businessman with his face on the cover of Forbes Magazine, who started a downward plunge after a troubling EKG exacerbated a mid-life crisis. You want to like Ben, so you want him to get back on his feet. And it looks like he might through the efforts of his new girlfriend's father. But, alas, even that leads to yet another train wreck. I thought the screenplay was well written and Douglas was surrounded by one of the best ensemble casts of the year. Susan Sarandon, Mary-Louise Parker, Danny DeVito, and Jenna Fischer play their roles to perfection. This is an independent film that will open in very few theaters and will probably be as underappreciated as was his *Wonder Boys*. Barbara and I both liked the film, but I liked it better. **GRADE B+/B**

THE SOLOIST: In 2005, Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez happened upon a homeless man playing a violin beneath a statue of Beethoven. The violin had only two strings, but the man who played it had a rare gift. Lopez saw the possibility of a column about Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a man who used music to dispel the terrors of the paranoid schizophrenia which took him from Juilliard Music School to the streets of Los Angeles. The column Lopez wrote brought in more email than any previous column. It also brought Lopez several more columns, a book deal, a movie, and a friendship that has changed the lives of both men. The story isn't about recovery because Mr. Ayers refuses to take medication. It is about the power of friendship and the power of music. Jamie Foxx does a masterful job of playing the wildly erratic Ayers: a man who can be charming one minute and manic the next. Is there nothing this actor can't do? Robert Downey, Jr. is equally brilliant at Lopez. The real Steve Lopez must be delighted that the actor portrays him with such authenticity. (Although the movie makes Lopez into a younger, divorced version of the writer who is actually happily married.) Director Joe Wright steps out of his genteel British sensibility (he directed *Atonement* and *Pride and Prejudice*) and shows us a side of Los Angeles we rarely see—some of the city's 90,000 homeless living on the streets and sleeping in doorways. Wright also tries to take us inside the mind of a schizophrenic using voices, colors, and hallucinations. Catherine Keener appears as the fictional ex-wife. There's no big uplifting Hollywood ending to this film, but in real life, endings like that rarely happen. To watch the 60 Minutes interview with Steve Lopez and Mr. Ayers, click on the picture accompanying this review. **GRADE B+**

SOME KIND OF HEAVEN: 2020/2021 (Streamed on Hulu) Since Gary and I are of that age, we decided to watch this documentary about a retirement community, but we were disappointed. We had hoped for better. First-time feature director Lance Oppenheim cracks the manicured facade of The Villages, America's largest retirement community -- a massive, self-contained utopia located in Central Florida. (The Villages has a population of 130,000, and Gary said that was larger than Des Moines when he lived there.) There are lots of scenes of people having fun playing pickle ball, exercising, and partying, that it appears to be a commercial for the community. However, it centers on a couple of single people and one married couple, who are unable to find happiness within the community's pre-packaged paradise. Barbara, whose husband has died, and dreams of going back to Boston. Anne & Reggie, whose marriage is going through a rough patch, are in couples' therapy. Dennis, who lives in his van and not in The Villages, is searching for a rich, good-looking woman who will support him in the style in which he would like to become accustomed. At the end of the documentary, Anne and Reggie are still together; Barbara, after a brief flirtation with a golf cart salesman, has decided to loosen up and is seen dancing, and Dennis, who doesn't believe you can have comfort and freedom together, opts for freedom is seen driving his van away from The Villages. I don't think we will move there. **GRADE C**

SOME LIKE IT HOT (1959 Available for streaming on Hulu) Directed, produced and co-written by Billy Wilder who is regarded as one of the most brilliant and versatile filmmakers of Classic Hollywood cinema. The film stars Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon. It opened to critical and commercial success and is considered to be one of the greatest films of all time. *Some Like It Hot* was made on a budget of \$2.88 million and had box office earnings of \$209 million. The plot is classic screwball comedy. Curtis and Lemmon play Chicago musicians who disguise themselves as women to avoid being rubbed out after they witness the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. They were desperate to get a gig out of town but the only job they knew of was in an all-girl band heading to Florida. The question is often asked, "Why was *Some Like It Hot* so controversial? Simply put, the film was seen as inappropriate for its time. It had cross-dressing, hefty sexual punch-lines, barely-there wardrobe, and even a hint of homosexuality, none of which would have been possible had Wilder gone according to The Motion Picture Production Code. Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in drag show up at the train station as Josephine and Daphne, replacement saxophone and bass players. They certainly enjoyed being around the girls, especially the beautiful singer, Sugar, who was played by the legendary star Marilyn Monroe, who was at the height of her stardom. In retrospect, it's a miracle that Monroe was able to complete her work, let alone be brilliant. She was pregnant and miscarried during filming. Her health issues, psychological problems and stage fright were so acute that she would keep cast and crew waiting for hours before arriving on the set, or would frequently miss shooting days, causing the production to run over schedule. If you choose to view *Some Like It Hot*, watch for the closing line delivered by supporting actor Joe E. Brown. It is ranked by many as one of the best closing lines in Hollywood history. Barbara and I loved this film in 1959 when we were in our mid 20s and still enjoyed it in our early 90s. **GRADE A**

SOMETHING NEW: This entertaining romantic comedy rises above its rather trite story line with a better-than-average script and two engaging leads. Sanaa Lathan is Kenya, a bright, successful, driven career woman who hasn't yet found her dream IBM. (That's Ideal Black Man.) She reacts badly when she meets Brian on a blind date. It's not that he isn't gorgeous and charming; it's that he's white. The Australian heartthrob, Simon Baker, is Brian and he looked ideal to me! Kenya, a new home owner, reluctantly agrees to hire Brian as her landscape architect. (The job he does on her backyard is spectacular, and no, that isn't a euphemism.) Needless to say, Kenya falls for him, but has to overcome the objections of her up-scale brother (Donald Faison from TV's *Scrubs*) and her socialite/shopper mother (Alfre Woodard). Kenya's surgeon father is played by Mike Epps, and Blair Underwood provides a suitable black alternative to

Brian. Sanaa Hamri's only previous directing credit was a Prince concert in Vegas. Writer Kriss Turner wrote for the TV series, *Whoopie*, and is the co-executive producer of *Everybody Hates Chris*. We give this one a solid B. **GRADE B**

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE: What a joy it is to see two actors in their prime playing two people in their prime. Diana Keaton and Jack Nicholson are perfect for their parts. Let's face it, writer/director Nancy Meyers wrote the part of Erica for Keaton, and Nicholson is pretty much playing himself--the charming sophisticated older man who only dates young women. Harry Langer (Nicholson) and Erica Barry meet when Harry is dating Erica's daughter, Marin (Amanda Peete). Erica is a famous playwright and Harry is a famous bachelor. You know they're going to wind up together, but the getting there is what's fun. Francis McDormand is Erica's sister and Keanu Reeves is Julian, the doctor who takes care of Harry when he has a mild heart attack. Except for the movie, *Speed*, I haven't cared much for Reeves but he is appealing and believable as a younger man attracted to the delightful Erica. Just watching Keaton and Nicholson is the real pleasure in this film. How nice to see two people who look their age, and look terrific! The only reason we didn't give the movie an unqualified A, is that we felt it was a bit too long--at one point I had the feeling that the writer didn't know how to end it. But it does end, and quite satisfyingly too. We think you'll like it! **GRADE: A-**

SOMETIMES ALWAYS NEVER: (2020 seen on *Amazon Prime* rental \$6.99) First you should know that this is a strange film. It is an offbeat quirky British dramedy that won't appeal to everyone. Some will find the slow pace intolerable while others will be charmed by the whimsical emotional journey, expertly lead by Bill Nighy and a uniformly strong cast of actors. The film takes its title from the rules a man must follow when buttoning up a suit jacket which has little or nothing to do with story. The plot centers on Alan (Nighy) and his family's search for his long lost son, Michael, who stormed out of the house during an argument in the middle of a game of Scrabble. Incidentally, your love of this movie will be helped if you are a Scrabble enthusiast or at least have some familiarity with the game. You may even pick up some high-scoring words to play in your next game. Barbara and I are enthusiastic Bill Nighy fans and are usually taken with British comedy. We enjoyed this ninety minute ride with one of our favorite actors. **Grade B+**

SOMEWHERE: (2010) For fans of action this movie is a no-no. One critic said, "Even so-called "slow cinema" shouldn't be this dull." We didn't find it dull enough to stop watching, but we kept waiting for something to happen. Stephen Dorff is Johnny, a movie star living an empty albeit privileged life. He lives in a suite at the Chateau Marmont where he smokes too much, drinks too much and, some would say, screws too much. One thing he doesn't do much of is talk. In fact, nobody talks much in this movie. (Gary thinks my review will have more words than there are in the movie's dialogue.) When Johnny's 11-year old daughter (Elle Fanning) comes for a surprise visit, he begins to realize how empty his life has been. The father-daughter scenes are sweet and we can see them begin to bond. I think, by the end of the movie, Johnny has decided to make some changes in his life, but that's my interpretation of the events that visually unfold. It didn't come from any dialogue. We can't really recommend this unless you are a fan of movies directed by Sophia Coppola. She has been described as a "visually stylish film director," and she definitely prefers the visual to the spoken word. Perhaps you remember *Lost In Translation* (2003) for which Coppola won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. She also was nominated for Best Director. *Lost In Translation* didn't have much dialogue either, but it was visually arresting, beautifully illuminating the loneliness and isolation of being in a foreign country where you don't speak the language. We gave it a B+, but we couldn't go that high for *Somewhere*. Perhaps a C. Gary says C-. **GRADE C/C-**

SOMEWHERE IN QUEENS: 2023 (Seen in a real movie theatre!) Ray Romano is a triple-threat in this movie: He stars, directs, and he shares credit for writing. It is a debut directing job for Romano, who never directed a single episode in his world-famous sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Leo (Romano) and Angela Russo (Laurie Metcalf) live a simple life in Queens, surrounded by their overbearing Italian-American family. The entire family meets for dinner every Sunday and those dinner scenes are priceless. So are the weddings, christenings, birthdays, confirmations, etc. in the Versailles Palace, where everyone in the neighborhood goes to celebrate. Leo works for his gruff father's construction company and has to deal with his brother as foreman. Leo is clearly not the favorite son. When their son 'Sticks' (Jacob Ward) finds success on his high-school basketball team, and has a shot at a college scholarship, Leo goes to dubious ends to help ensure his future. Metcalf imbues Angela with an Italian mother's feeling that "no female is good enough for her son." Gary and I saw Metcalf as a young girl just out of college when she came to Chicago as part of the Steppenwolf theatre, and we have followed her career with interest ever since. We enjoyed *Somewhere in Queens* and thank Holly V. IL for recommending the movie. We will have to go to theatres more often! **GRADE B+**

SON OF RAMBOW: Two lonely boys become unlikely friends when they work together on a short film. Will is a talented artist, but a solitary child with virtually no friends. His widowed mother is a member of a dreary religious group called "The Brethern," and she doesn't allow Will to have "worldly" friends outside the church, listen to music, watch TV, or do any of the things that youngsters like to do. When he crosses paths with Lee, the school trouble-maker, he sees his very first film, *Rambo: First Blood*, and he is entranced. He starts out as stuntman for the film that Lee is making for a film competition, but soon is playing the lead role. When a charismatic French exchange student, along with his groupies, becomes interested in the film, the growing friendship between the two boys is compromised. The story is set in an English village in the mid 80s. Despite the violence of the film the boys are making, *Son of Rambow* is really quite a gentle film. Reader **Holly V.**, IL recommended this movie, and you'll want to read her remarks in this issue's *Readers Views*. **GRADE B**

SON OF THE SOUTH: 2020 (Included with Prime Video) This is a true story set during the sixties Civil Rights Movement. A Klansman's grandson, Bob Zellner, is forced to face the rampant racism of his own culture. Defying his family and white Southern norms, he embraces the fight against social injustice, repression and violence to change the world he was born into. *Son of The South* is from executive producer Spike Lee and based on Bob Zellner's autobiography, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*. The film features fine performances across the board, but the only cast name I recognized was Brian Dennehy who plays Bob Zellner's grandfather an unashamed and incorrigible white supremacist who doesn't need a Klan robe to boldly flaunt his true colors. The movie's opening minutes indicate just how dangerous it could be for a white Southerner to be viewed as a "race traitor" in the days of segregation. At one point, Zellner narrowly escapes a lynching by rural, white southerners. The film ends with a montage of Zellner's activism during the '60s on civil rights, including a tribute to his mentor, the late John Lewis. Our thanks go to Holly V., IL for recommending *Son of The*

South. Only 18 critics reviewed this film and it received only 61%. The Audience Score was much higher at 90%. I liked the movie a little better than Barbara. She thought the screenplay should have been better. **GRADES B/B+**

THE SONG OF LUNCH: 2010 (Available for streaming on Prime Video) This is an unusually short 50 minute movie. Actually, it is a dramatized narrative poem about two former lovers who meet for lunch in London after 15 years separation. For those who appreciate poetry, I think you will love this unique film. But even if you don't, it is an intelligent film with wonderful production qualities. No better actors could have been cast. Alan Rickman and Emma Thompson are brilliant in their respective roles. She is relaxed and sunshine bright. He is unhappy, gloomy, and a little angry, perhaps because he realizes what his life might have been with her, but will never be. The story is told from his perspective, much of it as voice-over. It is a wonderful journey, surrounded by words seamlessly moving from voiceover narration into dialogue creating tension and drama. The film is not going to be for everyone, but Barb and I loved it. **GRADE A/B+**

SOPHIE SCHOLL-THE FINAL DAYS: (2005 release on video/DVD) In 1943, Sophie and Hans Scholl, young students in Munich, were members of the "White Rose," a Nazi resistance group. Together with some friends, they printed and distributed leaflets denouncing Hitler, the war and the National Socialists. One day, Sophie and Hans were caught by the Gestapo. After two days of interrogation, Sophie, along with her brother and a friend, was tried, convicted of high treason and sentenced to death. Julia Jentsch brings Sophie's spirit to such believable life that you think you are seeing the real person. Most of the action in the film consists of Sophie's interrogation by Robert Mohr, a policeman who had risen in rank under the Nazis and was loyal to the party. He had some sympathy for Sophie and tried to give her a way out, but she bravely refused to take it. The film uses transcripts of the actual interrogation and trial, so most of the dialogue is literally what Scholl and Mohr said. *Sophie Scholl* was an Oscar nominee for best foreign film in 2005. It is in German with English subtitles. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

SORRY TO BOTHER YOU: (2018) Critics are enthusiastic about this film written and directed by Boots Riley, probably because it pushes the boundaries of conventional storytelling. Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* called the movie an "impassioned" response to "dark and troubling times." Most critics agree that it is the wildest comedy of the season. It is about a telemarketer who becomes a superstar, but at a price. Set in the near future, it touches on racism, capitalism run amuck, corporate ethics and unionism. Lakeith Stanfield is good as Cassius Green who, after a disastrous interview, gets a job as a telemarketer because, as his boss explains, "I'll hire anybody." At first Cash isn't successful, but a co-worker (Danny Glover) suggests that he "use his white voice." Using a fake white voice pays off and propels him to the upper echelon of telemarketers. The view of life in this not-too-distant future is sobering. A TV reality show in which people get beaten and forced to take a bath in excrement, is wildly popular. A company called Worry Free, which promises a job for life if you live in its dormitories, is making millions for its founder, even while its employees are, in reality, slaves. It is also a union film, although *Norma Rae* it is definitely not. It may be an age thing, but Gary and I had trouble with the movie's scatter-shot approach to filmmaking. Many critics suggest that this movie will become a classic. We don't think so. In fact, we aren't sure that it was worth the hour-and-a-half round trip we had to make to see it. **GRADE C**

We agree with Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun Times* who said:

This movie is bat-bleep crazy even as it makes solid and thought-provoking arguments. It veers all over the place, at times scoring major laughs, on occasion working quite well as a social satire and a screwball romance. But it also falters with some running jokes that stumble and collapse, and a few cringe-inducing scenes that aim for provocation but seem forced.

SOUND OF METAL: 2019/2021 (Available on Amazon Prime) This fascinating film is a portrait of a man forced to come to terms with sudden deafness. Film director and co-writer Darius Marder, in his feature film debut, thoroughly captures the agony that comes with knowing one of your senses is fading to nothingness. Riz Ahmed, an English actor and musician delivers a devastating performance as Ruben, a heavy-metal drummer whose life is thrown into chaos and uncertainty when he begins to lose his hearing and is subsequently forced to change his approach to life. The movie is brought to life by Riz Ahmed's passionate performance. With his wide and animated eyes, Ahmed makes you walk a mile in Ruben's shoes. Ahmed spent six months learning to play the drums and spent almost as much time learning American Sign Language. He is joined by a cast comprised largely from deaf actors. The film brilliantly manipulates its soundtrack to help us understand what Ruben is feeling and hearing. It won critics over with 96% on the *Tomatometer* and audiences as well with 91%. From the opening there was Oscar buzz for Ahmed's performance, but now we learn the remarkable film was nominated by the Academy for Best Picture. It's hard to even compare *Sound of Metal* to other films, but Barbara and I liked it and feel we have a far better understanding of what it would be like to experience the tragic loss of one's hearing. **GRADE B+**

SOURCE CODE: I'm writing this review because Gary feels he just can't be objective when it comes to science fiction. The genre isn't a favorite of mine, either, but I have enjoyed some science fiction movies. I enjoyed this one, too, although the holes and logical inconsistencies within the fantasy did bother me a bit. I can accept the overall fantasy premise, but I like the pseudo-science within the fantasy to be consistent. However, I'll have to agree with Liza Schwarzbaum (*EW*) who said in her review of *Source Code*, "I'll have to take the futuristic science on faith along with the plot holes in this good-looking, diverting, overly jittered adventure." You are probably familiar with the story line: Captain Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) wakes up on a commuter train doomed to explode before reaching its destination, which is Union Station in Chicago. Actually, he wakes up on that train over and over again, reliving the last 8 minutes of a passenger on the train until he can fulfill his mission to find the bomber before a dirty bomb explodes in downtown Chicago. What I liked about it: Gyllenhaal, who is looking more and more like a movie star; Michelle Monaghan, always appealing; Vera Farmiga, always excellent; and the terrific scenes of Chicago. The city looks splendid. I found the love story touching, and I suppose the movie could make one speculate on the elasticity of time, but mostly it's simply an adventure/thriller and quite a satisfying one for me. Gary can't go higher than C, but I give it a solid B. **GRADE B/C**

SOUTHPAW: (2015) To ready himself for this movie, Jake Gyllenhaal trained for six months, seven days a week, six hours of day of boxing, strength training and conditioning. He ran 8 miles and did 2,000 sit-ups every day. Now that is commitment to a part! The part he plays is that of Billy Hope, a light-heavyweight champion who spirals into self-destruction when his adored wife (Rachel McAdams) is killed in an accidental shooting. Without her counsel, Billy loses everything: the money, the house, and, most importantly, custody of his adorable daughter. In order to get back his life and his daughter, he has to go back into the ring. The movie is nothing if not predictable.

But it is worth seeing especially for Gyllenhaal's buffed body and six-pack abs. His adorable daughter is played by Dona Laurence, and the trainer who gets Billy back into fighting form is played by the always remarkable Forest Whitaker. The audience we saw it with had a preponderance of men—men who looked like weight-lifters. Although the critics have been lukewarm, I suspect that the movie will be popular, especially with fight fans. And Gyllenhaal is impressive. Except for 1976's *Rocky*, I don't much care for movies that glorify the bloody sport of boxing, so my grade is lower than Gary's. **GRADE B-/C**

SOUTHSIDE WITH YOU: (2016) The movie is not intended to be political, but your political persuasion will, no doubt, influence your perception. If you are not fans of the Obamas, and happen to see *Southside With You*, you will probably find it boring. I am an Obama fan, and I found it pleasant, but just a tad boring. The movie has been compared to Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*, in which two young people fall in love while spending a night together. The comparison is apt so far as the plot is concerned, but the Linklater film had better writers. *Southside With You* was inspired by the first date of Michelle Robinson and Barack Obama in 1989. That eventful summer date took them from the Art Institute of Chicago to a screening of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and finally to the site of their first kiss outside of an ice cream parlor. They were both working at the same Chicago law firm, she as a second year assistant and he as a summer intern. Although Robinson kept insisting it was not a "date," it definitely was. It was refreshing to see two intelligent young people sharing their experiences and sometimes sparring without the slang and four-letter words which have become ubiquitous in movies today. Knowing where it leads can't help but engage the viewer, but knowing where it leads can also prove to be a distraction. Parker Sawyers does a great job playing the young Barak Obama, perfectly getting his speech cadence and mannerisms. (He doesn't have Obama's ears, though, and one exchange suffered because of it.) Tika Sumpter was a good choice for Michelle Robinson, and it was easy to see why the young intern would fall for her. Critics were generally high on this love story. One critic said, *Southside With You is a sweet date movie that serves as an unexpected respite from the current firestorm of political absurdity.* We'll be anxious to hear if you find it so. Gary and I give the movie a B-. **GRADE B-**

THE SOUVENIR: (2019) Written and Directed by British filmmaker Joanna Hogg, this semi-autobiographical coming-of-age drama is pulled from a dark episode in her romantic past. It deals with a young woman's emotional but poisonous first love that nearly destroyed her filmmaking dreams. In addition to being about a destructive relationship, *The Souvenir* is a movie about the science and the art of moviemaking. Honor Swinton Byrne, who plays the lead, is the daughter of well-known actress Tilda Swinton. Tilda Swinton is also in this movie. So, we have a mother and daughter playing a mother and daughter in a film inspired by the experiences of the writer-director. What I have written so far is what we knew about the movie before we drove 45 minutes to the only theater in the Phoenix area showing it. Critics gave it an impressive 96% on the Tomatometer so our hopes were high. Leaving the theater, Barbara said she thought it was a horrible movie and a total waste of time. I marveled at how she could be so generous in her evaluation. It was the worst film I have sat completely through in decades. I remember seeing a movie about forty years ago that might have been as bad, but I left half way through it so I can't be sure. **GRADE F**

SPANGLISH: (2004) We were charmed by this off-beat comedy. If you are expecting a typical Adam Sandler comedy, you will be disappointed. Sandler plays it pretty straight here and he does it quite well. His John Clasky is a man who is desperately trying to remain sane when everything around him is going crazy. Tea Leoni, Cloris Leachman and Paz Vega are all excellent in their roles. Leoni manages to bring some humanity to a woman who lives permanently on the edge of hysteria, and Leachman is delightful as Sandler's tiptling mother-in-law. However, it was Paz Vega who most caught our attention with her portrayal of a caring mother who is struggling to raise a daughter in a country whose culture is strange to her. Flor (Vega) speaks only Spanish and, when she becomes the housekeeper in the Clasky home, her daughter has to translate for her. (These scenes are some of the funniest in the movie.) Writer/Director James L. Brooks (*Terms of Endearment*, *As Good As It Gets*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) has provided the cast with an intelligent script and together they have created a delightful and touching movie. What the film lacks in believable realism, it more than makes up for in human values and funny situational comedy. We were sorry to see it end. **GRADE A- (Gary) GRADE B+(Barb)**

SPANGLISH: (2004/2020) We saw this charming film on a big screen when it was first released. Barbara and I have such fond memories of it that we decided to watch it again on HBO-GO while waiting for Covid-19 restrictions to be relaxed. Following is my 2004 review: *We were charmed by this off-beat comedy. If you are expecting a typical Adam Sandler comedy, you will be disappointed. Sandler plays it pretty straight here and he does it quite well. His John Clasky is a man who is desperately trying to remain sane when everything around him is going crazy. Tea Leoni, Cloris Leachman and Paz Vega are all excellent in their roles. Leoni manages to bring some humanity to a woman who lives permanently on the edge of hysteria, and Leachman is delightful as Sandler's tiptling mother-in-law. However, it was Paz Vega who most caught our attention with her portrayal of a caring mother who is struggling to raise a daughter in a country whose culture is strange to her. Flor (Vega) speaks only Spanish and, when she becomes the housekeeper in the Clasky home, her daughter has to translate for her. (These scenes are some of the funniest in the movie.) Writer/Director James L. Brooks (Terms of Endearment, As Good As It Gets, The Mary Tyler Moore Show) has provided the cast with an intelligent script and together they have created a delightful and touching movie. What the film lacks in believable realism, it more than makes up for in human values and funny situational comedy. We were sorry to see it end.* **GRADE A- (Gary) GRADE B+(Barb)**

(I should point out that the 168 critics who reviewed the movie for Tomatometer only gave the film a disappointing 53%. Obviously we go with the half that liked it.)

SPARTAN: The critics have raved about this film, written and directed by David Mamet. Many critics think that Mamet has an extraordinary gift for writing realistic dialogue. We have seen and enjoyed many of Mamet's plays and movies, but I must confess that I often find his dialogue stilted. Val Kilmer is a government secret agent who is assigned to the task of rescuing the President's daughter who has been kidnapped. It turns out to be a complicated web of intrigue involving white slavery and White House treachery. The script makes no effort to explain what is happening at the beginning of the movie--something most critics liked, but will, I think, be frustrating for many viewers. Kilmer is good, and we liked seeing Derek Luke (*Antwone Fisher*) and Tia Texada (TV's *Third Watch*). Gary gives it a B-, but I can't go higher than C+. **GRADE B-/C+**

THE SPECTACULAR NOW: (2013) This coming-of-age independent film will probably not see wide release even though it is quite well done and received high praise at the Sundance Film Festival this year. One thing that drew Barbara and me to the film was the casting of Shailene Woodley as Aimee, the young female lead. You may remember Woodley from her outstanding performance as George Clooney's daughter in *The Descendants* which won several Oscars in 2012. The male lead, Miles Teller, plays Sutter, a confident and charming high school senior who has found his comfort zone in High School, but who is totally unprepared for the future. The film is a little darker than the trailer led us to expect, but it does have warmth and humor and a degree of realism that is almost unexpected. I must emphasize how appealing Teller and Woodley are in their roles. We were also impressed with Kyle Chandler playing against type in a small but crucial role as Sutter's long-absent father. It is refreshing to see parents and other adults playing real and believable people rather than the often cartoonish qualities given in many movies about teens. What starts as an unlikely high school romance becomes a fascinating story that may remind us of our own formative years. **GRADE B+**

THE SPECTACULAR NOW (2013/2020--*Netflix*) it's a teenaged romance but with a difference: it doesn't follow the usual clichés. Every time you think you know where it's going, it surprises you. Miles Teller (*Whiplash*) is a popular high school senior who has a drinking problem. He recently broke up with his girlfriend, played by the remarkable Brie Larson (*The Room, & Short Term 12*). After a night of drinking, he passes out, wakes up on someone's front lawn, and meets Aimee, beautifully played as a "nice" girl by Shailene Woodley (*The Descendants & The Fault in Our Stars*). His friends are surprised that he's interested in a "good" girl, but he and Aimee become friends. Eventually, they fall in love. There are typical family problems, but they play out in unusual ways. Jennifer Jason Lee, Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Kyle Chandler (in a part that's the polar opposite of Coach Taylor), and are brilliant in small but important roles. We even saw Bob Odenkirk (*Breaking Bad & Better Call Saul*). That's what's fun about seeing older movies: you see a lot of familiar faces. Thank goodness for IMDb! At first, Gary was dubious about the film, but by the end, he said it was worth an A. I agree. **GRADE A**

SPECTRE: (2015) This is Daniel Craig's last appearance as 007. The movie is classic Bond: explosions, car chases and fistfights aplenty. The special effects for which 007 movies are famous do not disappoint. The opening sequence in Mexico City is especially impressive as are the graphics that follow. Bond does his thing in cars, helicopters, planes, water vehicles and even on a train. This is a serious Bond, though, and Gary missed the humor that we enjoyed when Sean Connery was the man with a license to kill. As usual, there are a couple of gorgeous women, one of whom seems to convince James to walk away from MI6. I doubt that will happen since there is great speculation on the internet as to which actor will replace Craig. My money is on Damien Lewis! Naomi Harris returns for her second Money Penny role, but the initialed people have been replaced: Ben Whishaw is the new Q, and Ralph Finnes replaces Judi Dench as M. They even added a C, played by Andrew Scott. C has designed a global information system that will replace the old-fashioned 00 section with its single assassin approach. It appears that James Bond's run in her Majesty's Secret Service is drawing to a close. But he has one last mission to perform—a mission that was Judi Dench's last request—even though it means he must go it alone. Christopher Waltz plays the evil villain with soft-spoken charm, but he is as lethal, though less interesting, than other Bond villains. Leaving the theatre, we talked about how James Bond gets into brutal fights, but they never leave a mark on him. And he never seems to bleed. Gary said that there is a long tradition in that beginning with Gene Autry. I do have one question, though: How did James Bond manage to pull an unwrinkled white dinner jacket out of that very small suitcase? These movies are pure fantasy, escapism at its best, and I suspect that *Spectre* will do well at the box office. Perhaps we have seen too many 007 movies, but this one didn't climb out of the B range for us. **GRADE B**

SPELLBOUND: This is a terrific documentary. It was nominated for Best Documentary at last year's Oscars. It follows eight young people who participated in the National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C. The filmmaker (Jeffrey Blitz) did an excellent job of introducing us to the eight spellers, showing them with their parents, winning their regional bees, and interacting with friends. Such interesting appealing kids! By the time they all arrived in D.C. we felt we knew each one and couldn't help but root for them all. Of course, only one out of the 249 that go to Washington will come away with the trophy. The National Spelling Bee was started in 1925 by the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain. At one point in the film, we saw the elderly gentleman who won the first Bee in 1925. The ritual is time-honored. The word is pronounced, and repeated. It may be used in a sentence. Then the contestant has to repeat it, spell it and say it again. The speller cannot go back and correct a single letter—once it is said out loud, it cannot be changed. It's amazing how much tension there is as spellers agonize over how to spell a word that they often have never heard before. We loved this movie! It has both suspense and humor. We give this film as enthusiastic **GRADE: A**

SPENCER: 2021 (Streaming is available on Prime Video for \$4.99 rental) Barbara and I were motivated to stream this film after seeing an interview with Kristen Stewart on *Sixty Minutes*. Stewart plays Diana, Princess of Wales, in this fictional psychological drama. We were charmed by her enthusiasm for the movie and were aware that most critics gave it high marks. Perhaps our expectations were too high because we were disappointed. I did not expect to see Diana played as an insecure, selfish and depressed woman, but that was not my problem with the film. Most of the movie is very slow moving and you get little reward for the effort of watching it. In other words, it was boring. The last ten minutes of the movie were better than the rest, but the bar was very low. If you decide to see this movie, it might be helpful to know a few things. *Spencer*, takes place over three days (from Christmas Eve to Boxing Day which is the day after Christmas) in 1991 which was about six years before her tragic death. Diana's marriage to Prince Charles had become strained due to his affair with Camilla Parker Bowles and she was struggling with whether to end her marriage and free herself from the pressures of royal life. So the movie is about powerlessness, revolt and liberation and an imagining of what might have happened during those few fateful days. If we had known just this much about the movie, we might have liked it a little better. To test this hypothesis, we should see it a second time.....but I don't think we will. **GRADE C**

SPIDER-MAN: Leaving the theater after seeing *Spider-Man*, we overheard a man say to his wife, "That was a stupid movie." We did not agree—we liked it. We didn't expect great writing or acting, after all, it's in the comic book superhero genre. This is a genre we usually avoid, but, we wanted to see this movie because of Toby Maquire. He is Peter Parker, a slightly nerdy high school senior who is bitten by a spider on a class field trip to Columbia University. (In the 1962 Comic Book, the spider was radioactive. Now it is a genetically altered superspecies.) The best part of this film is watching Parker cope with the changes his body undergoes as a result of the spider bite. It takes him a while to learn how to spin the webs that allow him to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Parker is in love

with his next door neighbor, Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst), but she doesn't seem to know he is alive. As Parker gradually turns into a superhero, he and Mary Jane get closer. The young love story makes the movie interesting when Spider-Man isn't vanquishing evil doers, and gives some heart to an otherwise special effects comic book extravaganza. We both really enjoyed **Spider-Man**. Maquire and Dunst are excellent and Cliff Robertson and Rosemary Harris are effective as Parker's Uncle and Aunt. When Parker graduates, he gets a job as a free lance photographer for the local newspaper. J.K. Simmons, who is the psychiatrist on TV's **Law and Order**, is hilarious as J. Jonah Jameson. The New York Times reviewer said that Simmons "explodes into the picture like a cartoon Edward G. Robinson, stealing all his scenes, of which there are too few." Willem Dafoe is Spider-Man's evil nemesis. By all means, take the kids to see this one, and if you don't have any kids to take, go see it anyway. **GRADE B+ /B**

SPIDER-MAN 2: I have to agree with Roger Ebert. Even Gary, who doesn't care for the genre, liked this second in the Spider-Man series. Tobey Maguire is terrific as Peter Parker, a young man born with a rare skill who can't bring himself to accept his destiny. At one point, he throws his Spider-Man costume in the trash determined to live a normal life. But, of course, he must once again don his costume when he is forced into a confrontation with Doctor Octopus. (*Stan Lee, the author of the Spider-Man comic books, created Doctor Octopus in the 1960s and I'm told this movie is quite true to the comic book.*) Alfred Molina makes an interesting and creative villain. His Doctor Octopus starts out as a scientist with the good of mankind in his heart, but events cause him to change. Once again, Kirsten Dunst is charming as Mary Jane Watson, Parker/Spider-Man's best friend. Once again, she wants to be more than just a best friend. We also liked Rosemary Harris as Aunt May and we thought J.K. Simmons was very funny as newspaper editor J. Jonah Jameson. Sam Ramer directed. I think this one is worth an A-, but Gary can't quite bring himself to give an A to a comic book movie. He says B+. **GRADE A-/B+**

SPICE: Desperate to see a movie in this summer film dead zone, and against our better judgement, we actually went to a horror/sci-fi film. We won't make that mistake again! Because **Spice** got B grades from many critics, and because it had to do with genetic engineering, we thought the science might make the movie interesting. It didn't. Adrian Brody and his wife play scientists who have had great success developing a protein using animal gene splicing. When they are told to end their splicing research and concentrate on synthesizing the protein, they try one last experiment and splice together human and animal DNA to create a new organism. "Dren," as they call the resulting creature, grows rapidly into a strangely beautiful human/animal/bird-like female, who eventually turns deadly. We just can't get past the ridiculous nature of this genre. We are more likely to laugh at it than be frightened by it. Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*) thought it was "well-done and intriguing," and Manohla Dargis (*NYTimes*) called it "pleasurably shivery, sometimes delightfully icky." Even though the concept was, indeed, intriguing, and I won't soon forget Dren, we really can't grade this one above a D. But, of course, we are prejudiced against the genre. **GRADE D**

SPOTLIGHT: Let me say it right up front. I think this film is one of the best movies ever made about investigative journalism. **Spotlight** is a gripping fact based story of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston Globe investigation of child abuse allegations in the Catholic Church. Without dwelling on lurid details, it traces the steps of a tenacious team of reporters as they work through leads taking them to one of the biggest cover-ups in history and leads to a massive wave of similar revelations around the globe. Sadly, it focuses on a kind of investigative journalism that increasingly is disappearing. There are no starring roles in this remarkable film, but an impressive ensemble cast made up of a top-notch team including Mark Ruffalo, Michael Keaton, Rachel McAdams, Stanley Tucci, Liev Schreiber, and Billy Crudup. **Spotlight** did very well at film festivals around the world and has been well received by critics. It is a film director/writer Tom McCarthy can be proud of. It may turn out to be his masterpiece. Barbara and I agree on a high grade for this gripping newsroom drama. **GRADE A**

Note: An interesting bit of trivia I discovered is that Ben Bradlee Jr., the editor of the Boston Globe when this story was making news, is the son of the legendary Ben Bradlee who was editor at the Washington Post when his paper broke the political scandal known as Watergate. Can it be that **All The President's Men** hit the theaters nearly 40 years ago?

SPY: (2015) This movie is a lot of fun. Director/writer Paul Feig insists that the movie is not a spoof, but from the James Bond-like opening, complete with theme song, the lethal gadgets hidden inside ordinary objects and Melissa McCarthy's hilarious throw-away lines, there a lot of spoofiness going on. We are fans of the very large and very funny McCarthy, and here she is surrounded by a terrific supporting cast including Jude Law, Jason Statham, Rose Byrne, Alison Janney and Bobbie Cannavale. We were pleased to see Miranda Hart, an actress we have noticed in *Call The Midwife* (TV series), in the role as a fellow agent and best friend to McCarthy. I've always liked Statham's **Transporter** movies but it was a surprise to see him in a comedy role as a CIA agent who is an outrageous braggart and a bit of a klutz. But his rapid-fire speech made him difficult to understand, especially for Gary. Byrne was an elegant-looking villain with astonishing hairdos that were the focus of several amusing comments. McCarthy plays a CIA agent who has always been relegated to supporting agents in the field with computer surveillance. She has spent her time sitting at computer screens working as a team with the very Bond-like Jude Law. When the people who are trying to sell a suitcase nuclear bomb to terrorists discover the identity of the field agents, she is pressed into service as an unlikely spy. She assumes a variety of covers, none of them to her liking. Told to confine her activities to trace and locate, she proves adept at field work, dispatching a variety of assassins in unconventional and amusing ways. **Spy** has earned at 95% on the Tomatometer (*Rotten Tomatoes*) and I particularly enjoyed it. Gary, who liked McCarthy but was not enamored of the mayhem. (If there had been closed captions, he probably would have enjoyed it more. He missed some of the good throw-away lines.) **GRADE B+/B-**

THE SPY BEHIND HOME PLATE: (2019) This is a feature-length documentary written, directed, produced, and edited by women. It is about Moe Berg, known as the brainiest man in baseball. After graduating from Princeton he played baseball in the big leagues for 15 seasons in the 1920s and 1930s while also earning a law degree at Columbia University and passing the bar exam. He spoke between 6 and 10 languages, depending on your source, including Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Sanskrit. Berg was a sensation when he appeared on the radio quiz show *"Information Please,"* startling fans with his encyclopedic knowledge. Oh, and he also worked as a spy for the United States government during World War II. He was recruited as an agent by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a precursor to the C.I.A. Should you see this film, be aware that the first half of the movie is about the extraordinary

Moe Berg and his life leading up to his time as a spy in WWII. The second half is more history lesson than biopic. Lacking film footage on his espionage, writer/director Aviva Kempner turned to Hollywood movies and stars like Alan Ladd to show what Moe might have been doing. The documentary is absolutely packed with information about the German atomic bomb program, the American Manhattan Project and an endless parade of facts and incidents leading to Moe's role in the war. Credit goes to filmmaker Kempner for putting all the pieces together in such a satisfying way. I liked the film a little more than Barbara. **GRADE B/B-**

(Barb's Note: I especially liked that Berg played for the Chicago White Sox.

The pictures of Comiskey Park brought memories of double-headers I attended with my dad.)

SPY GAME: This tautly directed spy film helps make up for Robert Redford's last dismal outing in *The Last Castle*. Here Redford is back to his old form, with a better script and Brad Pitt as his partner. Both are excellent in this story of loyalty in the CIA--something that may sound like an oxymoron. Nathan Muir (Redford) is old school CIA. On the day of his retirement, he discovers that Tom Bishop (Pitt), a young agent he mentored who has now become a rogue operative, has been taken captive in a Chinese prison and will be executed the next morning. It is 1991 and a trade agreement with China is about to be signed. It appears that the C.I.A. is willing to sacrifice Bishop in order to preserve Chinese/American relations. Muir won't let that happen. While we watch Muir manipulating the system to help Bishop, we learn of their relationship through flashbacks. Some critics were bothered by the flashbacks, but we were not. Tony Scott (*Top Gun*) directed the film and he maintains the tension throughout. The Cranky Critic complained because Redford looks exactly the same in 16-year-old flashbacks as he does in 1991. It's true, but it didn't really bother me. And Brad Pitt proves, once again, that he is much more than just a pretty face. (But what a face!) We both liked this one and recommend it for all those who enjoy a good spy story combined with plenty of action scenes and characters with some depth. (See if you can recognize Charlotte Rampling in a small part.) **GRADE: B+**

SPY KIDS: This is a creative kid's movie that is tons of fun for the kids and enjoyable for parents as well. We took our grandson, Nathan--10 years old--and both Gary and I found things to chuckle at. Robert Rodriguez, who has directed such violent films as *Desperado*, and *From Dusk Until Dawn*, has crafted an upbeat movie with a wholesome message. Gregorio and Ingrid Cortez (Antonio Banderas and Carla Gugino) are retired secret agents. They are also a most attractive couple. When they are kidnapped by Fegan Floop (Alan Cumming), the host of a kid's TV show who has dreams of taking over the world, their two children--Carmen (Alexa Vega) and Juni (Daryl Sabara) have to go to their rescue. The two youngsters become spies and manage to save their parents. Floop is assisted by Minion (Tony Shalhoub) and the Thumb-Thumbs--they are literally and figuratively all thumbs. Robert Patrick, who was the metallic man in *Terminator II*, plays a corporate villain. The special effects are great fun, and there is nothing mean-spirited about the humor. Rodriguez obviously had a ball doing this movie. We can definitely recommend taking a kid to this one. (George Clooney fans will be especially delighted with his cameo appearance.) **GRADE: B**

SPY KIDS 2: ISLAND OF LOST DREAMS: Grandson Nathan and I saw the first Spy Kids movie and we liked it. This one is not quite as good as the first one, although it does have some creative effects. What's missing is the novelty of kids performing like spies. Once again, Alexa Vega and Daryl Sabara are the talented kids and Antonio Banderas and Carla Gugino play their parents. In addition, this version features their grandparents, played by Holland Taylor and Ricardo Montalban. And once again, an evil man is trying to take over the world, only this time, he is a member of the OSS organization, and his two children are part of the Spy Kids organization. There is a great deal of energetic competition between the two sets of siblings. It's all very high tech--full of amazing gadgets and high speed racing around. Steve Buscemi plays a mad hermit scientist on the mysterious island of the title. He began his genetic experiments cloning miniature versions of animals. He hoped to sell a miniature zoo, complete with tiny animals. (See picture above.) But when he decided to make them just a bit bigger everything got out of hand. It resulted in some very strange crossbreeds, the best of which is a giant spider monkey, sort of a centaur-like creature. Nathan thought the first movie was a B+, but that this was only worth a B. I'd probably grade it lower, maybe C+. **GRADE: C+**

THE SQUID AND THE WHALE 2005/2021 (Streamed on Netflix) We took another look at this movie because it had two of our favorite actors, Jeff Daniels and Laura Linney. My original review is in the Archives. I remembered that Jesse Eisenberg played the older son, Walt, but forgot that Owen Kline played the younger son, Frank. Kline was very good in a part that must have been difficult to play. I incorrectly identified Frank as 10, but in doing research; found that the character was supposed to be 12. I also failed to mention that Noah Baumbach was not only the director but also the writer. Gary and I agreed with our original grade of B+. Here's the original review:

THE SQUID AND THE WHALE: This movie is hard to categorize and, I suspect, even harder to forget. It tells the story of a divorce seen almost entirely from the viewpoint of the couple's two sons. Bernard (Jeff Daniels) is a professor of English at a New York college. He has had one book published early in his career, but nothing lately. He is pompous, pretentious, competitive and terribly insecure. Joan (Laura Linney) is also a writer and her novel is about to be published. Their older son, Walt (Jesse Eisenberg), is 16, and their younger son, Frank (Owen Kline*), is 10. When their parents decide on shared custody, the boys take sides. Walt idolizes his father and faithfully parrots the older man's opinions on everything. Frank is more attached to his mother. Except in rare instances, we never see either of the parents without one or both of their boys. I can see why *The Squid and the Whale* was a film festival darling. The acting and writing are superb. Daniels has had the best reviews of his career, and the film provides Laura Linney with one more chance to excel. Both the young boys are terrific. However, the film is character-driver, not plot-driven, and you can't identify with either of the flawed parents. Be warned that the film deals with teen-age sex and masturbation, and is liberally sprinkled with 4-letter words. So, unless you are enamored of Independent Films, you may not care for this movie. We did like it and give it a B+. **GRADE B+ (*Owen Kline is the son of Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates.)**

ST. VINCENT: (2014) We want to congratulate director & writer Theodore Melfi and all the actors for taking a standard plot and making it into a superior movie! We expected that Bill Murray would elevate the grumpy-old-man-befriends-a-young-boy story line above the ordinary, but we were delighted by the charm of *St. Vincent*. The writing and the acting never become stereotypical and the movie walks the fine line between true sentiment and trite sentimentality. Murray is very good at walking that line and so are Melissa McCarthy, Naomi Watts, and Chris O'Dowd. But it is Jaeden Leberher as Oliver, McCarthy's young son who is moving into a new house with his about to be divorced mom, who almost steals the movie. And this is the young man's first feature film. It is also the first

feature film for Melfi as writer/director, although he has five short films and many producer credits in his filmography. How smart of him to cast Murray, McCarthy, Watts and O'Dowd—veteran actors all—in **St. Vincent**. I was especially impressed with Watts as a Russian "lady of the night." She is bawdy and funny, but never a caricature. McCarthy demonstrates that comedy is not her only skill, and O'Dowd plays a teacher in a Catholic school—the kind of teacher we all wish our children had. What can I say about Bill Murray? He is wonderful as Vincent. Gary thinks it is his best movie, ever. His singing along with Bob Dylan on "Shelter From The Storm" over the closing credits is so amusing that it is worth your staying put until the screen goes dark. It's a perfect ending to a terrific movie. **GRADE A-**

STAGE BEAUTY: (2004 release seen on video) The film is set in London in the 1660's when the Puritans no longer rule England, the monarchy has been restored, and Charles II (Rupert Everett) has reopened the playhouses. However, the old rules forbidding women to appear on stage are still in effect. Ned Kynaston (Billy Crudup), who Samuel Pepys described in his diary as the most beautiful woman on the London stage, is England's most celebrated leading lady. Kynaston's dresser, Maria (Claire Danes), longs to take her place on the stage. She studies everything Kynaston does and when she gets the chance to play the part of Desdemona in an illegal secret theater, she plays the part as a man playing a woman. It's all she knows how to do. When the King decrees that only women will play women's roles on stage, Kynaston's career as an actor appears to be over. Maria, meanwhile, has become a celebrated star. Both actors are terrific in bringing these complicated characters to life. It is especially interesting to see Crudup play both Desdemona and Othello in the same movie. Though not historically accurate, the film is a fascinating look at 17th Century theatre and sexual politics. It is also a thoughtful examination of gender identity. And, the extras on the DVD are worth looking at. **THUMBS UP**

STAN & OLLIE: (2018) Steve Coogan and John C. Reilly were fans of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy before filming the movie, and they became bigger fans of the famous comedy team after working on the film. In an interview, Reilly said, "One of the great things about promoting the movie is to remind people of the genius of Laurel and Hardy." Their movies were filmed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but they have been shown on TV. It was during the 1970s and 1980s that both Coogan and Reilly were introduced to the Laurel & Hardy brand of humor. I do remember them but rather vaguely. Gary has fonder memories of their movies. Their humor probably wouldn't be popular today and that's no doubt why the filmmakers chose to place the movie at the end of their lives when, in an attempt to reignite their film careers, they undertook a theatre tour of post-war Britain. It was to become their swan song for they never again performed together. The screenwriter focuses on the relationship between the two men, as they deal with past hurts and current health problems. We were underwhelmed with the first half of the film, but warmed to it eventually. The final fifteen minutes had us both sniffling. Kudos to the makeup people: they made Reilly look incredibly like Oliver Hardy giving him a huge stomach and jowls that allowed him to move his face naturally. Coogan, who somewhat resembled Stan Laurel, relied on haircut, posture and movements to perfectly duplicate the man who was responsible for the comedy bits that made the team a world-wide sensation. The two actors are largely responsible for our grade. **GRADE B**

STAND UP GUYS: (2013) Many professional critics were unimpressed with this 94 minute drama/comedy, and only a few more than half of polled audience members liked it. I guess Barbara and I will stand with the audience and critics who liked it. Of course we both are big fans of Christopher Walken and Alan Arkin, and have seen enough really good work from Al Pacino to know how capable he is. This thoughtful little buddy caper movie may not stretch their acting muscles, but for me the pleasure of watching three gifted veteran actors play off each other and soar above the screenplay was refreshing. Val (Pacino) is released from prison after serving twenty-eight years for refusing to give up his close criminal associates. He's a "stand up" guy. His best friend (Walken) is there to pick him up when he is released from prison and they soon re-team with another old pal (Arkin). The glory days are gone, but the bond is as strong as ever. As you would expect, the plot thickens and we are treated to glimpses of their old skills. It would be easy to dismiss this film as a sentimental movie about old gangsters, but for me it was much, much more than that. I was especially pleased with Pacino who is often accused of being loud and bombastic in his "over the top" performances. Here he is restrained, and brilliant. Julianna Margulies is excellent in a small supporting role but I must give honorable mention to Addison Timlin, a young girl who gets tremendous mileage out of the role of waitress. The camera loved her. Barbara and I both thought the film was enjoyable and worth seeing. **GRADE B**

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT: (2015) This gripping, informative film is a dramatic recreation of what has come to be regarded as a classic study on the psychology of imprisonment. In 1971 Dr. Philip Zimbardo, a social psychology professor, and a team of researchers randomly assigned male students who were paid to play the roles of either prisoner or guard in a simulated prison which was situated in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Zimbardo was hired as a consultant on the making of the movie and Billy Crudup is effective in bringing Zimbardo to life in the film. This study is mentioned in just about every college introductory psychology textbook published. I was teaching psychology when the results of the research were released and I can tell you the study had a powerful impact. The realistic role playing by young college students was designed to last for two weeks, but the experiment was abruptly terminated after just six days when things spiraled out of control. Several guards empowered by uniforms, Billy clubs, and aviator shades, became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued and they started demanding complete obedience and subjecting their prisoners to abuse when their demands were not met. Since footage of the real experiment has been made public, one doesn't have to wonder about the accuracy of the dramatization. The young cast is electrifying and the film is timely and thought-provoking (think Abu Ghraib). It is an amazing story about the darker side of human behavior. Watching young men brutalize each other is troubling enough, but perhaps the film's most interesting angle is how the experiment changed more than its subjects. The behavior of Zimbardo and his staff was negatively changed as well and it took the fresh eyes of a former female student and later his wife to open him to the unethical elements of the study. The researchers watched the brutality between prisoners and guards dispassionately, and did nothing to stop the violence. Months after terminating the experiment, subjects were interviewed in an effort to check on how they were doing, and how their relationships with each other had been affected. The aftermath is nearly as compelling as the main plot of the film. Jeff Baker, reviewer for "The Oregonian" asks a fascinating question, "Was Zimbardo a daring visionary who showed how situational authority can produce sadistic results or a sloppy researcher who played with dynamite and was lucky not to get arrested or sued when it blew up in his face?" As excellent as the film is, it will not answer that question. It is a disturbing film and very difficult to grade, but Barbara and I agree. **GRADE B+**

A STAR IS BORN: (2018) I have fond memories of the 1954 version of this movie with Judy Garland and James Mason, so I didn't expect to like this one. Although Bradley Cooper's first directing job convinced me that he is more than just a pretty face, I thought the music overwhelmed the story. The stars have good voices, but I had difficulty understanding the lyrics except when Lady Gaga and Cooper were singing a ballad. Even then, when Lady Gaga got loud her enunciation suffered. The plot of **A Star Is Born** has been in every version: A troubled star on his way down falls in love with an ambitious star on her way up. With his help, her fame soon eclipses his. He can't handle her stardom and his failure. But she stands resolute in the end, stronger for having known him. The iconic line, "I just wanted one more look" has appeared in all four versions. On *Collider.com*, Matt Goldberg says that "while Cooper's version is not without its flaws, It feels like the best realized version of this story." That may be true, but I still prefer Judy Garland. Gary and I agree on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

STAR TREK: Tagline: *The future begins.* If you're interested in how James T. Kirk became captain of the Starship Enterprise, this film will give you the necessary background. You'll also be introduced to the familiar characters of Spock, Scotty, Sulu, et.al. The young actors were well cast for their roles, and Chris Pine and Zachary Quinto are perfect for Kirk and Spock. Lenoard Nimroy, the original Spock, makes a surprise appearance, as this story jumps back and forth in time. Even though I watched the TV series only rarely, I was interested in seeing the beginning of this series that has become a science fiction icon. It was the human story that appealed to me, but most of the space battle scenes made me long for a nap. (Gary thought he dozed off during a couple of them.) I can't really comment on the special effects, since we try our best to avoid most science fiction thriller movies. I guess they were good, but mostly they were fast, loud and boring. Eric Bana is unrecognizable as Nero, the evil captain of the Romulan space ship. The movie did well at the box office and got some glowing reviews, so you can expect sequels—sequels we will no doubt avoid. I'm sure that trekkers will grade this film much higher than we do. (See Readers' Views) **GRADE C+**

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS: (2013 We saw the 2D version.) This latest version of the **Star Trek** series has all the requisite visual effects. It has little dialogue but lots of explosions, battles, complicated futuristic machinery and awesome space ships. It is set in the 23rd Century where wars between countries appear to have ended, but wars between planets have begun. All the familiar characters are present. The handsome and appealing Chris Pine is James Kirk and he is a good choice. Zachary Quinto is especially good as Dr. Spock, the half Vulcan-half human first officer. Both actors previously voiced their characters in a Star Trek video game. Simon Pegg is Scotty and he and Quinto provide more humor than I suspect the genre usually contains. Even Gary smiled once or twice, when he wasn't nodding off during the many action sequences. And I do mean many! The villain, Kahn, is played by an actor with an unusual name, Benedict Cumberbatch. His villain is more complicated than most. You can almost understand the revenge rage that drives him. Cumberbatch currently plays Sherlock Holmes in the PBS Masterpiece series. (Brits seem to have a lock on playing Holmes on TV. Jonny Lee Miller, another Brit, is currently playing the famous detective in TV's *Elementary*.) I definitely liked the relationships between the crew members better than all the fighting and warp speed stuff. Critics have graded the movie generously and one called it the "must-see action flick of the year." Fans of Sci-Fi will enjoy this movie and will, I feel sure, look forward to the inevitable sequel. But I can safely say that for us, once is enough. (More than enough for Gary.) I think it deserves a B for the skill with which it was made, but only a C+ when it comes to my enjoyment. (Gary so dislikes Sci-Fi that he abstains from grading it.) **GRADE B/C+**

STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS: (2015) First off I should say that while Gary and I saw and liked the original **Star Wars**, released in 1977, we have not seen the rest of the trilogy or any of the prequels. But we felt compelled to see this 7th movie in the box office juggernaut that is **Star Wars**. What I remember of the 1977 movie is the astounding visuals and the captivating characters created by George Lucas. These days every other movie has astounding special effects, and if you read **Movie Views**, you know that we avoid most of those CGI-laden movies. Thus, the opening scenes of **The Force Awakens** were just another futuristic ho-hum for us. But then, Hans Solo and Chewbacca appeared and the movie came alive for me. I confess to getting caught up in the story and loved seeing Harrison Ford and Carrie Fischer again. Even seeing C-3PO and R2-D2 was like seeing old friends. Once again, the galaxy is threatened, and those who are determined to resist must find the last Jedi, Luke Skywalker, who has been missing for many years. I won't divulge any more of the plot, except to say that it was refreshing to see a woman (Daisy Ridley) with "the force!" I also thought the new Droid, BB-8 was an inventive and amusing addition to the cast, and J.J. Abrams directed with considerable skill. (There were many fight scenes, but the best was the fight with the lightsabers!) I'm sorry to say that Gary was less enchanted than I was by the movie. He feels that he really cannot give this movie a grade. He abstains. The movie did make me want to revisit the original and its two sequels, so I'll have to give **The Force Awakens** credit for that. **GRADE B+**

The original movie was retitled: **Star Wars IV: A New Hope**, after three prequels were released: **The Phantom Menace** (1999), **Attack of the Clones** (2002), and **Revenge of the Sith** (2005).

The Star Wars Trilogy is the first three Star Wars movies:
the original **Star Wars**, plus **The Empire Strikes Back** (1980), and **Return of the Jedi** (1983).

STARBUCK: (2011) Barbara and I see a lot of subtitled foreign films and there are times when we are underwhelmed. This was not one of those times. We were delighted with this French-Canadian feel-good comedy and charmed by Patrick Huard who played David Wosniak, the lead and biological father of 533 children. Wosniak was a prolific sperm donor in his youth and now, a couple of decades later, he is a lovable but consistent screw up trying to take control of his life. Life gets even more complicated when he finds 142 of his progeny want to meet him and are suing in court to learn his name. The subject matter could have been treated crudely and it will be interesting when writer-director Ken Scott brings out an American version of the story titled **Delivery Man** starring Vince Vaughn. There was a nice mix of farce and sincerity in **Starbuck** and we enjoyed it from beginning to end. Huard is so thoroughly charming and convincing as a delinquent becoming a better person, that we highly recommend the film. **GRADE B+**

STARDUST: Barbara and I often approach this film genre (Romance/Science Fiction/Fantasy) with trepidation, but we were both won over by a cast which included Claire Danes, Robert DeNiro, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Peter O'Toole The trailer was also appealing, so we ignored our reservations and headed for the theater. Professional critics were all over the map ranging from D to A and that gave us another good reason to add our opinion to the mix. I guess we always hope for a film with the impact of **The Princess Bride**. As you might expect **Stardust** is no "...**Princess Bride**", but it has its moments not the least of which is a cross-dressing pirate played by DeNiro, haggling with a low-life played by Ricky Gervais (*Extras* on TV) over the price of fenced goods. The story line is too painful to

describe, but involves Danes playing a "fallen star." Not the Hollywood variety, but the Hollywood image of the celestial variety. It also involves a wall that separates England from the fantasy kingdom of Stormhold. Of course Michelle Pfeiffer plays beautiful, ugly, and evil with aplomb. Barbara especially loved King Stormhold's (O'Toole) dead sons who are shot in black and white and provide many comic moments. We see far too little of Peter O'Toole, but what we see is wonderful. I have to confess that I found the action between the early appearance of O'Toole and the mid-way appearance of DeNiro to be soporific. Barbara liked the film better than I. She gives it a "B." **Grade C+/B (Note from Barb: I thought Claire Danes and Charlie Cox made a charming couple. In spite of the fact that the couple-who-starts-out-disliking-each-other-and-ends-up-in-love is a much used cliché, they made it work. The ending of the film was especially touching. However, the special effects and the darkness of some scenes overwhelmed the love story. They didn't make that mistake in *The Princess Bride*. Also, it could have used more humor.)**

STARLET: Barbara and I are probably more tolerant of indie films than most of our readers. They usually play in one remote venue in a large city, so they take a little more effort than the big Hollywood releases. At their best they are quite rewarding, but at their worst they can be boring and leave you wondering why you made the extra effort. **Starlet** is not a total bust, but it isn't very rewarding either. We often find that even mediocre films are bolstered by strong performances and this film is no exception. Dree Hemingway, daughter of actress Mariel Hemingway and the great-granddaughter of author Ernest Hemingway is especially good in this lackluster film. The film explores an unlikely friendship between 21 year-old Jane (Hemingway) and 85 year-old Sadie (played by a nonprofessional actress discovered exercising in a Los Angeles gym). Jane spends her days getting high with her dysfunctional friends and earning money in the seedy adult video industry in San Fernando Valley. Sadie passes her days alone tending her flower garden. The two women's lives are thrown together at a chance encounter and unusual purchase at a yard sale. There are no easy answers as to what draws the two women together and an underwhelming final revelatory scene is little help. **Starlet** has been given favorable and even glowing reviews by many professional critics. We are not so generous. **GRADE C-**

STARSKY & HUTCH: Gary and I never watched the TV show on which this film is based, but we still enjoyed watching Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson. Stiller does up tight better than anyone, and Wilson is the supreme laid-back dude. The critics' comments on this spoof range from "affectionate and surprisingly funny," to "dismal." We lean more toward the former. Starsky's perm and his red Ford Torino were fun, and Vince Vaughn is very funny as a big-time cocaine dealer. Snoop Dogg is Huggy Bear, a combo pimp/superfly/police informer whose outfits are not to be believed. Will Ferrell turns up in a weird cameo as a prisoner with some very kinky requests. Gary enjoyed the Stiller and Wilson antics enough to give the film a B, and grandson, Nathan, laughed a lot and said it was an A- movie. I did laugh out loud several times, but taken overall I have say C+. (The fact that I had a cold and a bad cough, which I desperately tried to stifle, may have interfered with my enjoyment.) **GRADE A-/B/C+**

STARTING OUT IN THE EVENING: (2007 Release) Heather (Lauren Ambrose) is a graduate student writing her thesis on Leonard Schiller (Frank Langella), an author whose critically acclaimed books, written years before, are no longer in print. Reluctant at first to take time from the novel he is writing, Schiller eventually succumbs to Heather's youthful enthusiasm and her intense admiration for his earlier novels. As you might expect in a movie about a writer, there isn't much action, and for many used to the rapid pace of typical Hollywood fare, it will seem slow-moving. But Langella is marvelous and Ambrose and Taylor both give stellar performances. The relationship between the elderly author and the young student is an interesting one and is the heart of the film, but it is handled with supreme subtlety. The emotions of the characters in this film are rarely out in the open. They simmer beneath the surface of the words. We also are given glimpses of Schiller's relationship with his daughter, Ariel (Lilli Taylor), who is facing some life-changing decision of her own. If interesting and intelligent characters and dialogue are your thing, you will like this film. **GRADE B**

STATE AND MAINE: Thank goodness we saw this lighthearted movie on the same day we saw Quills. At least the day ended on a happy note. We always enjoy seeing movies about moviemaking, and this is a particularly good one. David Mamet has assembled a cast that includes some of his old Chicago actor friends--W.H.Macy, Jack Wallace and Rebecca Pidgeon--plus a lot of other talented people. Macy is the director of a movie-in-the-making called *The Old Mill*. They began filming in New Hampshire where they had constructed an actual mill, but were forced out of town due to the penchant of their star, Bob/Alec Baldwin, for bedding teenaged girls. The town of Waterford, Vermont seems perfect for them, and the financially strapped film crew takes over the sleepy little village. We are treated to a lot of behind-the-scenes maneuvering and also to the effect that the presence of the movie people has on the townspeople. Baldwin is very amusing as the lecherous leading man, and Sarah Jessica Parker displays her considerable comedic talents as a temperamental diva who wants only to be taken seriously. The ubiquitous Philip Seymour Hoffman is the hapless writer who is out of his depth working on his first movie. His relationship with a local bookstore owner, Rebecca Pidgeon, is State and Maine's only love story. Charles Durning is Waterford's Mayor and Patti LuPone is his starstruck wife. **GRADE: B+**

STATE OF PLAY: If you like old school suspense without spectacular car crashes, you may want to put this film on your "want to see" list. Don't worry, there is still plenty of action. In the fast opening scenes a man is shot dead in an alley; a passing bicyclist is killed, and a woman is shoved or jumps under a subway train. A mercenary security company (think *Blackwater*) may be protecting a multibillion-dollar industry. Russell Crowe, Rachel McAdams, and Ben Affleck effectively play the leads in this twisty, topical, political thriller. Helen Mirren, Robin Wright Penn, Jeff Daniels, and Jason Bateman are all fun to watch in supporting roles. The film was directed by Kevin Macdonald who also directed *The Last King of Scotland*. Crowe plays a scruffy, seasoned newspaper reporter who may be onto the biggest story since Watergate. McAdams plays a perky newspaper blogger who also fills the role of cub reporter. In an interesting bit of trivia, I learned that Brad Pitt was originally scheduled to play the disheveled reporter that was taken over by Crowe when Pitt had to drop out. I like the acting of Pitt at least as well as Crowe, but I think Crowe was a better fit. It is also interesting to know that this American film is a condensation of a 2003 British mini-series. Barbara and I both felt the film deserves relatively high marks. **GRADE B+**

THE STATION AGENT: In the last issue, Peg C., our local star of stage and screen trying to make it big in Hollywood, said that if she could see only one film this year, *The Station Agent* would be that film. I can certainly understand the feeling. This is one of the best independent films ever. The film is a study in loneliness and friendship. Three very different people become friends, and watching that happen is totally engrossing. Peter Dinklage is Fin McBride, a dwarf who loves everything about trains. When he inherits an abandoned

train station, he leaves the city for rural New Jersey and makes the station his home. The very first day he meets two people: Joe (Bobby Cannavale), who is running a mobile hot dog stand for his ailing father, and Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), who is the epitome of accident-prone and almost runs Fin over with her car--*twice*. It's an unlikely beginning, and the very solitary Fin is slow to warm up to Joe and Olivia. The movie is touching and amusing. The actors inhabit their roles so completely that you feel you could go to New Jersey and meet them. Drinklage is absolutely wonderful. We expect Clarkson to be excellent, and she is, but we weren't as familiar with Cannevale. Some of you may remember him from TV's *The Third Watch*. His voluble Joe is a loveable puppy dog kind of guy, and eventually even the taciturn Fin can't resist his charm. ***The Station Agent*** was a favorite at the Sundance Film Festival and captured acting, writing and audience awards. I'm not surprised. Thomas McCarthy both wrote and directed this unforgettable film. **GRADE: A**

THE STATION AGENT: (2003) When Barbara reviewed this charming film in 2003, she declared it to be "*one of the best independent films ever*." Now, 17 years later, streaming it on a smaller screen, it is still a gem of a movie. If you haven't seen it, and if you like independent film making, we think it is worth your time and hope you love it as much as we do. ***The Station Agent*** is an original: a sweet, slow moving, and quirky film about a dwarf, a refreshment stand operator, and a reclusive artist. Played by Peter Drinklage, Bobby Cannavale, and Patricia Clarkson, these talented actors create characters you have never seen before and are not likely to soon forget. Drinklage stands 4 feet and 4 inches, and we can hope that he helps break down a long history of a dwarf screen stereotype. I encourage you to go to the Movie Views Archives and read Barbara's original review. Our grade doesn't change. **GRADE A**

STEP BROTHERS: I think Barbara and I would have skipped this film if we had not read the following opening to an *Arizona Republic* review by Bill Goodykoontz: "***Step Brothers*** is stupid. Childish. Moronic. Simple. Juvenile. Silly. Just ridiculous. Man is it funny." I have to say there is some truth in the Goodykoontz evaluation. Given a film that gloats on irreverence, I admit I often chuckled and was far more entertained than I can logically justify. Will Ferrell (***Blades of Glory***) John C. Reilly (***Chicago***), Richard Jenkins (***The Visitor***), and Mary Steenburgen (a ton of roles) take admittedly crude material and make it better than it may deserve. Steenburgen is a good enough actor to make you believe she could be an enabling single mother of a sporadically employed 39-year-old who still lives at home. And Jenkins is a good enough actor to make you believe he could be an enabling single father of a terminally unemployed 40-year-old who still lives at home. A sudden marriage between the two enabling parents forces the immature boys to live with each other as stepbrothers. Fortunately for the film, Ferrell and Reilly bring no shame or sense of dignity to their roles. One crude scene involves what one hopes is a stunt scrotum bulging with testicles into full view for the sake of a petulant adolescent antic. Maybe you should leave the little kids at home. I liked the film a little better than Barbara, so we settled on the following grades: **GRADE C+/C**

THE STEPFORD WIVES: Gary has three things to say about this film: 1. The story is stupid, 2. It's a remake, 3. It's very funny. Director Frank Oz and Screenwriter Paul Rudnick were smart not to do a faithful remake of the 1975 movie made from Ira Levin's thriller novel. Although the feminist heart is still there, the current film is more comedy than thriller. It has a lot of funny lines, especially those delivered by Bette Midler. Nicole Kidman has a line about AOL that made both of us laugh out loud. We actually enjoyed this movie more than we expected to after hearing so many critics savage it. I don't know why they are being so hard on it. I realize it's not a great movie, but it is reasonably entertaining summer fare. Glen Close, Christopher Walken and Matthew Broderick are fine and Faith Hill does well in her first movie. **GRADE C+**

STILL ALICE: (2014) It may be a "disease of the week" plot, but this movie is so much more. It tells the story with honesty, and the excellent script is without emotional manipulation. Most importantly, it has a truly amazing performance by Julianne Moore as a brilliant 50-year-old Linguistics professor diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. One of the tragic elements of the disease is that the afflicted know what is happening and what will happen to them. They deal with loss every day and fear for the future. Moore's Alice handles her disease with grace and dignity, but when she learns that hers is a rare type of genetic Alzheimer's, and that her three children could inherit it, she is devastated. It is heartbreaking to watch this bright, articulate woman, who always felt she was defined by her intellect, struggle to find the words that she can see in her mind but cannot grasp. The movie is accurate and compassionate in showing Alice's tragic decline and the demands her disease places on her family. I know that some want to avoid this movie, and perhaps, if the specter of Alzheimer's hangs over you, that is a good thing. It was difficult for me because I have a sister, who, with her family, is struggling with late onset Huntington's Disease. I can understand if you decide to miss ***Still Alice***, but by doing so you will miss a stunning performance by Julianne Moore. If you do go, "don't be surprised to find yourself suddenly obsessed with forgotten names and misplaced keys." (Linda Barnard, *Toronto Star*) Gary and I can appreciate that comment, because that was our reaction! Moore's performance is mostly responsible for the high grade we have given the movie. **GRADE A-**

STILL: A Michael J. Fox Movie: 2023 (Available for streaming on Apple TV) This is an uplifting and often amusing documentary about a beloved actor. The film explores Fox's personal and professional triumphs and travails, and what happens when an incurable optimist confronts an incurable disease. Having achieved stardom in his early 20s, Fox found himself in his 30s hiding from, and then publicly facing up to a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease – a condition that he believed (as many do) only affected older people. He began noticing symptoms when he was just 29 years old. His resilience is remarkable. And, despite the obvious effects of a degenerative brain disease that inhibits his speech and movement, Fox is still pin balling his way through life. Critics loved this hour and 35 minute film with 99% from 149 reviews on the Tomatometer. Fox is 61 now and has spent a good deal of time raising money for research efforts seeking a cure for Parkinson's. So far he has raised over 2 billion dollars. Directed by Davis Guggenheim the film opens with the memory of the hungover young actor staring at his shaking pinky and wondering why it didn't seem to belong to him any longer. Fox, the star of the ***Back to the Future*** films and TV's ***Family Ties***, started experiencing symptoms of early-onset Parkinson's disease in 1991, when he was in his late 20s, and he went public seven years later. The disease finally forced his retirement from acting in 2021. Fox's wife, Tracy Pollan, who plays an important person in his life is also in the film. She played Ellen on ***Family Ties*** where they met. The couple has four children: first a son, then twin daughters, and then another son. You might think a movie about Parkinson's would be a "downer." Barb and I did not feel that way. The feeling I had when the ending credits started to roll was a feeling of tremendous admiration for a man who has incorporated this terrible disease into his life and has refused to let it stop him living it. **GRADE A**

STILL MINE: (2013/2013) Professional critics loved this truth based tender drama available on Netflix and so did Barbara and I. It is a showcase for two veteran actors: James Cromwell and Genevieve Bujold playing Craig and Irene. It is a deeply touching love story

sprinkled with humor and pathos. Craig has for decades lived the life of a self-sufficient farmer on his land in New Brunswick, Canada. When he sets out to build a smaller house which will better meet the needs of his ailing wife, he gets on the wrong side of a rigid building inspector and blindsided by local building codes and bureaucratic officials. Faced with unreasonable demands, stop work orders, and ultimately the possibility of jail, he takes a stand. It is a touching story and you may need a Kleenex or three. **GRADE B+**

THE STING: 1973 (Available for \$3.99 rental on Prime Video.) There are some movies that are so good that they can be revisited every decade or so and give you the same thrill you had with the original viewing. *The Sting* is such a movie. Barbara and I loved this film in 1973 and we still love it. *The Sting* reunited Robert Redford and Paul Newman, stars of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). That's not all, though. Both movies were directed by George Roy Hill, who was one of the giant directing talents who contributed to Hollywood's second Golden Age of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Created by screenwriter David S. Ward, the story was inspired by real-life cons perpetrated by brothers Fred and Charley Gondorff and documented by David Maurer in his 1940 book "The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man." Following the murder of a mutual friend, aspiring con man Johnny Hooker (Robert Redford) teams up with old pro Henry Gondorff (Paul Newman) to take revenge on the ruthless crime boss responsible for the murder, Doyle Lonnegan (Robert Shaw). Hooker and Gondorff set about implementing an elaborate scheme, one so crafty that Lonnegan won't even know he's been swindled. They devise a complicated scheme and amass a talented group of other con artists who want their share of the reparations. The stakes are high in this game, and our heroes must deal with Lonnegan's murderous tendencies. The talented supporting cast is nearly as good as the leads. Released on Christmas Day of 1973, *The Sting* was a massive critical and commercial success and was hugely successful at the 46th Academy Awards, being nominated for ten Oscars and winning seven. If you have never seen this wonderful film, put it on your must see list. **GRADE A**

STOKER: (2013) This is not a film genre Barbara and I often attend, but I think one needs to be reminded occasionally why one tends to skip a whole film genre. Actually the main attraction for us was the casting of Mia Wasikowska in the starring role of India Stoker, a young girl grieving over the recent death of her father. We were first impressed with the work of Wasikowska in an HBO TV series titled *In Treatment*, and we have followed her work ever since. *Stoker* is an hour and 38 minutes of what I would describe as a creepy suspense thriller. After India's father dies in an auto accident, her Uncle Charlie, who she never knew existed, comes to live with her and her emotionally unstable mother. Matthew Goode and Nicole Kidman are nothing short of excellent in their roles as Uncle Charlie and India's mother. The film's director, Park Chan-wook sometimes leaves us wondering not, "what will happen next?", but what the hell is happening?" He sometimes plays with perceptions by shooting a scene two ways and leaving it to us to decide which, if either, of the scenes is supposed to be real. There is a lot of blood and a lot of creative symbolism and I think movie buffs who love the thriller genre will rate this film highly. My somewhat biased view of the genre darkens my evaluation. **GRADE B-** (Barbara enjoyed it more than I did, and she liked the creativity of the film. She gives it a solid B)

STORIES WE TELL: (2012/2013) Sarah Polley is a gifted actress with an extensive filmography. She is also a talented director. In 2006 she directed Julie Christie in *Away From Her*, a movie we especially liked. It garnered two Oscar nominations, one for Christie as best actress and one for Polley for best adapted screenplay. Then, in 2011 she directed Michelle Williams in *Take This Waltz* and the Directors Guild of Canada nominated her for best director. In *Stories We Tell* Polley brings her keen director's eye to her own family's story. Through the documentary format, she hopes to uncover the truth at the core of her family's history. Polley's was only 11 when her mother died, but, because her father filmed so many moments of their lives together, she had many lasting images of her mom. She began the documentary project with an interest in how people tell the stories of their lives. But her search became much more than that: It became a search for her biological father. It had always been a family joke that she didn't look anything like her father and eventually she wanted to find out the truth. In the process, she does discover her biological father, but the "truth" of her family remains elusive. Perhaps we only know *our* truth and not *the* truth. Hers is a family of storytellers and almost all of them seem comfortable in front of the camera. Her father(s) are particularly articulate. We come to care for them all, most especially for the one who can't tell her own story, Diane, Polley's mother. Our local critic said, "Watching Polley solve the riddles in *Stories We Tell* is one of the most satisfying movie experiences I've had in a long time." We agree. **GRADE A**

STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON: (2015) Barbara and I were going to skip this one, but it received 90% from critics on the *Tomatometer*, a 96% audience score, plus a recommendation from faithful Movie Views readers Diane & Lee. *Straight Outta Compton* is an informative 2½ hour biopic with powerful performances from a solid cast which included Paul Giamatti. In the mid-1980s, the streets of Compton, California, were considered by many to be among the most dangerous in the country. Five talented young men who grew up in that brutal environment used their musical gifts to rebel against abusive authority and in the process revolutionized the music industry and pop culture forever. I was not an early fan of "gangsta rap", a subgenre of hip hop, but this film gives a better understanding and appreciation of how the music evolved. The group, N.W.A was active from 1986 to 1991 and stirred considerable controversy owing to their music's explicit lyrics that seemed to glorify crime and drug use. Though the film tended to soft peddle it, the lyrics also contained abusive disrespect for women. N.W.A is an abbreviation of "Niggaz wit' Attitude." Although N.W.A. has twice been nominated, it has not yet made the final cut into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. The biggest name to come out of the N.W.A. was O'Shea Jackson, better known as Ice Cube, who has made a name for himself both in the Music Industry and as a respected actor. Ice Cube's son, O'Shea Jackson, Jr., does an excellent job playing his father in the movie. For me the value of the film lies in the historical perspective provided for emergence of "Gangsta Rap." Against a back drop of police brutality and racial profiling, N.W.A's notorious breakout record, "*Fuck Tha Police*" stands out. One can understand the deep feelings behind the lyrics as well as the umbrage taken by law enforcement. I also understand why Rolling Stone's lists it as one of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time. The film doesn't make me love the music, but it gives me a much deeper understanding of it. **GRADE B**

STRANGER THAN FICTION: Imagine that you are a writer suffering from writer's block. Harold Crick, a mild-mannered IRS agent, is the main character in your new book. You want to kill him at the end of the novel, but you can't decide what method to use. Now imagine that you discover Harold Crick is a real person. And, he has been hearing your voice narrating his actions. Your dilemma: if you kill your character, the real Harold will die. Yes, it is strange, but the beauty of this film is that you actually buy into the fantasy, perhaps because Will Ferrell as Harold Crick and Emma Thompson as the conflicted author are so believable. It's an unusual role for Ferrell. You see none of the over-the-top character he usually plays. One critic thought he was boring, but we quite liked him. And Maggie

Gyllenhaal is charming as a baker who is being audited by the IRS. Dustin Hoffman is very entertaining as a Literature Professor that Harold turns to for help. Not a great film, but a very enjoyable one. **GRADE B**

STRANGERS WITH CANDY: Dan Heydaya has the best of it in this film: He's in a coma for all but a few minutes of it. Would that we had been! Gary said he expected nothing from this movie, and, except for one chuckle, that's what he got. Perhaps we're too old for this kind of humor, because, on Yahoo Movies, there are raves from many viewers, all of them probably decades younger than we are. The movie was written by Stephen Colbert and Amy Sedaris, a Second City alum and a pretty girl with a rubber face. (She doesn't look pretty in this film.) Sedaris stars as Jerri Blank, a 46-year-old ex-junkie and ex-con who emerges from her long prison stay and returns to high school in a bid to start her life over and bring her father (Heydaya) out of his coma. Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick make a surprise appearance, and the rest of the cast is fine. We just didn't find it funny. We thought *Clerks II* was bad, but this one is worse. **GRADE D**

STRONGER: (2017) This film is the true-life story of Jeff Bauman, a young man who because of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, was thrust into hero status against his wishes. Bauman was the man whose iconic photo from the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing captured the hearts of the world. But having your legs blown off by a terrorist bomb doesn't feel inspirational to the person suffering it. Bauman didn't consider himself a hero and in fact shied from the spotlight for many painful months. Later he co-authored a best-selling book on which this film is based. The film is a testament to the human need for symbols of hope. Jake Gyllenhaal who won an Oscar for his performance in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is nothing short of brilliant in his portrayal of Bauman. Also brilliant is the work of Tatiana Maslany playing Erin, Bauman's on-again-off-again girlfriend. Maslany is a Canadian actress best known for playing multiple roles in the science fiction thriller TV series *Orphan Black*. Barbara and I clearly remember her extraordinary versatility in playing those roles. Bauman was at ground zero waiting for his girlfriend to finish the marathon when the Boston bombing happened, and he lost both of his legs above the knee. His story became an even bigger when he reported that he saw one of the bombers. Deserving special mention was Miranda Richardson playing Bauman's mother. The movie does not try to sugar coat the darker moments of his recovery. The director goes for realism and he achieves it. Most critics loved this movie and so did we. **GRADE A**

STUCK ON YOU: The Farrelly brothers have produced a one-joke movie, and halfway into it I began to tire of the joke. However, soon after the midway point, the movie took a bit more serious and sentimental turn, and that revived my interest. Bo (Matt Damon) and Walt (Greg Kinnear) are conjoined twins. They are NOT Siamese twins, because, as Bo says, "We're Americans." The two men are quite different: Walt is an aspiring actor and a practicing ladies' man, but Bo is shy and retiring. When Walt decides to go to Hollywood and become a star, Bo, naturally, has to go along. Most of the humor comes from the spectacle of these two men "stuck together." The funniest scenes show them flipping burgers, pitching for the Martha's Vinyard baseball team, working as a goalie (goalies?) for the local hockey team, and in the ring as a prize-fighter with four fists. Several celebrities appear as themselves in *Stuck On You*: Meryl Streep is less successful in her appearance as Cher is in hers. Cher does a terrific sendup of herself. Gary thinks the movie deserves a B-. While I was a bit disappointed in the film, I do remember laughing enough to give it a C+. **GRADE A-/B-**

THE SUBSTANCE: 2024 (Prime Video rental \$6.99) I should have looked at [Art S., IN's](#) review before we saw this AWFUL movie. He said in his review, "*I am not exaggerating when I say it was the WORST movie I have ever seen.*" He could have saved us 2 hours and 23 minutes of our time! The critics on RT gave the movie 89%; the audience score was 75%. I agree with Art: *So much for trusting critics reviews as a measure of the quality of a movie.* I should have trusted the genre—horror plus drama RT said, but Gary and I wanted to review recent movies in this issue. It started out interesting enough. Demi Moore was a workout queen, and she had a show on TV. She was over 50 and Dennis Quaid, his producer, said he wanted a younger woman as the new workout queen. "*At 50 it's over,*" he said. The pursuit of youth and beauty is big business in this country, and we are always up for a put-down of that. But we weren't prepared for the excesses of the last scene. It was truly terrible! We won't be seeing any horror films again! It was an AWFUL movie! The only bright spot was the stylized look of the film. **GRADE D**

SUBURRA: (2015, streamed from Netflix 2018) We streamed this grisly and violent movie from Netflix. It is an Italian film that got good reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes*. At first, we didn't think we'd like it, but we watched the entire movie and thought it was well made and well acted. The story is this: A gangster wants to turn the waterfront of Ostia into a new Las Vegas. (Ostia is a large neighborhood of Rome near its ancient port, and is now a major archaeological site known as Ostia Antica. We visited that ancient city in 2008.) All the local mob bosses, and even some members of the Italian Parliament, have agreed to work for this common goal. But when it comes to the mob, things don't stay peaceful for long.

SUFFRAGETTE: (2015) Many people take a woman's right to vote and to hold public office for granted. But the fight for those rights has a checkered history and is still being fought in parts of the world. This movie is set in Great Britain. After peacefully struggling decades for women's rights with no results, many turned to Civil Disobedience. Thousands of women risked all they had - their jobs, their homes, their children, and even their lives. *Suffragette* tells a stirring fact-based story. Why would women turn to violence for the right to vote? Of course it was for more than the right to vote. The legal status of women in Great Britain was little more than human bondage. Sexual exploitation of women and girls in the workforce was common if not expected. In case of separation or divorce, children were legally the property of the husband. The idea that women would have the intelligence to vote and should have any political power in a society in which they made up half, was patently absurd to most men. So women declared war because, they said, war is the only thing men listen to. "If you want me to respect the law?" spits one woman, "Then make the law respectable." The screenplay focuses on Maud Watts (played by Carey Mulligan), a working-class laundresses, wife and mother whose life is forever changed when she becomes part of the U.K.'s growing suffragette movement. It excels at showing how vulnerable suffragettes became in the eyes of a punitive and increasingly panicked British government. When a movie deals with a cause that is so just, one hopes it will be Academy Award worthy. Even though Mulligan's performance was terrific (it always is) and the supporting cast did their part, both Barbara and I were at least mildly disappointed. It was good and the subject matter powerful. We just we wanted it to be better. **GRADE B**

SUGAR: The Dominican Republic supplies more players to Major League Baseball than any other country outside the U.S. Over two dozen U.S. teams have opened training facilities on the island. Young men live at the camps returning to their homes only on the weekends. Baseball is everything to these young men. It is their chance to escape poverty, and, if incredibly skilled and lucky, make millions. Sugar is one of these young men. He hopes that his pitching arm will take him to a Major League team in the U.S. The day he is told to report to the Kansas City training camp is exciting not just for Sugar, but for his family and friends—the whole neighborhood celebrates. Sugar is eventually sent to a farm club team in Iowa, and we see the hope and the anxiety in his eyes as he struggles to play well, to learn English, and to overcome his homesickness. Up to this point, **Sugar** seems to be a typical sports film, but it slowly develops into a young man's search for identity in a strange country. Algenis Perez Soto, who plays Sugar, is not an actor but a former infielder who had to train for two months to become a convincing pitcher. The filmmakers wanted someone who had the ability to express himself without words, and the handsome Soto is very good at doing that. Gary thought the film was slow at times. A long tracking shot that impressed some reviewers was, to us, puzzling. But Soto was terrific, and I liked the fact that this film is much more than a standard sports story. **GRADE B.**

SUGARCANE: 2024 (Available for streaming on **Hulu**.) This 107 minute documentary received a rare 100% positivity from 65 critics on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer signifying universal acclaim. In 2021, evidence of unmarked graves was discovered on the grounds of an Indian residential school run by the Catholic Church in Canada. After years of silence, the forced separation, assimilation and abuse many children experienced at these segregated boarding schools was brought to light, sparking a national outcry against a system designed to destroy Indigenous communities. It is a moving tribute to the resilience of Native people and their way of life. **Sugarcane** explores dark places journalists rarely get into....going on-the-record and revisiting a nightmare that may haunt them for years. **Sugarcane** premiered at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival where it won the Directing Award and has since garnered over a dozen awards including an Oscar nomination. It marks the first time that an Indigenous North American filmmaker has received an Oscar nomination. Co-directors Julian Brave NoiseCat and Emily Kassie, the filmmakers behind the film, spent years investigating the truth behind just one of the institutions: Joseph's Mission near the Sugarcane Reservation of Williams Lake in British Columbia. The school, which did not close until 1981, was one of many state-supported institutions — 139 in Canada, 408 in the United States — operated for more than a century to deal with the "*Indian problem*" by more or less brainwashing children into forgoing their Native languages and customs, and becoming acceptably assimilated. These children are now adults who struggle to confront the pain of their pasts. Interviews with residents help fill out this haunting and damning narrative. Through them, we come to understand the impact these parochial environments had on survivors. **Sugarcane** paints a horrifying picture of the systemic abuses inflicted by the state-funded school and exposes for the first time a pattern of infanticide and babies born to Indigenous girls and fathered by priests. As the investigation continued, co-directors Emily and Julian traveled back to the rivers, forests and mountains of their homeland to hear the many stories from survivors including how different government agencies collaborated to cover up these crimes. The cover-up and lies involved Priests who, even when found to be molesters, were simply transferred to other reservations. In preparation for reviewing the movie, I read several articles. Barbara saw the film knowing nothing about it. I loved it while she found it too long and slow moving. **GRADES A/C**

SULLY: (2016) Clint Eastwood directs and Tom Hanks stars as "Sully" Sullenberger, the US Airways pilot who in 2009 successfully executed a mid-winter emergency landing on the frigid Hudson River, saving 155 lives. Hanks was a perfect choice to play the humble taciturn hero who was shoved into the media spotlight. In 96 minutes Eastwood delivers what the real Captain Sully described as a "pretty damn accurate" account of the emergency landing, incredible rescue, and the post-crash investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. Eastwood was so committed to getting the details of the story right that he had a special effects post-production team change the color of the class ring Hanks wears in the film from yellow gold to white gold to match the captain's real ring. I thought the film worked well, as did one our **Movie Views** readers who is himself a pilot. That amazing event was given abundant news coverage and I think most people remember reading about it or seeing it on TV. But the investigation of the National Safety Board was given far less coverage. That is what Eastwood tended to focus on. Barbara, her son John, and I saw the film together and we all enjoyed it. **GRADE B+**

SUMMER 1993: (2017/2018) This coming-of-age subtitled Spanish film received favorable reviews at several international film festivals before opening in selected art houses around United States. Rotten Tomatoes gave it an impressive 100% based on 54 critical reviews. It is a semi-autobiographical period piece written and directed by Carla Simon and was named by the National Board of Review as one of the top five international films of 2017. As one critic observed, "not since **Boyhood** has a film shown this much respect and understanding for what it's like to be a child." Simón draws on personal memories to create a thoughtful drama elevated by outstanding work from its two young leads. Both girls are amazingly natural, behaving as if they are totally unaware that there is a camera present. In an opening scene, six-year-old Frida looks on in silence as the last objects from her recently deceased mother's apartment in Barcelona are placed in boxes. From the outset Simón puts us in Frida's baffled mind-set, listening to hushed adult conversations around her and making us work to figure out what it all means, just as Frida does. Although her aunt, uncle, and younger cousin Anna welcome her with open arms, it's only very slowly that Frida begins to get used to her new home in the countryside. We gradually learn Frida's mother died from AIDS. Remember it is 1993 and it is fascinating how the adults tip-toe around the subject without ever uttering the dreaded word. Simón forces us to view the collapsed world of a child who has lost her anchor. It is a timely reminder of what it is like for a child to be torn from his/her mother. Barbara and I were moved by the film. It will probably be hard to find an art house showing it. But if you have the opportunity, it is a unique film worth seeking out. **GRADE B+**

A SUMMER IN GENOA: This 2008 film went directly to DVD, and we can understand why. Although it is a delicate handling of the subject of grief, it moves very slowly and nothing much happens. Colin Firth stars a recently widowed father of two daughters. Five months after the accident that killed his wife (played by Hope Davis), he takes a teaching job in Genoa, hoping that a change of scene will help them all move on. Catherine Keener plays a college friend of Firth's who helps him get settled. In Genoa, Firth's older teenaged daughter begins to experience some grownup pleasures, while the younger girl, age 10, is troubled by nightmares and visions of her mother. Some critics liked the fact that Director Michael Winterbottom stripped the story of sentimental undertones, i.e. there are no climactic revelations or cathartic moments for any of the characters. But I doubt many would find it compelling viewing. Firth and the

actors who play his two daughters are very good and their performances were enough to keep us involved. Since I am a serious Colin Firth fan, I liked the movie a bit better than Gary. **GRADE C+/C**

SUMMER OF SOUL: 2021 (Available for streaming on Hulu and also available in many theaters.) Barbara and I saw it on Hulu. This movie is a powerful reclaiming of lost history. Remember Woodstock? If you are old enough, you do. Remember the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969, the very same year? No, you don't. That's because it was almost forgotten. Footage of the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival was shot and later placed in a basement, where it sat for about 50 years. The lack of awareness of this event is another tragic example of black history being ignored. Summer of Soul showcases the enormous talent of legends in their prime that performed during the Harlem Cultural Festival. Names like Stevie Wonder, B.B. King, Gladys Knight & the Pips, the 5th Dimension, and many others. The festival was free of charge and attracted a nearly all-Black audience of 50,000, every day on the six summer weekends it played in a park in Harlem, just one hundred miles south of Woodstock. It is a stirring documentary that is as much about history and sociology as it is about music. The summer of 1969 was a defining time that marked a tidal shift in Black Americans racial identity. The full title of the film, which you don't usually see, was *Summer of Soul (. . . Or When the Revolution Could Not be Televised)*. 1969 was the year that marked the death of the word "negro" to be replaced by the word "black" and people adopted the phrase "Black pride." The summer of 1969 represented different things to different people, as this film reminds us. Most Blacks had little emotional stake in the moon landing; they were more concerned about issues they faced every day, like drugs, crime, poverty, and police brutality. I am so thankful that that film footage of the Harlem Culture Festival did not stay lost in that dark basement. What was lost is now found and hopefully will be a remembered part of history which is available for us all to share. **GRADE A**

SUPER 8: When you go to a movie and all the previews are of *Transformer*-type films, you should know you're in for a science fiction story with huge mechanical monsters and lots of things blowing up. We went to *Super 8* because we read it paid homage to Steven Spielberg, who, as a boy scout living in Scottsdale, fulfilled a requirement for the photography merit badge by making a nine-minute 8 mm film entitled *The Last Gunfight*. The boys in this story are making a zombie movie, but when they film a scene at a train station, they inadvertently film a colossal train wreck. When they finally get their film developed, they realize that there is a monster loose in town and the military is trying to cover it up. However, the kids are the real stars of this movie and we enjoyed the development of their characters. Joel Courtney, as Joe, a young boy still grieving for his mother, is very good in his first movie role. Elle Fanning is also good as Joe's young love interest. Kyle Chandler plays Joe's father, a deputy who has to take over as sheriff when the real sheriff mysteriously disappears. A lot of strange things start happening in the town when the military takes over the investigation of the train wreck, and it's at this point that we began to lose interest in the movie. Monster movie aren't really our thing. To me, they are only frightening when I haven't yet seen the monster. It's the unknown that I find scary. C.G.I. monsters don't frighten me at all. I did enjoy the young actors and appreciated the homage paid to *E.T.*, *Close Encounters*, etc., but there was too much mindless mayhem for my taste. Only at the end, when the monster builds a spaceship and goes home, was I engaged. Gary had even less patience for the science fiction element than I did, and his grade is lower than mine. **GRADE B-/C**

SUPERBAD: This one is tough for us to fairly evaluate. Therefore Barbara magnanimously passed the job off to me. Roger Ebert loved the film and grades it A-, and the average for professional critics on Yahoo is B+. I am not sure adults of our maturity can fully appreciate adolescent humor, but the favorable reviews lured us to the theater to try. This is a raunchy teen sex comedy about a couple of co-dependent high school guys who want to make it with girls before they graduate and go their separate ways to college. Jonah Hill and Michael Sera are appealing as the sex-obsessed graduates. There is a third character that must be mentioned. His name is Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse). He is a key player in this hormones and insecurities driven story. His fake ID under the name of "McLoven" may give the boys access to liquor which may be the ticket to sexual paradise. *Superbad*, is written by Seth Rogen (*Knocked Up*) and his pal Evan Goldberg. Both have roles in the film which supposedly has autobiographical elements. Barbara and I didn't hate the film, but we certainly didn't love it either. We are stuck in the limbo of: **GRADE C/C-**

SUPERNOVA: (2021 available for streaming on Prime Video for \$6.99 rental) *Supernova* is the tale of a gay couple coming to terms with the fact that one of them is experiencing early-onset dementia. It is an incredibly moving story of two men who are deeply in love but will soon face the reality that one will lose his ability to comprehend the world around him. Barbara and I were blown away by the dazzling talents of the two leads. If you are a big fan of Colin Firth and Stanley Tucci, as we are, then this is a film you won't want to miss. The chemistry between Firth and Tucci is so natural that it's impossible to say which of the two is better and it is a pleasure watching them work together on screen. The two men are traveling across England in an old camper van visiting friends, family and places from their past. Interestingly, in real life Firth and Tucci are longtime friends and they were originally slotted into the opposite roles than the ones they ended up playing in the film. The title of the film will make more sense if you think of a supernova as the last hurrah of a massive star. On Rotten Tomatoes, critics liked the film far more than audiences: 89% vs 67%. We agree with the critics. **GRADE A.**

THE SUM OF ALL FEARS: We were caught up in this action/triller which is based on a novel by Tom Clancy. The central character is Jack Ryan (Ben Affleck) as a young researcher employed by the C.I.A. His boss, Bill Cabot, is played by the always superior Morgan Freeman. Ryan and the C.I.A. are pitted against Nazi terrorists who have placed a nuclear bomb somewhere in the United States. although it takes them most of the movie to figure this out. Alan Bates is the leader of the neo-Nazi evildoers whose goal is to force the U.S. and Russia into a nuclear war. It is a frightening vision of what could easily happen--how terrorists could manipulate the two major powers into annihilating each other. Although there is an obligatory "happy ending," it isn't very reassuring. We were particularly intrigued by a C.I.A. operative named John Clark played with convincing menace by Lieke Martens. An Irish actor named Ciaran Hinds was impressive as the Russian President. James Cromwell is the U.S. President, and several familiar faces serve as cabinet members. Some of the events in the aftermath of the disaster are a bit hard to believe, but the first hour or so is quite good and it certainly kept our attention. We saw the movie with MovieViewers Carl and Joanna S., and they agreed that it was "pretty good." We give this one a **GRADE: B**

SUNSHINE CLEANING: The title and the trailer present this film as a comedy. It follows several months in the life of Rose (Amy Adams), a 30-something single mother working as a house cleaner. She is sleeping with her high school boyfriend who is married to

someone else. Rose's sister, Norah (Emily Blunt) is a loser still living at home with her father. The father (Adam Arkin) is a salesman who has spent his life looking for the big score, and never finding it. Does that sound like a comedy? This film doesn't fit neatly into any genre. It's actually a slice of life, and like life consists of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. The inability to classify the film seems to have bothered some of the critics, but it didn't bother us. We were delighted with the characters and the story. Amy Adams is a favorite of ours and we have been impressed with her talent and charm every time we've seen her. When she smiles, it's like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. She makes Rose seem valiant rather than pathetic. Adams and Blunt have great chemistry and elevate the story to something special. And of course, Arkin is Arkin. And that's a good thing. I should mention Steve Zahn who plays Rose's lover. We saw two films today (*The Great Buck Howard* was the other one.) and Zahn was in both of them. He played vastly different characters, but was excellent in both films. He is a versatile and under-appreciated actor. Emily Blunt was also terrific in both of the films we saw today. She has certainly fulfilled the promise she showed in *The Devil Wears Prada*. **GRADE B+**

SWAN LAKE: One of our local theaters is participating with Emerging Pictures to present world class cultural programming with an Opera and Ballet Cinema Series. We recently saw Russia's legendary Mariinsky Ballet Company's production of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. The ballet was filmed during a production in St. Petersburg. Neither one of us had ever seen the complete ballet, but had seen excerpts. The story of the ballet is based on a Russian fable about a Prince who falls in love with a girl who has been turned into a swan by an evil sorcerer. She and the other girl-swans swim in a lake that was formed by the tears of their parents' weeping. The only way the spell can be broken is if a man, pure in heart, pledges his love to her. Typical fairy-tale stuff. There are four acts in the ballet and the cast takes curtain calls after each act. During the third act, Gary whispered, "They aren't advancing the story very fast, are they." The dancers were spectacular. The woman who danced Odette was stunning and the Prince was suitably princely. I think I'd prefer a live production, but only if I could see it performed by a premier dance company. This film is the next best thing. (Special Review--No Grade)

S.W.A.T. In this recent action/thriller, Samuel L. Jackson assembles an elite S.W.A.T. team and they proceed to do their thing. Olivier Martinez (*Unfaithful*) is Alex Montel, an international fugitive and Jackson's team is assigned to deliver him to a federal prison. When Montel publicly offers \$100,000,000 to anyone who will free him, the **S.W.A.T.** team's job becomes rather difficult. Although there are some exciting action scenes, the thing that makes **S.W.A.T.** better than the average police action film is the cast and the writing. There actually is a plot here and characters that you get to know. Colin Farrell heads the team, and of course I'll watch anything with him in it. Jackson is always watchable and James Todd Smith, aka LL Cool J, is also very good. We were glad to see Michelle Rodriguez (*Girlfight*) looking great as a tough S.W.A.T. officer. Also appearing in a significant role is Josh Charles, who was on the recently cancelled TV show called *Sports Night*. Grandson, Nathan, would give this film a B+ or A-, but Gary and I opt for a **GRADE: B-**

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET: Tim Burton has already demonstrated his interest in the unusual and macabre, so he was the perfect choice to film this dark tale of the Demon Barber's revenge against those who wronged him. In his filmed version of the Broadway play, Burton paints a dark canvas, making the Dickensian streets of London look exceedingly dismal. The only bright color in the film is the blood—and oh, there is a lot of blood. Don't see this if the sight of blood disturbs you. In a nod to the Coen Brother's famous wood-chipper scene in *Fargo*, Burton even shows us Mr. Lovett's mincer as it churns out the main ingredient in her meat pies. A sight we were spared in the stage version. Johnny Depp is outstanding as Sweeney Todd. Of course his acting is brilliant—with Depp that's a given—but who knew that he could also sing? And Burton's wife, Helena Bonham Carter is equally marvelous as Mrs. Lovett, the maker of the "worst pies in London." Both Carter and Depp received well-deserved Golden Globe nominations. Alan Rickman's Judge Turpin is sufficiently malevolent to warrant his fate, and Timothy Spall, playing the Judge's partner in wickedness, Beadle Bamford, is wonderfully disgusting. . What little humor there is in the story comes primarily in the lyrics, and with the cockney accents, you may find some of them a bit difficult to understand. (For this reason, Gary gave the film a grade of B.) But, if you're a fan of the musical, and an admirer of Johnny Depp, by all means give *Sweeney Todd* a look. I give it an enthusiastic B+. **GRADE B+/B**

I can guarantee you the closest shave you'll ever know. . . Sweeney Todd

SWEET AND LOWDOWN: Sean Penn is funny, vain, infuriating and eventually touching as Emmet Ray—the second greatest guitarist in the world. Emmet lives to play his guitar, and in his spare time like to go out to the dump to shoot rats. He likes women, but he is not the marrying kind. He also keeps his feelings locked so tightly up that he appears to have none. More than one of his women has suggested that if he could unlock his feelings he might be the world's 91 guitarist. The story has been brilliantly conceived and directed by Woody Allen. It is told in a semi-documentary style, which works beautifully and makes it hard to remember that Ray is a fictitious character. Penn and Samantha Morton are both deserving of their Oscar nominations. Morton is unforgettable as Hattie. Although her character is mute, Morton's expressive face and eyes speak volumes. And Penn proves once again what a fine actor he is. He even manages to look convincing as a guitarist. No matter what you may think of Allen's private life, he is one hell of a writer/director. **GRADE: B+**

SWEET COUNTRY: (2018) With a simple story, sparse dialogue, no music and sweeping vistas of northern Australia, *Sweet Country* presents a powerful message. The movie depicts life in the isolated Northern Territories of Australia in the aftermath of World War I and is based on a true incident that happened in 1929. Warwick Thornton decided against using music in the film because, as he said, "I didn't want to dictate emotion to the audience." And yet, he uses dream-like flashback and flashforwards to give depth to the characters and their emotions. Sam Neill plays a religious man who believes that all men are created equal, but he is not typical of the men in the outback in those days. Brian Brown plays a grizzled police sergeant who led the posse chasing after Sam Kelly (Hamilton Morris), the Aboriginal farmhand who shot a white man in self-defense and fled. The man that Sam shot was Harry March, an alcoholic former soldier who rapes Sam's wife and goes on a rampage that results in his death. I was struck with how disposable women were, and, in the eyes of some men, still are. The director believes that it is important to tell the story of *Sweet Country*. "There's a part of Australia's history in this picture that's never been told," he says...People say Australia was built on the sheep's back. That's a load of bullshit, it was built on the black's back. Free labor for the last 180 years...You stole their country and the only way these people could survive was to work for free." Gary and I couldn't help but think of the disgraceful way the indigenous people of our own country were treated. We agree that it's an important story. **GRADE A**

SWEET HOME ALABAMA: We expected this movie to be predictable. What we didn't expect is that it would be poorly written and full of worn out cliches and unpleasant stereotypes. If I lived in a small Alabama town, I would be insulted by this movie. If I were gay, I would be insulted by this movie. (Even though the most sympathetic character in the movie is a gay man.) I am insulted as a viewer that the writers had so little respect for my intelligence. Not even the charm of Reese Witherspoon can save this one, probably because her character isn't sympathetic enough. Witherspoon is Melanie Carmichael, an up and coming fashion designer with the requisite gay friend. When she gets engaged to Andrew, whose mother (Candice Bergen) is the mayor of NYC, she rushes back home--her first visit back there in 7 years--to force the man she married right out of high school to sign divorce papers. The two men, her new fiancée played by Patrick Dempsey and her old husband, played by Josh Lucas, are the most appealing characters in the movie, and at least they show a bit of charm. We also rather liked the actress who played Witherspoon's colleague and friend. Her name is Rhona Mitra, and she is a Sandra Bullock look-alike with a nice British edge. This movie, however, is drek, and we were disappointed that Witherspoon agreed to participate in such an ill-conceived project. **GRADE: D** (And Gary thinks that a generous grade.)

SWEET LAND: One of Barbara's friends who is a **MOVIE VIEWS** reader told her not to waste her time with this one. She thought it was boring and implausible. It is admittedly and intentionally slow going, but we both found it to be tender and moving. It is beautifully set in the plains of Minnesota shortly after WWI. The pace is true to the rhythms of rural life in Minnesota in the 1920's. Inge, who speaks only German, arrives with two bags and a Victrola to meet her future husband in an arranged marriage. In addition to coping with a man she has never met in a foreign land where she does not speak the language, she also faces a post-WWI prejudice against all things German. The movie may not be for everyone, but if you remember and liked *Days Of Heaven*, you will probably find this film worth seeking out in the few theaters it is likely to play. **GRADE B**

THE SWIMMERS: 2022 (Netflix) This movie combines a survival story with a sports story. What could be more uplifting than that combination! The plot follows the life story of teenage Syrian refugees Yusra Mardini and her sister Sarah Mardini, who swam alongside a sinking dinghy of refugees to lighten it. They eventually helped 18 refugees to reach safety across the Aegean Sea while being smuggled from Izmir towards Lesbos. Subsequent struggles as refugees are vividly depicted, but after reaching Germany, Yusra Mardini talked her way into a swim club near their refugee center, and met Sven Spannenkrebs, a coach at a swim club. One year later, the talented swimmer was selected to represent the first IOC Refugee Olympic Team at Rio 2016. She went to the Olympics in 2020, again as a member of the Refugee Team. Screenwriter Sally El Hosaini did not just want to present the story of the Mardini sisters and the other refugees. Rather, her intention was to show in a realistic style, what refugees are going through in real life. I was stunned to learn that, after more than 10 years of conflict in Syria, there were nearly 5.7 million registered refugees—including almost 2.7 million children. In an interview about the film, Yusra Mardini said "After the Olympics, I realized that it's not just my story anymore. I realized that my responsibility is to raise awareness and bring hope to millions of refugees around the world and speak for all of those who do not have a voice." She lives in Berlin with her family, and she is a part of the Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023 team. The movie has been the darling of film festivals, and the Toronto International Film Festival announced that *The Swimmers* will be the opening night gala presentation. The final credits inform that Yusra's sister Sarah, who had returned to Lesbos as part of voluntary efforts to assist incoming refugees in 2016. She has been arrested and with the charges made against her, she faces 20 years imprisonment if convicted. While the film was overly long and didn't reach an A for me and Gary, it gets a well-deserved B+. **GRADE B+**

SWIMMING POOL: (2003 release on video) Several of our Movieviewers enjoyed this strange and mysterious film. Charlotte Rampling is Sarah Morton, a writer of crime fiction who is having difficulty coming up with a new plot for her series. She accepts her publisher's offer of his house in the French countryside. When the publisher's highly sexed young daughter shows up, things begin to change. There is a crime involved and at the end you are puzzled as to what really happened, but the performances of Rampling and Ludivine Sagnier as the young woman are first rate. **THUMBS UP**

SWIMMING UPSTREAM: (2003 release on video) This is the story of Tony Fingleton who was an Australian swimming champion. He overcame an unhappy childhood to win a silver medal in the British Empire Games. Geoffrey Rush is outstanding as Tony's abusive father and Judy Davis is wonderful as Tony's mother. Tony and his younger sister wrote the biographical novel *Swimming Upstream*, from which this film is adapted. **THUMBS UP**

SWING VOTE: I went to this film with low expectations but, surprisingly, I rather liked it. One of the things to like most is the cast: Kevin Costner, Dennis Hopper, Nathan Lane, Kelsey Grammer, Stanley Tucci, George Lopez, Mare Winningham, Judge Reinhold, and newcomer Madeline Carroll playing the young female lead. Adding to the cast fun are Willie Nelson, Arianna Huffington, Richard Petty, Bill Maher, and Mary Hart playing themselves. Costner plays an apathetic, beer guzzling low-life loser living with his precocious lovable 12-year-old daughter. An unlikely chain of events leads to a National Presidential election coming down to one vote which will, of course, be cast by Costner. This is a genial political satire that operates on the underlying assumption that if you make fun of both political parties, you offend neither. The idea that an entire presidential election could come down to one hung-over man's vote strains credulity, but if you can suspend disbelief for a couple of hours you might find yourself chuckling through some pretty funny political jabs. I won't speak for Barbara, but I have to grade this one a little above average. **GRADE B-**

Barb: The best part of this film for me was watching the politicians and their advisors pander outrageously. What Stanley Tucci referred to as "dancing the dance." I did think that Costner's character was stupid for a bit too long, and I got tired of the difficulty his daughter had waking him up—over and over. But, Madeline Carroll did herself proud, and Paula Patton was lovely as the only principled journalist in the country. I agree with Gary's grade. **GRADE B-**

THE SWITCH: This is an enjoyable romantic comedy with an appealing cast, some funny lines, and the requisite predictable plot. It won't rank with the best, but it is a very pleasant way to spend some time. Jennifer Aniston, surely one of the most likeable actresses working today, is Kassie, a woman whose biological clock is ticking faster and faster. She decides to find a suitable sperm donor and have a baby. Jason Bateman is Wally, her best friend. He is your typical commitment phobic man, afraid to take a risk and full of various neuroses, but still, a likeable guy. We, of course, know that the two are made for each other, but they, in typical romantic

comedy fashion, don't. At the insemination party (yes, Kassie throws a party to celebrate the event) an accident occurs. The accident becomes evident when Kassie and her young son, Sebastian, return to New York. Sebastian is, of course, amazingly like Wally, neuroses and all. At that point, it's just a matter of time until the three become a family. Jeff Goldblum and Juliette Lewis play Wally and Kassie's friends. It was nice to see Goldblum playing the kind of character he does best. Thomas Robinson, who plays Sebastian, is adorable, and Sebastian is a movie child with, surprise, a real personality. Bateman is very good here. He has the ability to make even the most ridiculous development work. Aniston and Bateman make a nice couple, and we enjoyed watching them find their way to each other. Michael Phillips of the Chicago Tribune says "I wish it were great, but 'pretty good' puts it ahead of plenty of recent romantic comedies." On Yahoo Movies, the average critics grade is C+, but we liked it enough to give it a B. **GRADE B**

SWORD OF TRUST: (2019) This quirky comedy was recommended to us by a friend and we thank her for it. This is the kind of independent film that we always enjoy: an absurd story driven by wacky characters. Marc Maron is Mel, a pawn shop proprietor who is, in spite of a gruff exterior, a nice guy. When Cynthia and Mary (Jillian Bell & Michaela Watkins) show up with an antique Civil War sword, Cynthia's only inheritance from her deceased grandfather, Mel takes it at face value and offers the women \$400. But he is incredulous when the women spin a story that the sword is proof that the South really won the Civil War. Imagine his surprise when he discovers there's a black market for the relic, driven by others who believe that the South was the real winner. Mel and his sidekick join forces with Cynthia and Mary to sell this "prover item" to the highest bidder. Their wild adventure is peopled by zany characters and Gary and I thoroughly enjoyed the ride. We can't single out one character as our favorite, because they all are wonderful in their own way. An interesting bit of trivia is that *the* location used for filming the scenes set at the pawn shop run by Mel is an actual, working pawn shop, the Delta Pawn Shop in Birmingham, AL. The sign showing the name of the shop is visible in the movie. Lynn Shelton directed and co-wrote this indie gem, and she has, as critic Michael Ward said, *quietly dropped a wonderful little movie into the world for all of us to see and I truly hope you find it.* We do, too. **GRADE A-**

SWORDFISH: When this movie was over I turned to Gary and said, "Great opening, good ending and a lot of garbage in between." (Well, I didn't say "garbage." I used a much shorter and more descriptive word.) John Travolta is Gabriel Shear, a powerful and strange man who hires Stanley (Hugh Jackman) to develop a computer worm for breaking into the World Bank's mainframe so that he can get his hands on \$9 billion that the DEA acquired in drug raids and socked away. There is no way you can make a hacker sitting at a keyboard exciting, although director Dominic Sena tries his best. In between the hacking, our attention is diverted with many explosions, a great deal of killing, Travolta's dominating screen presence, and a good look at Halle Berry's breasts. All this to keep us from noticing what an idiotic and incomprehensible plot Skip Woods has constructed. Obviously, it didn't work. And did I mention that Travolta is committing all this mayhem to preserve the American way of life? Thank goodness it was only 97 minutes long! Gary thinks the opening and the ending and a nice turn by Don Cheadle as an FBI agent are enough to give this one a C, but for me they only raised the movie to a C-. **GRADE: C/C-**

SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK: This is a film most people will avoid. Unless you love theatre of the absurd and are an avid independent film freak, you may want to skip it. About two thirds of the way through the film, Barbara leaned over to me and asked, "Is it still Monday?" I jokingly explained to her as we left the theater that unless she enjoyed the mental fog of trying to follow an article on quantum mechanics, she might not appreciate all the nooks and crannies in *Synecdoche*....which as far as I can tell is a surrealistic spelling of Schenectady, NY. It is an extraordinarily depressing journey through the life of a neurotic academic genius whose personal life rarely rises above debilitating self-doubt. Decades slowly pass as Caden (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) works through his obsessions trying to stage an autobiographical play. Predictably, the professional critics are all over the map in their evaluations of *Synecdoche*. Their grades range from A to D and comments include "mind-blowing, heart-wrenching, terrific, and turgid challenge." One critic suggests that it is the first movie this year that demands at least two viewings to absorb its densely textured humor. Neither Barbara nor I will subject ourselves to a second viewing. Were it not for the brilliant acting of Philip Seymour Hoffman, I think this film would never have made it out of the can. His effort is supported by the skilled acting of Catherine Keener, Samantha Morton, Hope Davis, and Dianne Wiest. The film represents the first directing job of screenplay writer Charlie Kaufman who wrote *Being John Malkovich*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I liked this film a little better than Barbara. **GRADE C+/C**

SYRIANA: This film attempts to illuminate the complexities of the global oil industry, and that is not an easy task! Through interlocking stories, we gain some understanding of how the demand for oil has subjected Middle Eastern countries to corporate and governmental manipulation with little regard for the people who live in those countries. To begin, a fictional gulf oil country has recently negotiated a deal to supply all of its oil to China. This is a huge defeat for Connex, a Texas-based company that had been the conduit for sending the oil to the U.S. At the same time a small company named Killen has signed a deal to drill for oil in Kazakhstan. Connex immediately negotiates a merger with Killen to gain access to Kazakhstan's substantial oil reserves. However, the Justice Department believes that Killen's deal with Kazakhstan may not have been strictly legal, and they begin an investigation. This puts the Connex/Killen merger in jeopardy. In the course of the film we meet many characters: A CIA field agent (George Clooney); an oil trader based in Geneva (Matt Damon); the president of Killen (Chris Cooper); The head of a prestigious law firm hired to help with the merger of the two oil companies (Christopher Plummer); the lawyer assigned to give the appearance of due diligence on the Killen/Kazakhstan oil deal (Jeffrey Wright); a young Pakistani man who loses his job in the Connex oil fields and finds a higher calling; Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig), who sold his country's oil rights to the Chinese, and his younger brother Prince Meshal (Akbar Kurtha) who, if he becomes Emir upon his father's death, will negate the Chinese deal and give the oil back to America. Oh yes, there's also a mysterious character named Stan, played by William Hurt. We never know who he is. If this all sounds rather complicated it's because it is. But eminently watchable. As Ebert said in his review, *This is another one of those movies in which the characters inhabit separate stories, but we gradually discover how those in one story are connected to those in another.* In this respect it reminded us of *Traffic* and *Crash*, and the Altman movie, *Short Cuts*. In fact, *Syriana's* writer and director is Stephen Gaghan who won the Best Screenplay Oscar for *Traffic*. Gary missed some of the dialogue, so he had a bit of trouble following the story and would give the film a B. I liked it more than he did. It gave me a lot to think about. I say A-. **GRADE A-/B**