

# THE EPOCH TIMES

# ARTS & CULTURE

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Cherry blossoms in full bloom at Hirosaki Park on May 4, 2005. Hirosaki Park is one of the major cherry blossom-viewing spots in Japan.



## TRADITIONAL CULTURE

# Japanese Cherry Blossoms: Spring's Glorious Fleeting Celebration

CORA WANG

**B**right pink cherry blossoms against a brilliant blue sky is a sight unlike any other in the world. “Sakura” is the cherry blossom’s name in Japan. They flutter slowly to the ground as crowds mill about, taking in springtime’s beauty. Across the country, the atmosphere shifts. Buds bloom. Winter draws to an end. Just as spring brings the promise of fresh beginnings, the sweet scent of the sakura brings hope and cheer. Family and friends gather to admire the scenery and enjoy warmer weather.

**‘Hanami’ is the Japanese word for ‘the act of admiring cherry blossoms,’ which is a respected tradition there.**

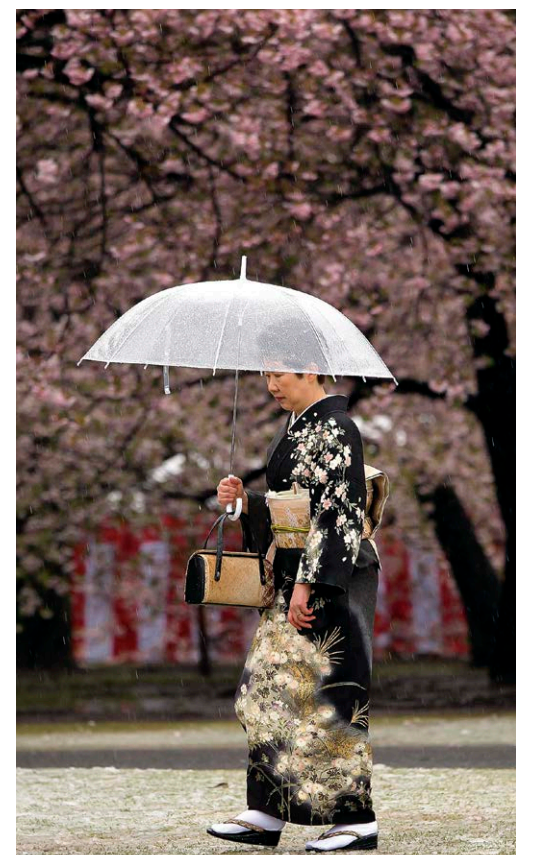
### A Revered Tradition

“Hanami” is the Japanese word for “the act of admiring cherry blossoms,” which is a respected tradition there. It dates back to the Nara period (710–794) when a Japanese envoy to China brought back the custom of enjoying plum blossoms. Festivals dedicated to sakura began in the Heian period (794–1185).

Back then, Japanese people believed that gods signaled a year of good harvest through cherry blossoms. So they prayed, made offerings, and feasted to honor the sacred trees.

*Continued on Page 4*

Every spring, hundreds of people flock to the magnificent Hirosaki Castle to take part in the cherry blossom festival.





## TRADITIONAL CULTURE

## A Question of God, Part One

# Why Does God Ask Questions?

JAMES SALE

St. Augustine observed long ago that “whatever appears in the divine Word that can be referred neither to virtuous conduct nor to the truth of faith must be taken to be figurative.” I think the key word in his sentence that we have to come to terms with is the word “figurative.”

The “divine Word” means, of course, the scriptures. And it is easy to see that the Ten Commandments, for example, are a clear case of exhorting us to virtuous conduct. Equally, we can delve into the Epistles of Paul in the New Testament and find plenty of examples of what constitutes “the truth of faith.”

But then, setting aside this large body of virtue and truth texts, we also have huge swaths of text—myths, stories, parables, and so on—that make up what might be construed as “figurative.” That seems easy and straightforward, doesn’t it? It does, but it isn’t! It’s important in looking at the Bible to realize that figurative truths exist alongside literal truths, and sometimes can be even more powerful.

One of the problems with atheists, and especially those of a scientific cast of mind (sometimes called “scientism”), is that they look for literal meanings where, in fact, figurative things are meant.

And, it’s not just atheists who do this, for if we go back to the New Testament, we find the Pharisees—religious leaders (not atheists!)—doing it. A great example would be in Mark’s gospel (14:58) where Jesus is accused of saying that if “this Temple” is destroyed, he will make another in three days. Here, clearly, the figurative meaning that Jesus is referring to is his own resurrection, but the accusers and priests assume that he actually—literally—means he will rebuild Herod’s temple (that took 46 years to build, John 2:20) in three days!

But still worse than scientism, however, is when we find the aesthetic artist types who also, incredibly, seem not to understand what figurative means. A good example of what I am talking about occurs in the book “Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible,” published in 2005, in which various celebrities and experts give their responses and inter-

pretations to many of the books in the Old and New Testaments.

### Do Creative Writers Understand the Figurative?

In “Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible,” I was astonished to read the well-known novelist Louis de Bernières writing on the book of Job and claiming: “God in the story [of Job], is not omniscient (He asks Satan what he has been up to)...” This is a pretty major claim to make against God, and it will come as no surprise that the rest of the article really likes to stick the knife into God and his reputation.

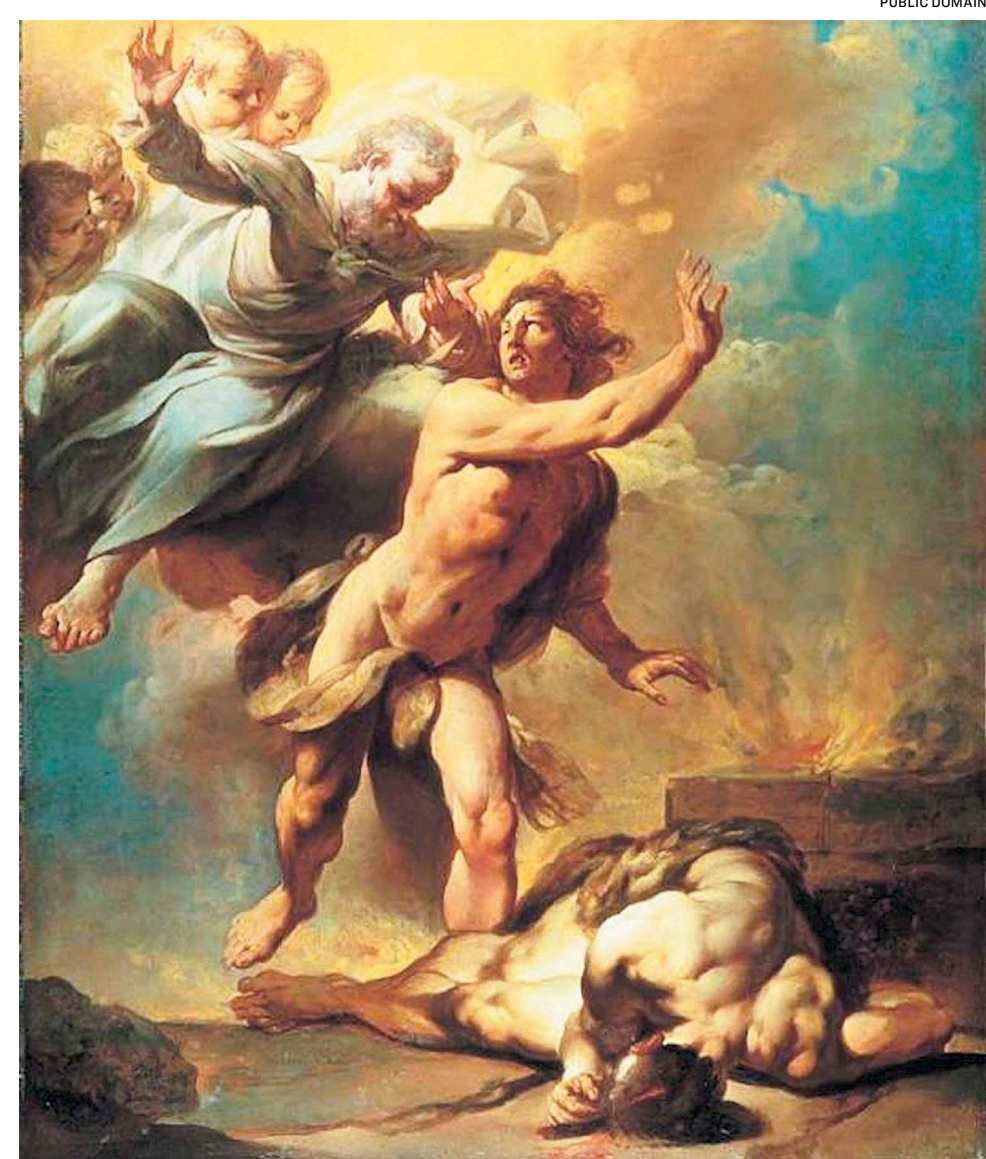
### The point of God’s question is always to enable the subject to self-realize.

But leaving aside all the other accusations that de Bernières brings against God (for we are in the book of Job after all!), what do we make of this theological assertion that God cannot be omniscient because he asks Satan a question?

Here, we come back to the figurative again. Anyone who has really read and studied the Bible would know that God’s asking questions in no way invalidates his omniscience. There is a profound figurativeness in God asking questions, and to see this in action, let’s examine in some detail the first time that God asks a question. The scenario will be extremely familiar to you.

In Genesis Chapter 3, we find Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden having just eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. They hear God walking in the Garden and they hide from him. God’s first question is “Where are you?” and his second and third are “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

Who, on the basis of these three questions, would think that God did not already know the answers to them? The language is figurative, and because it is figurative it is, paradoxically, true! We can only understand



After God rejects Cain’s offering, he warns Cain against unrighteousness, but Cain does not heed God. “Cain and Abel,” 1740, by Giovanni Domenico Ferretti.

the catastrophe that happened to mankind at the beginning—the aboriginal mistake, the Fall—through poetry since we have no way of understanding the mind of God or even the state of perfect human beings, except through poetry, that is, through figurative language.

### Why Does God Ask Questions?

So we are left with asking two questions. The first is, Why does God ask questions when he already knows the answers? And this, I think, helps us delve further into the depths of meaning in this seemingly simple story or myth.

A starting point might be that to see the presence of God “in the cool of the day” (notice, not the heat or passion of the day) is somewhat analogous to the voice of conscience: They have done wrong, and they know it; but they don’t know it and wish to hide from it. But there is no hiding. If we won’t come to God, then God comes, walks, toward us.

Then, in this personal encounter (and isn’t conscience intensely cool but also intensely personal?) we find God—clearly knowing the answers to his own questions—going into what in modern parlance might be described as a “coaching” mode. Yes, God the ultimate coach!

For what do coaches do? By questioning, they draw out from the subjects the answers that are within them, but yet which unaided they seem unable to reach. The point of God’s question is always to enable the subject to self-realize, to rescue their self from their own predicament.

We see this time and again in the Bible. For example, the very next questions God asks in the Bible are in the next chapter (Genesis 4): Why is Cain angry? Why has his countenance fallen? And, encouragingly, if he does well, will not Cain’s countenance be lifted up? There, again, God is coaching Cain, giving him every opportunity to put right what Cain knows is wrong. And, of course, God knows that this coaching is going to fail. Cain is going to go his own way.

In a way, contrary to de Bernières’s conclusions, the Bible is a record



that leaves human beings without excuse, for despite all the warnings and all the coaching, humans tend to go their own way anyway. And what is true here, also seems reflected in other myths of the world (for instance, Pandora’s Box), which account for the dilemmas and evils we still currently have to face. There is, then, profound truth in this.

But that leads on, nicely, to our second question that we said appertains to God’s questioning and his omniscience. For just as we have taken issue with de Bernières for an inadequate survey of biblical material, we ourselves must take our own medicine. The second question relates to the fact that God’s question is not, indeed, the first question that occurs in the Bible. We find that the first ever question in human history (figuratively understood) was posed by another character, who happens to appear in the book of Job too: Satan.

Part 2 of this article will explore that question and that character and his meaning for us in this real world that we are in, but which requires figurative interpretation to understand.

James Sale has had over 50 books published, most recently, “Mapping Motivation for Top Performing Teams” (Routledge, 2021). He won first prize in The Society of Classical Poets 2017 annual competition, performing in New York in 2019. His most recent poetry collection is “Hellward.” For more information about the author, and about his Dante project, visit [TheWiderCircle.webs.com](http://TheWiderCircle.webs.com)

(Above) The influential Christian theologian St. Augustine believed that some scripture was meant to be interpreted figuratively. “The Triumph of Saint Augustine,” 1664, by Claudio Coello. Prado Museum.

(Left) God and Satan discussing Job, in a 16th-century French manuscript.

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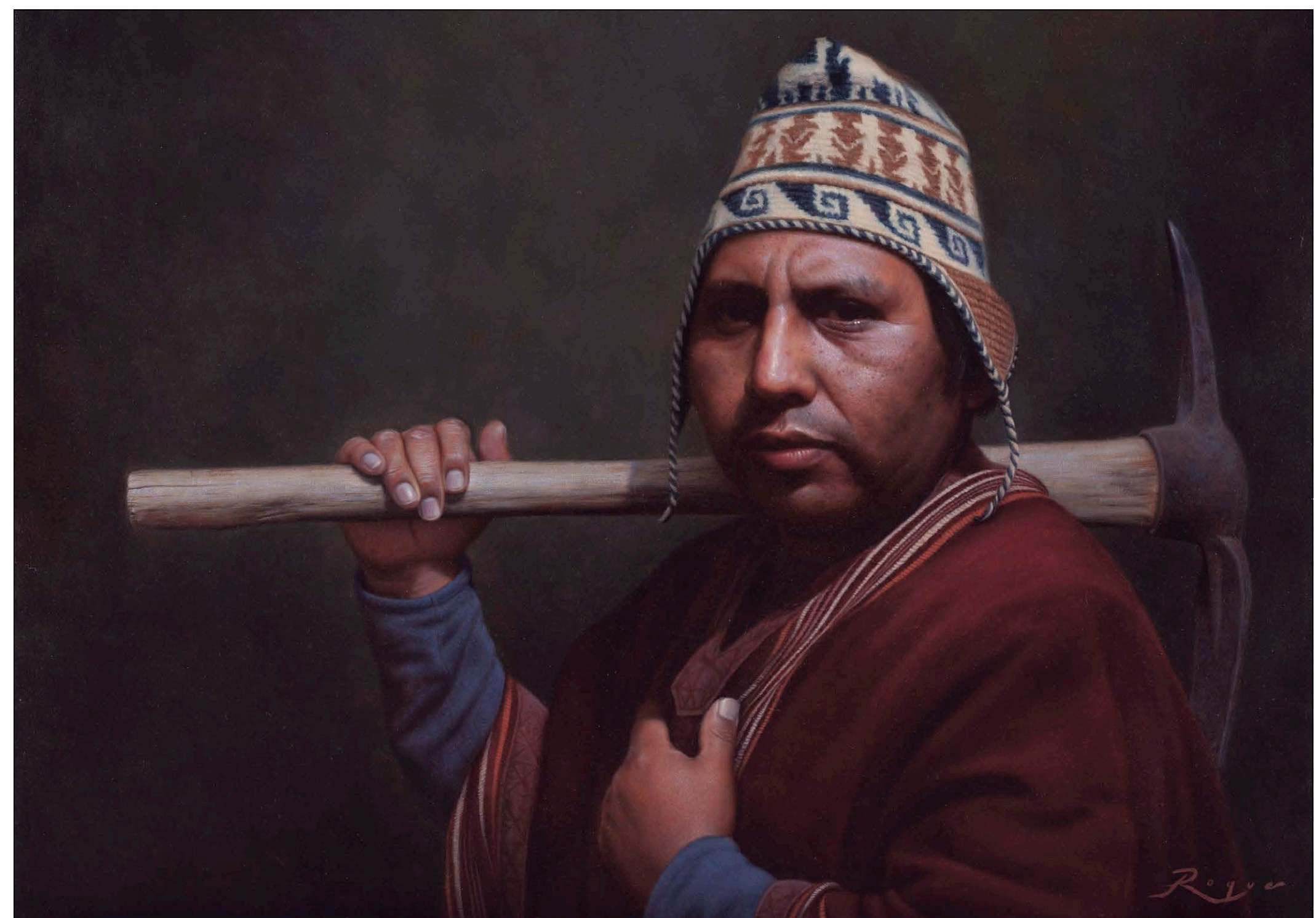


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## TRADITIONAL CULTURE

# Japanese Cherry Blossoms: Spring's Glorious Fleeting Celebration

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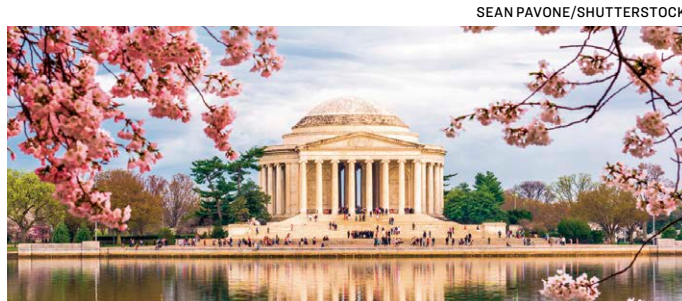
Hanami—sakura festivals as we know them now—were first popular in the imperial court. Nobles held grand viewing ceremonies that included singing, dancing, feasting, and drinking. Over time, the hanami tradition spread to the common people and became widely enjoyed all over Japan.

One of the largest hanamis to ever take place was Hideyoshi Toyotomi's Cherry Blossom Party in 1598, held at the famous Daigo-ji Temple in Kyoto. The temple was in a state of disrepair until Toyotomi invited thousands to attend his event. With over 700 cherry blossom trees planted around the temple, the extravagant fete further cemented the hanami as a valuable part of Japanese culture. After that, Daigo-ji Temple was revitalized and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## Beauty in Impermanence

From the 1600s until the mid-1800s, viewing cherry blossoms was a popular event enjoyed by Japanese from all walks of life. The flowers and their festivals became recurrent motifs in art and literature, as the charming blossom established itself as a national image for the Japanese. Famously, Utagawa Hiroshige depicted several blooming cherry boughs in his vertical-format landscape series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo." Hiroshige was a Japanese ukiyo-e artist and considered one of the last great masters of the tradition.

The legendary sakura found its way into famous poetry of the day, beginning in the Heian period. "Waka" is one of the most recognized forms of Japanese poetry and the basis for haiku. The cherry blossom often appears in the "Kokin Wakashu," one



SEAN PAVONE/SHUTTERSTOCK



**(Top left)** One can take part in hanami culture in America as well. Every year from late March to early April, Washington holds a national cherry blossom festival.

**(Bottom left)** Utagawa Hiroshige depicted several scenes of blooming cherry trees in his vertical-format landscape series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo." This print is "Suijin Shrine and Massaki on the Sumida River."

**(Right)** "Chiyoda Great Interior Flower Viewing," 1894, by Toyohara Chikanobu. This painting depicts a "hanami," the revered Japanese tradition of admiring cherry blossoms.

This article by Cora Wang and translated by Angela Feng is republished with permission from *Elite Lifestyle Magazine*.



of the earliest anthologies of waka poems compiled by Emperor Uda.

More than beautiful, the cherry blossom represents impermanence. Despite being so widely adored, the blossoms last for a very short period of time. Cherry blossoms bloom once a year for only a week—maybe two at best. Part of their beauty lies in how fleeting they are. "The Japanese were perhaps the first to discover the special pleasure of impermanence and believed... that impermanence was a necessary element in beauty," Japanese-American scholar Donald Keene said.

In fact, much of Japanese literature is filled

with a sense of acceptance—even celebration—of impermanence. "Mono no aware," which translates to "the pathos of things," is the Japanese term for the awareness of impermanence, or the transience of things. It originates from "The Tale of Genji," a classic work of Japanese literature from the Heian period that is often considered the world's first novel. The cherry blossom has come to embody this phrase, representing a bitter-sweet fondness for the brevity of life.

While flowers are typically associated with femininity, the cherry blossom has a masculine side, too. They are a symbol of the samurai's bravery. These men faced death with

courage. As an ancient Japanese proverb states, "The best blossom is the cherry blossom; the best man is the warrior." Just as the cherry blossom falls at its prime, samurai were known to sacrifice their lives without hesitation for the sake of their country.

Though the sakura blooms only briefly, its impact on Japan is profound. The blossom has planted its seed in people's hearts, making its way into everyday life. From sakura-flavored snacks and drinks, sakura-patterned decor, to sakura-inspired clothing pieces, the flower fills people with a sense of comfort and joy. After a long day, a glimpse of its beauty is enough to lift one's spirits.

## A Universal Allure

There are many kinds of sakura, each with its own beauty, including the most common Somei Yoshino blossoms, the wild Yamazakura blossoms, and the bright pink Shidarezakura blossoms, or weeping cherry. The sakura originated in China where the largest variety of species still live. The Japanese have cultivated the blossoms since discovering them thousands of years ago, and have spread their beauty around the globe.

Cherry blossom viewing was first introduced to the United States in 1912, when Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo gifted 100 cherry blossom trees to Washington, D.C.

Over time, hanami culture spread across America. Now, every year from late March to early April, Washington holds a national cherry blossom festival. New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver hold their own celebrations, as do other cities across North America.

In an age when people are more isolated, the cherry blossom has the power to bring people together. "Under the cherry blossom, there are no strangers," Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa said. No matter how vast their differences, individuals can come together in mutual admiration of the beauty of the sakura.

## Showers, Flowers, and Poetic Powers: It's Time to Celebrate!

JEFF MINICK

April is the greening time, when choirs of birds announce the flourishing of bud and bloom, when the good old earth sheds its dull patchwork mantle of gray and brown and bustles with blossoms and new life.

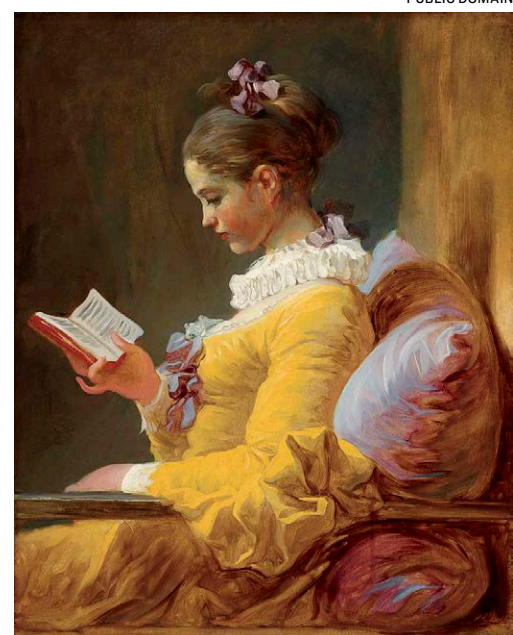
April is also National Poetry Month, and this year marks the 25th anniversary of this event.

Begun in 1996 by the Academy of American Poets, this annual event "has become the largest literary celebration in the world, with tens of millions of readers, students, K-12 teachers, librarians, booksellers, literary event curators, publishers, families, and of course, poets, marking poetry's important place in our lives."

For many years, the number of Americans who read poetry was in decline, but a 2017 survey by the National Endowment for the Arts found that a sea change had taken place. Poets dead and alive had regained some of their audience, with some 28 million adults reporting that they'd read poetry that year. Bolstered by events like National Poetry Month and by its

### April is National Poetry Month, and this year marks the 25th anniversary of this event.

Perhaps you don't read poetry because it doesn't occur to you. April is National Poetry month and a good time to try. "Young Girl Reading," circa 1769, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington.



increased popularity on social media, poetry remains a part of the literary life of many Americans.

Despite this welcome news, the vast majority of American adults read no poetry. Perhaps some dull literature courses in high school or college left them cold toward this art form. Perhaps at the recommendation of a friend, they attempted to engage with some modern poem they couldn't understand, and so gave up poetry as silly and incomprehensible. Most likely, many Americans don't read poetry simply because they never think to do so. Which is too bad.

Poems can be vitamins for the soul, strengthening courage and resolve. They can lead us to see the world through different eyes, connect us with nature and other human beings in unexpected ways, rouse us to action, and bring us to laughter or to tears.

If you're a stranger to the realm of verse, here are some tips to help you enter that kingdom.

#### Short and Simple

Rather than begin your journey with some long and difficult poem, aim instead at those pieces with just a few lines. Edwin Markham's "Preparedness" is a favorite of mine, one my middle-school students used to memorize:

For all your days prepare,  
And meet them ever alike:  
When you are the anvil, bear—  
When you are the hammer, strike.

Phyllis McGinley is little read nowadays, but I still love her verse for its sparkle and wit. Here are two of her short poems:

"The Old Reformer"  
Few friends he kept that pleased his mind.  
His marriage failed when it began,  
Who worked unceasing for mankind  
But loathed his fellow man.

"The Old Philanthropist"  
His millions make museums bright;  
Harvard anticipates his will;  
While his young typist weeps at night  
Over a druggist's bill.

And here's a Gelett Burgess poem that's easy to memorize and will bring a laugh from the Pre-K set:

I never saw a purple cow,  
I never hope to see one,  
But I can tell you anyhow  
I'd rather see than be one.

#### Kids and Grandkids: Read Aloud

Reading such poetry together with children is not only a great way to connect with them and share some fine moments together, but it also brings adults into contact with poetry as well.

As I wrote the above words, I realized that I often read nursery rhymes with my young grandchildren, but that I less frequently share poetry with the older ones. Hundreds of pieces are out there begging for just such an audience, from the humorous cadences of "Casey at the Bat" and "Jabberwocky" to dramatic works like "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and "O Captain! My Captain!"

Reading poetry aloud to young people will deepen our own appreciation of the meter and rhyme. It also demands we bring some drama to that reading.

Note to self: Gather those tweens and teens together on our next visit, and sock it to 'em with some rhymes.

#### Own the Poem

When we read a poem aloud, even when we are alone, we make those lines more a part of ourselves. Unlike novelists or other writers, nearly all poets write their words to be spoken, to be enunciated, to be tasted and savored.

Memorizing poetry also makes us owners of verse, and recitation can turn an ordinary occasion into a memorable event. Over a decade ago, at a luncheon where several of my family members and their grown children had gathered, my son-in-law Mike recited the end lines of Tennyson's "Ulysses," which he'd committed to memory in high school.

Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds.

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:

It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'

We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are,  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

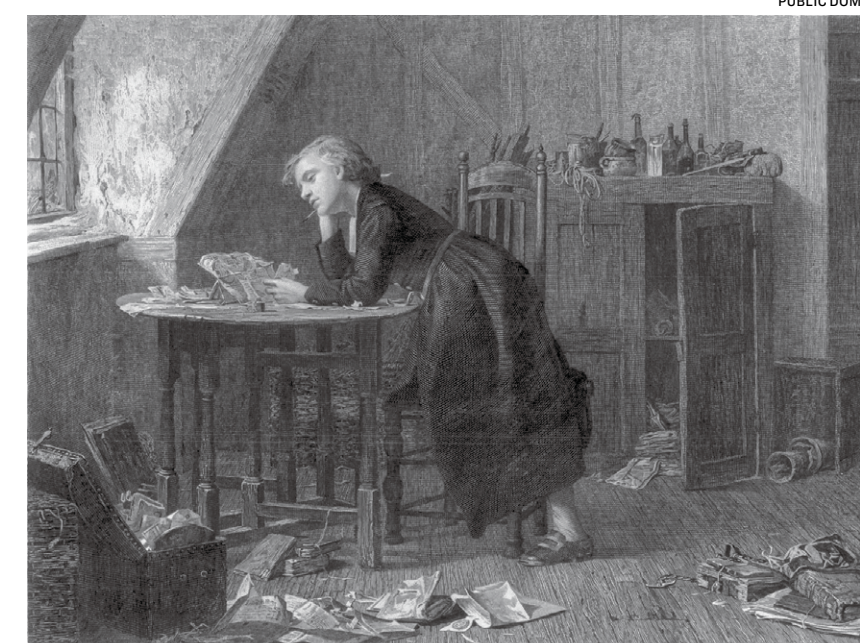
Mike has a fine, deep voice, and I can hear his rendition in my mind all these years later.

#### Passions and Prejudices

A student once told me she didn't care for poetry. I asked her what sort of music she enjoyed, and she rattled off the names of vocalists and bands, most of them unfamiliar to an older guy like me. "Aren't the lyrics poetic?" I asked. She agreed, but pointed out that they were set to music. "Mary had a little lamb," I then said. She paused, looking at me quizzically, and then said slowly, "Its fleece was white as snow." "And everywhere that Mary went," I said. "The lamb was sure to go," she finished. "Poetry," I said, and she laughed.

Poetry is a mansion with many rooms. Some of these rooms strike us as uncomfortable, dark, and grim while others are as welcoming as a day at the beach. In my case, though I've read Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" and Dante's "Divine Comedy," I generally dislike long poems; the 70 lines of Tennyson's "Ulysses" are about as far as I like to go. Another example: with the exception of Keats, I'm not a fan of the Romantics, though I admire Shelley's "Ozymandias."

And again with exceptions, free verse, so popular now for a century, holds little



Getting a poem just right can take a lot of tinkering. "Chatterton's Holiday Afternoon; Thomas Chatterton, 1872, engraved by William Ridgway after a picture by W.B. Morris, published in *The Art Journal*, 1875.

attraction for me, especially those poems that are both long and incoherent. In Charlottesville, Virginia, I once attended a reading where a young man shared his poem about a motorcycle. On and on and on he read. Here is a sampling, not verbatim, of his words: "Roaring/ Shards of glass/ Stars rolling overhead/ Gray highway and the drip of gasoline." Fortunately, this event took place in a room above a bar, and our torture was alleviated by pitchers of Budweiser.

All poets are set on wooing us, on winning our hearts. If they fail to win yours, you are not obliged to spend hours deciphering the meaning of a poem or to pay it homage because others declare its genius.

#### Try Writing Your Own Verse

If you wish to appreciate the power of poetry, try writing it.

Though I'd written bits and pieces of poetry in my youth, as so many young people do, the only time I seriously gave versification a shot was in my 50s. During that time I wrote 70 to 80 poems, a few of which I found a publisher, most of which were either too personal to put in the mail or too poorly written to even consider such a course of action.

Here is a sonnet I wrote then about a girl

I scarcely knew, but whose eyes—so baffled by life, so innocent, so wondering—I have seen in only one other young woman my entire life:

"Ora Pro Nobis"  
The dead die when we living let them die;  
We breathing clasp to hearts our breathless dead;  
We place them gently in their graveyard beds.  
In silent tombs they speak our names.  
They cry  
To us: "Remember me! Remember me!"  
Ah, Cissy, I remember you. Your eyes  
Which last saw light at seventeen still lie  
In me like jeweled cuts of sun-cut sea.  
I dream your eyes, their baffled quiet grace;  
Others forget, but I do not forget;  
You prick my prayers, poor altars of regret;  
My mind's sharp eye calls back your sea-sun gaze.  
Pray all, I pray, who read these lines of song,  
For her whose eyes are gone when I am gone.

What I most loved about writing poetry was that wherever I went I could carry the poem with me, tinkering with the word order as I took a walk, contemplating the beat and rhythm as I drove on the interstate, wondering, as Oscar Wilde once declared, whether to insert a comma or remove it.

#### Soul Food

Reading and writing poetry connects us to the past, deepens our appreciation of the present, and gives us hope and strength to face the future.

And just as our bodies need food and water, so too do our minds, hearts, and souls. Music, the arts, films, conversations: these and other "foods" help nourish our interior selves, and poetry can do the same. To partake of this bread and wine for the soul, you have only to visit your local library or bookstore, or explore online sites, and you'll find poems about every subject and to suit every taste.

Enjoy the feast!

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminary students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.



ALL IMAGES IN PUBLIC DOMAIN



(Left) "Fruit and Flowers," circa 1630, by Orsola Maddalena Caccia. Oil on canvas; 30 inches by 39 inches. Bequest of Errol M. Rudman, 2020. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Right) "Madonna and Child With the Infant Saint John the Baptist," circa 1625, by Orsola Maddalena Caccia. Oil on canvas; 38 3/8 inches by 38 inches. Bequest of Errol M. Rudman, 2020. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



## FINE ART

## Rarely Seen Outside of Italy: Introducing The Met's Divine Art Collection by a Renaissance Nun

LORRAINE FERRIER

Last year, an Italian nun caused quite a stir at Sotheby's, London, when her painting titled "Still Life of Birds, Including a Marsh Tit, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, Blue Tits, Goldcrest, Lapwing and a Great Tit" fetched far more than estimated. The Renaissance painting by mannerist painter Orsola Maddalena Caccia sold for 212,500 pounds (\$264,350), 14 times more than its estimate of 10,000 to 15,000 pounds.

Caccia's bird painting is exceptional for a number of reasons. Even though she was a prolific 17th-century painter, most of her commissioned pieces were religious frescoes and altarpieces, which are still in situ in Italy. Although she painted still-life subjects—Caccia is even credited as the first recorded painter of a floral still life in Italy—they number far fewer than her religious paintings.

Most of Caccia's work is in Monferrat, an area in the northwest region of Piedmont, Italy. But late last year, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art became the largest repository of Caccia's paintings outside of Italy, after hedge fund manager Errol M. Rudman bequeathed the museum three of her paintings.

**Faith and Family**  
Baptized as Theodora Orsola in 1596, Caccia

grew up with her five sisters and two brothers in Moncalvo, a village in the Piedmont region, where she lived for most of her life.

Caccia's father, the successful fresco painter Guglielmo Caccia, known as "il Moncalvo," taught her how to paint. He first taught her how to mix pigments for his paints, and later she began painting some of the minor figures in her father's frescoes.

Caccia became Orsola Maddalena when she took to the cloth in an Ursuline convent at Bianzè, a fortified frontier outpost. A few months before her father died, in 1625, he obtained permission to found a convent at Moncalvo, where he could safely house all six of his daughters.

The Ursulines were founded in 1535, when Angela Merici, now known as St. Angela Merici, had a divine vision to create a convent. The original nuns took their vow of chastity but remained with their families. They didn't have to choose between the family and the cloister. In the Moncalvo convent, Caccia ran the painting studio where the nuns took on commissioned works to support the convent's running costs.

After her father died, Caccia continued to paint as he had done, completing mainly religious commissions such as frescoes and altarpieces. Her overall painting style remained faithful to her father's teachings, but among her meticulous compositions she



"Flowers in a Grotesque Vase," circa 1635, by Orsola Maddalena Caccia. Oil on canvas; 40 3/8 inches by 31 7/8 inches. Bequest of Errol M. Rudman, 2020. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

placed small, realistic still lifes.

Those still lifes within the paintings had a distinct purpose: to acknowledge the divine. A lily could symbolize the Virgin Mary, and another flower could simply be an appreciation of God's creations, but each helped the viewers deepen their connec-

tion to the divine.

**Caccia at The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

The Met's three Caccia paintings—two still lifes and a religious composition—differ greatly from her Sotheby's bird painting, but they are just as delightful.

Caccia painted "Madonna and Child With the Infant Saint John the Baptist" around the time that her father died in 1625, and his influence can be clearly seen in the painting. She painted the same mannerist style of figurative forms as her father did, with their elegant limbs and mannerisms. She also used the sfumato painting technique, as did her father, which delicately softens colors and tones to convey a more realistic image. Birds and flowers also feature in the painting.

Each flower in her paintings "Flowers in a Grotesque Vase" and "Fruit and Flowers" is meticulously rendered, a skill Caccia likely learned from studying Northern European botanical prints, according to The Met's website.

In "Fruit and Flowers," a striking medley of color, fruit, and flowers—tulips, irises, apples, pears, peaches, and more—harmoniously collide in an unusual arrangement. Caccia carefully painted each item, perhaps in praise of God's fruitful creations, and as a vibrant appreciation of the gifts we all share on His abundant earth.

## LITERATURE

## A Thoroughly Classic Detective: Boris Akunin's Erast Fandorin Series

BENJAMIN WELTON

Many years ago, during the twilight of the Soviet Union, millions of Soviet citizens enjoyed the guilty pleasure of reading a detective novel or two. Emphasis should be placed on the word "guilty," for, with the exception of Vasily Livanov and Vitaly Solomin's depictions of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on Soviet state television from 1979 until 1986, the Soviet government frowned on the detective genre.

This stemmed in no small part from Marxist interpretations of the genre as thoroughly wedded to bourgeois rationalism, individualism, and the ideology of the capitalist marketplace. Fictional detectives, especially those like Holmes or Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, were critiqued by communist literary critics for their lack of revolutionary consciousness. Thus, so many mystery-hungry Soviets, such as Grigory Chkhartishvili's wife, dared to read mystery novels in public only if they were first covered with brown paper.

**The Great Bad Man**

Few know the name Chkhartishvili, but millions of readers around the world know who Boris Akunin (b. 1956) is. Chkhartishvili, an ethnic Georgian and a third-generation Muscovite, is a Russian author and

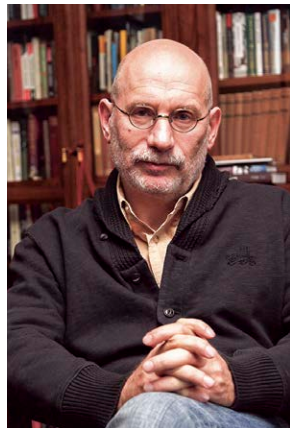
specialist in Japanese literature and culture. He took the name "Boris Akunin" (Japanese for "great bad man") to single-handedly invent the modern Russian detective novel.

His first publication under the Akunin nom de plume, 1998's "The Winter Queen," introduced the world to the detective Erast Petrovich Fandorin. Unlike so many fictional detectives, Fandorin is fully human and regularly vulnerable, which means he has weaknesses, doubt, and a less-than-rosy past. He also has a pronounced stutter.

Forced to leave Moscow State University due to his deceased father's huge debts, Fandorin gains employment as a clerk with the police. His natural genius shines through, and soon enough, Fandorin is made a detective and a member of the secret police known as Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery.

**Looking to Other Writers**

Given that the Fandorin novels are set during the age of the Russian Empire, and since Fandorin is as much of a spy as he is a gumshoe, Akunin's novels see the detective thrown into several different maelstroms across the world. In "The Turkish Gambit," Fandorin finds himself in Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878.



Novelist Boris Akunin in 2013.

**One cannot help but read the Fandorin novels and fall in love with the common nobility of the period.**

In "The Diamond Chariot," Fandorin's case involves not only the Trans-Siberian Railway, but also the Russo-Japanese War in northern China and Korea.

Besides their historical character, the Fandorin mysteries are dedicated to the classic tropes, themes, and creators of the mystery genre. Take for instance "Murder on the Leviathan." Set aboard a passenger ship in the 1870s, "Murder on the Leviathan," with its theme of cursed archaeology, its multiethnic passengers, and intricate mystery, recalls the great Agatha Christie and her novels like "Death on the Nile."

This is no coincidence either; Akunin is a lover of the mystery genre, and his Fandorin novels pay homage to the mystery genre's past. "He Lover of Death" is Dickensian, while the short story collection "Special Assignments" places Fandorin in the heart of Victorian London during the days of Jack the Ripper, arguably the most written about serial killer in literary history.

**A Better Time**

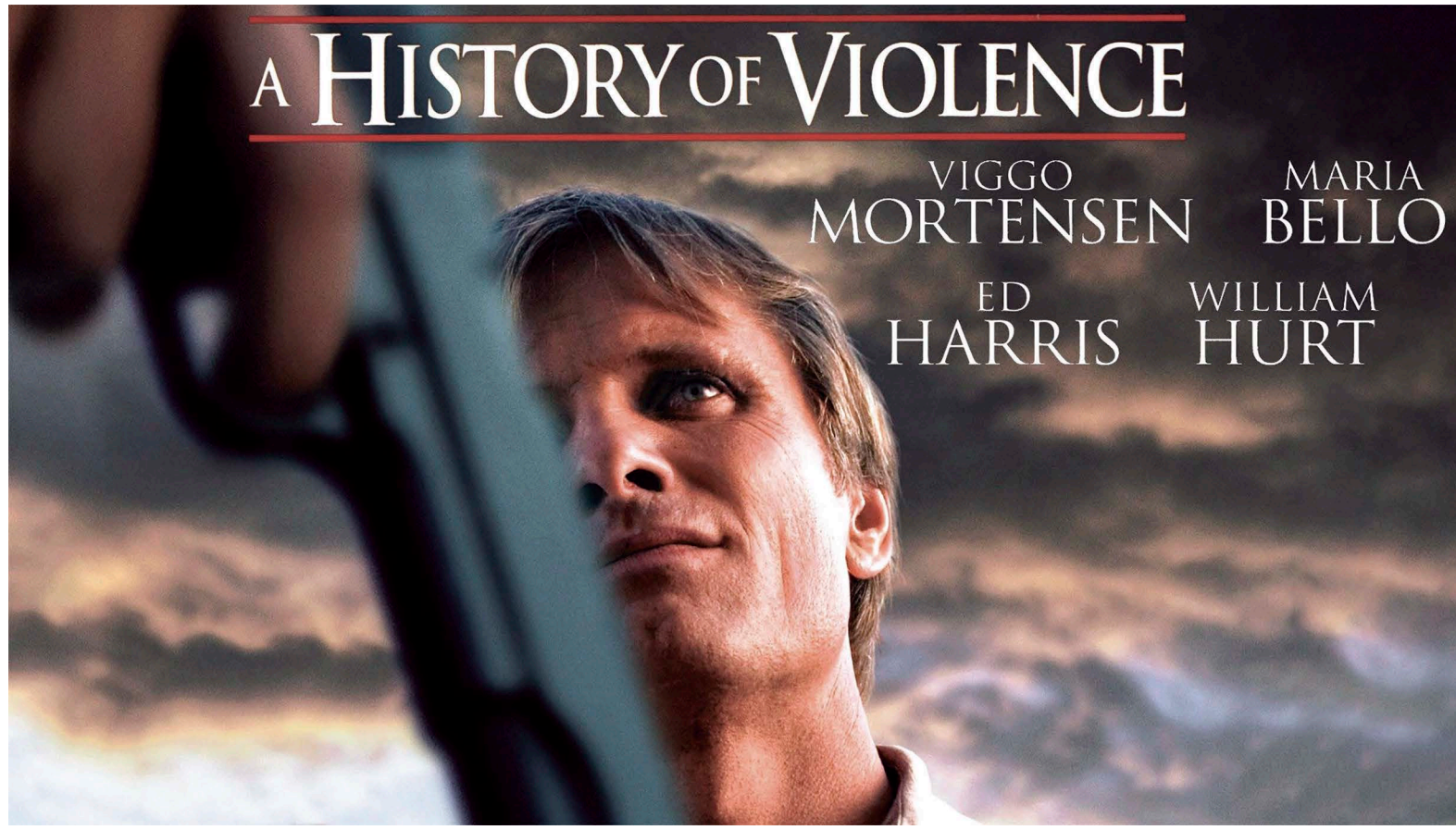
The bygone days of the Russian Empire are also honored. This is not to say that Akunin's novels are blind paens to tsarism. There are plenty of duplicitous characters who populate these novels, and not all of them are bomb-throwing Bolsheviks or

common thieves. Corrupt Russian bureaucrats, idealistic students influenced by too much Nietzsche, and royal psychopaths appear just as often.

However, one cannot help but read the Fandorin novels and fall in love with the common nobility of the period. The characters behave with manners. They have honor. They have loyalty, and no character is more loyal than Masa. Masa, who first appears in "The Diamond Chariot," is a former yakuza gangster whom Fandorin hires to be his ninjitsu teacher. Masa saves Fandorin's life time and time again in the novels, all the while thinking what can be construed as racist, or at least anti-Western opinions about European hygiene and gender relations.

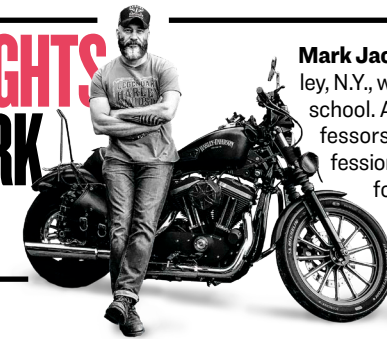
The Fandorin series is the apex and apogee of historical mystery greatness. Akunin is an expert stylist and someone interested in the granular details about Russian history, its imperial culture, and the uniqueness of the Russian soul. The Fandorin novels are also a true feast for mystery and detective fiction lovers, and they offer the rare cross-cultural opportunity to see a traditional locked-room plot transported to 19th-century Russia.

*Benjamin Welton is a freelance writer based in New England.*



Viggo Mortensen as a former hitman for the Irish mob in "A History of Violence."

### FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

## Why Movies About Reformed Assassins Are So Popular

MARK JACKSON

"Black ops agent" or "wet boy" is internal CIA lingo for assassin. There have been loads of cold-blooded assassin movies—a random Google search immediately turned up: "Top 150 Assassin/Hitman Films & Shows - IMDb." Not to mention the popular video game "Assassins" and others of its ilk. However, movies about "morally reformed" assassins have been on the rise for some time now. The quotation marks indicate a relative concept; we're not talking about priests here.

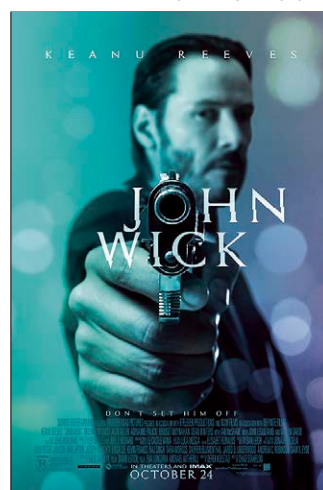
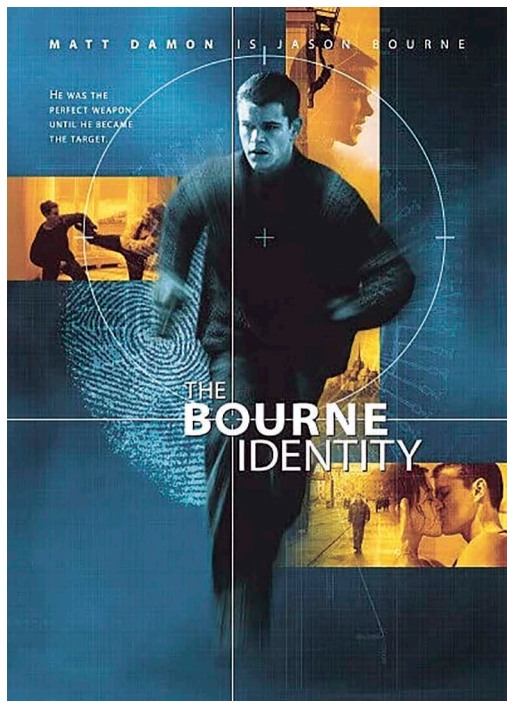
There's an overwhelming fascination with human killing-machines—that sheer destructive force. After all, what is the hugely popular "Terminator" but a time-traveling, mechanized assassin? When Arnold said "I'll be baack" in 1984, he wasn't kidding. Nobody expected him to be back, 31 years later, in IMAX and 3D.

However, it's the current societal preoccupation with another community that also specializes in termination—special forces military operators—that has upgraded the cold-blooded assassin to the "morally reformed" assassin story.

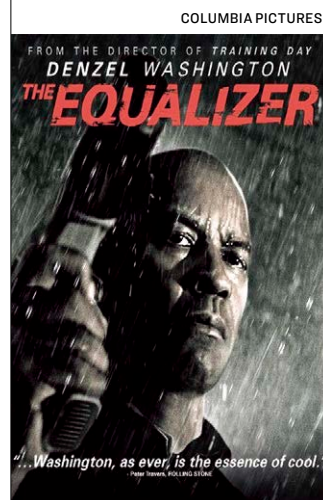
**Warrior-Spy-Assassin**

Former Army Rangers, Green Berets, Delta Force operators, Navy SEALs, Air Force combat controllers, and Marine Raiders, once done with the military, often start a second career with the CIA's paramilitary asset, the Special Activities Division Ground Branch, which hires the best of the best of military special forces operators.

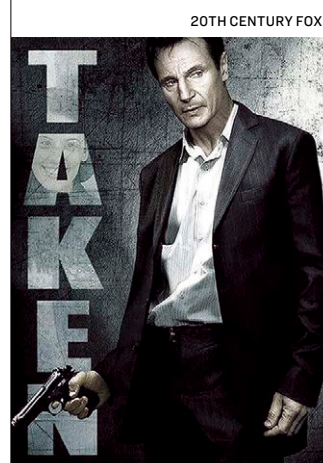
Some former operators also go beyond door-kicking, flash-bang grenades, room-clearing, and snatch-and-grabs into the stealthier black ops community. They don't have to go far to transpose their hard-



In "John Wick," Keanu Reeves is an ex-hitman.



Ex-CIA black ops agent Robert McCall (Denzel Washington), in "The Equalizer."



(Above) Liam Neeson in "Taken" plays an ex-CIA black ops agent whose daughter is abducted. (Left) Matt Damon plays Jason Bourne, an amnesiac CIA black ops agent in "The Bourne Identity."

won military skills of terminating human life—especially skills involving stealth, intel gathering, hand-to-hand combat, and sniping—to become spies and assassins.

Killing is the name of the game for special forces operators and assassins alike. But ultimately, a great many of the men in the special operations forces community are patriotic, morally superior, church-going men. This inner code and moral compass have been portrayed in films like "Act of Valor," "Lone Survivor," and "American Sniper."

To quote former U.S. Navy SEAL Brandon Webb, who more or less single-handedly revamped the entire SEAL sniper course, and who describes his fellow friends and teammates in his latest book thusly: "All three of them had such kind, generous natures. 'Sensitive' may not be a word you expect in a description of the nation's deadliest war fighters. But there it is."

This trend has bled into the cinematic assassin narrative. Ultimately, it's more uplifting to hear stories of true warriors and reformed killers, as opposed to cold-blooded ones. What's more inspiring than tales of redemption and righteousness?

**The Warrior Quadrant**

So, what's the attraction to the concept of an incredibly lethal man? It has to do with the fact that the spec ops and black ops professions showcase the most concentrated, distilled essence of the warrior archetype, and modern men (and women) thirst for knowledge of the true warrior ethos. What constitutes a warrior? Warrior is boundary setter, enforcer against trespassers. Sentinel, protector, shield. Destroyer of fears and attacks. Warrior embodies courage, aggressiveness, decisiveness, discipline, integrity, accountability, purpose, mindfulness, adaptability, skill, loyalty, and service.

The archetypes of the mature masculine have been under scrutiny in American culture since the early 1980s. The modern, international men's movement, especially the mytho-poetic men's movement—spurred into existence largely by feminism as it existed in the 1970s—defines four quadrants of the mature male psyche: the warrior, king, lover, and magician.

**The Boyhood-to-Manhood Rite of Passage**

American men up until recently had largely lost access to the birthright of all males, namely, the classic boyhood-to-manhood rite of passage that's existed in healthy communities, tribal and otherwise, the world over since the dawn of humans.

The current paltry remnants are the bar mitzvah and high school sports. But not everyone is Jewish, and not everyone's a jock. And now traditional manhood is furthermore under siege by the creeping manipulations of communism infiltrating American society by way of disguised, benign-seeming, liberal and progressive agenda-based hyperawareness of gender issues.

Women in the 1960s and '70s, completely fed up with the uptight, pedantic, patriarchal, emotionally illiterate, "mansplaining," hat-wearing, briefcase-toting, mildly misogynistic, 1950s-style male, successfully convinced men that a sensitive man was more sexually attractive to women.

This desire of women to have a more balanced partner was warranted—that '50s guy, such as he was, was badly in need of an upgrade. It's just that no one could elucidate exactly where he got off track. But men responded by subconsciously halting their archetypal mature-male psychic growth cycle. The wisdom and understanding of the process and its profound necessity in a healthy society had long gone missing. This worked, for a time, as a counterbal-

ance. Women became more masculine; men became more feminine. However, women soon and rightfully became disgusted with the resultant, living-in-mommy's-basement, slacker man-child, who couldn't and wouldn't pick up the check, didn't know the meaning of the word chivalrous, and cried way too much.

Where did the real men go, the world's women demanded to know? At which time the male community finally woke up and rediscovered some ancient truths, namely, men cannot base their understanding of what constitutes a man by listening solely to the wants and desires of women.

Why? Because women never know what they want. But they know exactly what they want. But they never know what they want. But they know exactly what they want. But they ... And ultimately, women cannot teach boys and men ... to be MEN.

It must also be mentioned here that modern feminism originates in the communist agenda to destroy tradition, by sowing jealousy and insisting that all women are eternally oppressed by men—but that's a topic for another piece.

Anyway, in traditional culture, only men can teach true manhood to boys and men. And so the male rite of passage is returning, in conscious form, to modern culture, and with it, the rebalancing of the male-psyche quadrants. To learn about the results and what modern women think about all that, read my review of the stunning documentary regarding the modern men's movement, "The Work."

It's safe to say that women, especially with nesting and children in mind, look for well-developed warrior qualities in men. They'd prefer a man with whom they could walk down a dark alley in a dangerous neighborhood and feel supremely safe. Of course, some women prefer to get a black belt in Krav Maga and/or Brazilian jiu-jitsu and feel that way with or without a man.

**There's nothing quite as satisfying as sending a former assassin after child traffickers.**

But ultimately, to quote author George Orwell: "We sleep peacefully in our beds because rough men stand by to visit violence on those that would do us harm." Or, like Jack Nicholson's Marine Corps Colonel's line in "A Few Good Men": "You don't want the truth, because deep down, in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall, you need me on that wall." But this is part of why the morally reformed assassin story is so popular these days.

**How They're Morally Reformed**

What's so intriguing about "The Bourne Identity" is the fact that the character of Jason Bourne has powerful amnesia. He can't remember who he was, but he discovers that he has a jaw-droppingly impressive set of lethal skills and has no idea where he learned them. When he discovers that he was previously an assassin, his true self is mortified.

In addition to Matt Damon in "The Bourne Identity" (CIA black ops), there is also Liam Neeson in "Taken" (ex-CIA black ops) and Denzel Washington in "The Equalizer" (ex-CIA black ops).

Also, there's Washington's "Man on Fire" (ex-assassin), Keanu Reeves in "John Wick" (ex-hitman), and Viggo Mortensen in "A History of Violence" (ex-Irish mob hitman). Their characters are all formerly (and currently) unstoppable, deadly men who can impose their wills on highly dangerous situations. You mess with them, you get dead quick.

But these men have undergone inner transformations. Mortensen's Tom Stall spent a long time drifting in the desert, finding his moral compass. Jason Bourne contacts his true self due to the trauma of being shot and floating in the ocean a long while before being fished out by a French trawler, and his ensuing coma overriding the memory of his lethal self.

While we don't learn much about the inner transformations of Denzel Washington's Robert McCall or Liam Neeson's Bryan Mills, we see the results: McCall safeguards a young, vulnerable prostitute, while Mills rescues his trafficked daughter.

They've all got moral codes now. But they can still access the Wild Man, or warrior. And we enjoy very much that they can access the Wild Man. We'll watch that all day long. There's nothing quite as satisfying as sending a former assassin after child-traffickers; it's likely the reason that the meme of Neeson-as-Mills on the phone saying "I will find you, and I will kill you" has become part of the international lexicon. To learn more about the Wild Man and the warrior, again—read my article on "The Work."



REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

# The Struggle of Temptation: ‘Christ in the Wilderness’



PUBLIC DOMAIN

ERIC BESS

Every year, millions of people celebrate Easter as the day commemorating the resurrection of Jesus three days after he was crucified and buried.

Instead of looking at the horror of Jesus on the cross, though, I would like to remember a moment from the life of Jesus, one that both reveals his humanness and exemplifies the Christ-like attributes worthy of embodying. This is only my limited interpretation of a very complex subject.

## The Temptation of Christ

As the story goes, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist before going into the Judean Desert to fast for 40 days and 40 nights. During his fast, Jesus becomes hungry and is met by Satan who tempts him three times.

The first temptation suggests that Jesus turn stone into bread so that he may eat and satisfy his hunger; another temptation is to jump from the highest point of the temple and have angels prevent him from harm; the third is to bow to Satan to gain all of the kingdoms in the world.

Of course, Jesus denies all three temptations with simple statements that, to me, suggest that humans need spiritual sustenance more than material sustenance, that it is blasphemous to test God's power, and that only God—not Satan—should be worshiped and served. Upon denying Satan, Jesus is attended to by angels.

Though there are three temptations, they all seem to be directed toward influencing one thing in Jesus, the one thing that Satan—in his rebelliousness toward God—embodies: pride.

Satan prefaces two of his temptations by casting doubt on Jesus's relationship with God. In other words, in the first and second temptations, Satan asks Jesus to prove that he is indeed the Son of God. The third temptation, in which Satan asks Jesus to kneel to gain all of the kingdoms in the world, is a direct appeal to pride—both to Jesus's pride, if he has any, and Satan's own pride.

The story suggests that the weak link in our battle against temptation that prevents our union with God is our ego, our pride.

▲ “Christ in the Wilderness (Christ in the Desert),” 1872, by Ivan Kramskoy. Oil on canvas, 72 inches by 84 inches. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

## ‘Christ in the Wilderness’

The painting “Christ in the Wilderness” by the Russian painter Ivan Kramskoy depicts Jesus as he denies Satan's temptations.

Placed in the center of the composition, Jesus is our focal point. He is all alone, sitting on a rock near the bank of a body of water. He is dressed in a red robe and dark blue cloak, and his feet are bare. His head, framed by the sky, is bowed in deep concentration, and he clenches his fingers tightly together in prayer.

The sky is of pastel colors that contrast beautifully with the grays of the rock. It is difficult to tell if it is dawn or dusk, but the sky suggests that it is one or the other.

## Struggling to Resist

To me, this is a striking and unusual portrayal of Jesus, and I think it can be very revealing for those today who are interested in gaining moral insight into resisting temptation.

First, it is interesting that Jesus is depicted solely as a man. He isn't shown with a halo or ascending into heaven, which, of course, are images that have their place. Instead, he is shown as a regular man, which sets the stage to suggest or encourage us, as human beings, to resist temptation despite how difficult it might be. In other words, this portrayal suggests that we—like Jesus—may possess the strength to resist temptation.

Next, Jesus is shown alone. There's no one else there: There is no Satan, and there are no angels. The gray of the rocks and barrenness of the environment supplement this feeling of solitude. To me, this suggests that the temptations that Jesus now experiences are internal. He is internally resisting the temptations of Satan.

We often believe that the source of our temptations, our enemies, are “out there” somewhere waiting to destroy us. Is it instead the case that our greatest temptations, our greatest enemies, are deep within ourselves?

Is this why Jesus is depicted with such a deep look of concentration on his face? Is he intently trying to resist these temptations within himself as Satan conjures them?

This journey within is not an easy one, but it's a necessary struggle for those mor-

ally inclined. The difficulty of Jesus's resistance is suggested by his hands clenched in prayer and by his bare feet. He sits on a hard surface and is surrounded by jagged rocks. Nothing about this scene suggests comfort or ease.

But these difficulties do not deter Jesus. He may be assaulted by Satan's earthly temptations, but his heart and mind are depicted above the composition's horizon line, framed by the heavens. This suggests that his divine nature is what allows him to resist Satan's temptations.

It may be dusk, suggesting that Jesus's temptations are just beginning and night is coming; or it may be dawn, which suggests that he is at the very end of Satan's onslaught, and the sun is rising to shine light upon the darkness. Either way, dawn and dusk—being in between day and night—might suggest that he is still in the process of resisting temptation.

The fact that it is in between day and night might also represent, in the same way that his lower body is positioned on earth and his upper body is framed by heaven, that he occupies two realms: He is God made flesh. It could also represent the necessary stage between his baptism and accepting disciples, that is, teaching the word of God.

There are many people this Easter who will celebrate Jesus dying for their sins. But I also encourage us to ask what it means to resist the temptations of Satan and access the divine nature in our hearts and minds.

*The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series “Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart,” we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.*

*Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).*

FILM

# ‘Mank’: The Story Behind the Story of ‘Citizen Kane’

TIFFANY BRANNAN

“Rosebud.” What picture does that word bring to your mind? You may be thinking about a gift on Valentine's Day, but this particular blossom gained a new meaning 80 years ago. “Citizen Kane,” Orson Welles's 1941 masterpiece, begins with the titular character gasping “Rosebud” before dying. The rest of the film is a series of flashbacks from different people's perspectives, chronicling a reporter's quest to uncover the secret of Kane's dying words.

The American Film Institute lists “Citizen Kane” as No. 1 on its “100 Years...100 Movies” list, but many people haven't watched this classic. Last year, Netflix Inc. revived the dramatic story of a newspaperman who gains the whole world and then loses it in his quest for public adoration.

On Nov. 13, 2020, “Mank” was released. “Mank” isn't a remake of “Citizen Kane”; it is a story about that film's inspiration and making, focusing on the experiences of the title character, Herman J. Mankiewicz, co-writer of the “Citizen Kane” screenplay. “Citizen Kane” is about reporter Jerry Thompson's (William Alland) attempts to learn the true story behind Charles Foster Kane's life and dying words, while “Mank” is about the supposedly real-life incidents and people who inspired Mankiewicz's writing of “Citizen Kane.”

This article, in turn, is about an even deeper Hollywood backstory, which was not addressed in either film but played an influential role in both finished products. Let's call it the story behind the story.

## ‘Mank’ is a story about the powerful characters who ruled studio-era Hollywood, all of whom are based on real people

### A Thoughtful Effort

The most remarkable thing about “Mank” is its black-and-white filmography. Director David Fincher's insistence on this historic homage delayed the project by 20 years—but if it wins Best Picture at the Academy Awards, it would be only the second black-and-white film to do so since “The Apartment” won in 1960.

The filmmakers took great pains to make “Mank” seem authentically vintage, shooting it exclusively on Red Digital Cinema Camera Company's (RED) Helium 8K Monochrome cameras, using a monaural sound mix, recording the score with only period-correct instruments, and even purposely degrading the audio and visual resolutions to create graininess. Their efforts are impressive, although devoted classic-film fans will notice modern cinematographic styles of lighting, camera angles, and opening credits.

However, there is one major reason why no one would confuse “Mank” with a 1940s film, and it's more noticeable than the lack of an on-screen “The End.” No 1940s movie would contain the profanity, vulgarity, and political agenda that “Mank” features.

The Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) gave “Mank” an “R” rating “for some language.” When “Citizen Kane” was released, there was no ratings system. Instead, film content was guided by the Production Code Administration (PCA), which was established in 1934 by the Motion Picture Association, then known as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Instead of allowing and classifying all content, the Motion Picture Production Code determined what was acceptable.

Many Hollywood historians and fans think that filmmakers “worked” the code system by sneaking in forbidden content; however, most movies from the code's heyday (1934-1954) are cleaner than today's “G”-rated movies, due to intelligent collaboration.

What critics of Old Hollywood's self-regulatory system don't acknowledge is how modern filmmakers manipulate the CARA. Both “Star Wars” (1977) and “Annie” (1982) added profanity to ensure that they got “PG,” rather than “G,” ratings. A “G” rating would have branded them as “kids' movies,” hurting their box office returns.

I suspect that “Mank” is the same case. Aside from five highly unnecessary uses of a certain profanity, which ensures an “R” rating when used twice, this film didn't earn its restricted classification. There are no bedroom scenes, and no nudity or violence. The only objections, apart from swearing, are some suggestive and vulgar lines, violent sickness on screen, and a bizarrely underdressed secretary.

The occasional profane outbursts seem forced, as though included to ensure the desired rating. A “PG-13” rating is associated with immature films, so an “R” rating is more desirable! Thus, a film that should have been rated “PG-13,” purposely garnered an “R” rating to attract adults.

### The Power Behind the Screen: Orson Welles and Joseph Breen

“Mank” is a story about the powerful characters who ruled studio-era Hollywood, all of whom are based on real people. The ranks include big shots like William Randolph Hearst, Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg, and Orson Welles. There's one glaring omission from this Hollywood “who's who” list, however: Joseph I. Breen, head of the PCA, enforcer of the poorly labeled “Hays Code,” and little-known Hollywood insider, isn't even mentioned.

The characters neither comment on nor complain about Breen's office. Whether they considered them helpful self-regulators or pesky censors, screenwriters like Mank were very aware of the film industry's moral guardians. Breen himself, a former newspaper reporter, would have called this “the story behind the story.”

Surprisingly, little information is available about the PCA's role in the production of “Citizen Kane.” The Margaret Herrick Library's collection of PCA files, which contains invaluable information about the Production Code's enforcement, includes no file for “the greatest film ever made.” The only known request from the PCA changed the setting of Kane's newspaper anniversary party, which would have taken place in a brothel. The scene, which Welles supposedly included as a distraction from controversial plot points, was easily relocated to the Inquirer newsroom. Apart from that, we can only guess about Joseph Breen's opinion of this controversial film.

However, his opinion about the film's 25-year-old producer is less elusive. “Citizen Kane” premiered in New York on May 1, 1941. On May 15, Breen officially left the PCA to become head of production for RKO Radio Pictures Inc. (RKO), the studio court-ing controversy with the film's obvious depiction of newspaper magnate Hearst. According to contemporary articles, Breen was one of Welles's biggest supporters at RKO. A New York Times article from July 1941 stated: “All conflict between Welles and the studio has been ironed out by Joseph L. [sic] Breen, new head of production,” allowing Welles to begin his next project, “The Magnificent Ambersons.”

Breen was enthusiastic about the latter film, writing to Welles on Dec. 2, 1941: “Hastened to thank you, to congratulate you, and to tell you that I have not been so impressed for years ... The material we saw was really excellent and although you know me to be a chronic kicker, in this instance I have naught but praise—from my heart. God love you.”

According to Wellesnet (the Orson Welles Web Resource), Breen's vacation in March 1942 and eventual return to the PCA in May left Welles with few allies at RKO. Close friendships with filmmakers were not uncommon for Breen; he probably respected Welles's desire to make artistic films rather than cheap, sensationalist ones.

### Citizen Mank

Like most Hollywood biopics, “Mank” rearranges, changes, and ignores facts to form the story it wants to tell. Earlier events in Mankiewicz's life are carefully angled to show that his disgust with Hearst's manipulation of public opinion inspired his writing of “Citizen Kane.” The whole plot hinges on Mankiewicz's outrage at how Hearst, aided by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. executives, rigged the 1934 California gubernatorial election.

As Breen would have responded to this distortion, this is “very interesting, but not true,” as he's quoted in Jack Vizzard's book, “See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor.” Mankiewicz's opinions about this election are actually unknown, and Hearst did not fund the fake newsreels that figure



A scene from “Mank,” showing vintage cameras.



A scene in “Citizen Kane” set in the Inquirer's office.



Herman J. Mankiewicz, co-writer of “Citizen Kane,” is the protagonist in “Mank.”



“Citizen Kane” has been called the greatest film of all time.



“Mank” does not live up to the quality of its predecessor.

prominently in this story. While the PCA never demanded historical accuracy, it would have resented this deliberate fabrication to promote Netflix's liberal agenda.

Although it frequently sacrifices facts for plot development, “Mank” deserves credit for its efforts to capture a bygone era. The cinematography, soundtrack, and costuming include many difficult-to-achieve touches of authenticity because Fincher was motivated to lovingly re-create the era of “Citizen Kane.”

In fact, the director re-created more than just its era. The mood, visual effects, and even the plot of “Mank” echo “Citizen Kane.” However, “Mank” doesn't reproduce the iconic magic of its predecessor—which remains beloved after 80 years—even though compelling story material, effective actors, and creative effort from its production team are certainly not lacking. Instead, it misses the mark regarding the wholesome values that set Hollywood's Golden Age apart from all other eras of filmmaking. “Mank” could have been thoroughly vintage if it heeded period-correct decency standards.

The film's producers can't claim the excuse of ignorance, either. Its official trailer opens with the declaration, “THIS PREVIEW APPROVED BY THE ADVERTISING ADMINISTRATION OF THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION, CERTIFICATE NO. 52693,” revealing knowledge of Breen's office protocols. However, the actual film features no such nod to the PCA; there is no MPPDA logo in the opening credits or in the content that follows.

How might “Mank” have been different if it had conformed to the Motion Picture Production Code? Imagine the film without any swearing, vulgarity, suggestive dialogue, revealing costumes, or heavy-handed political messages. Would it have lacked anything?

“Citizen Kane” complied with PCA standards, and it is called the greatest film of all time. As a PCA-approved film, “Mank” could have found a positive moral in Mankiewicz's jumbled life, instead of fabricating a socialist message. Watching this Netflix original will undoubtedly make you want to watch “Citizen Kane,” for the first—or fiftieth—time! If “Mank,” with its six Golden Globe and ten Academy Award nominations, informs people about “Citizen Kane” and motivates them to watch it, I think it will have served a useful purpose.

*Tiffany Brannan is a 19-year-old opera singer, Hollywood history/vintage beauty copywriter, travel writer, film blogger, and ballet writer. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.*



## REWIND, REVIEW, RE-RATE

## Tear-Hijacker Doesn't Ring True

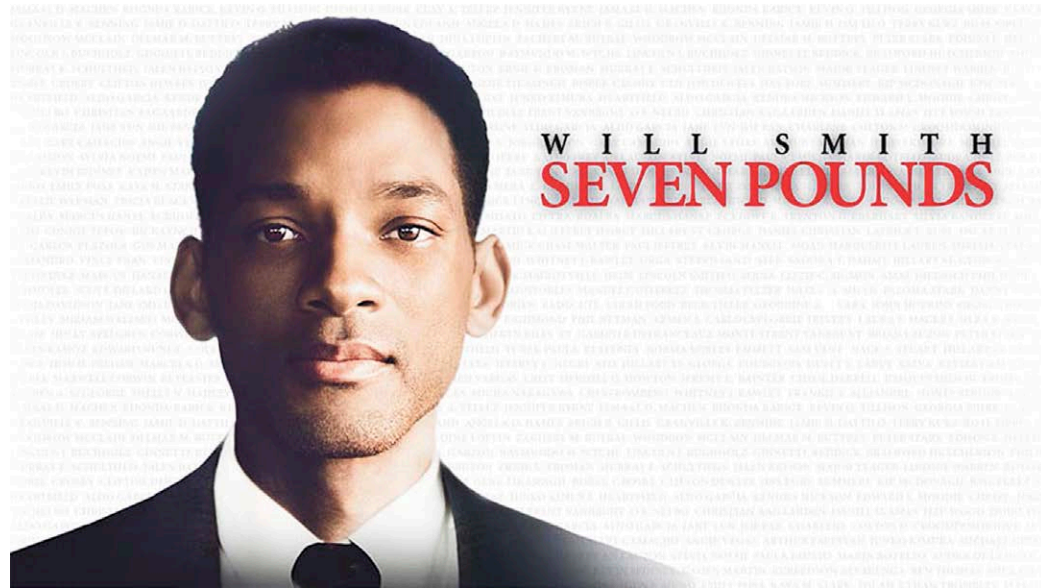
IAN KANE

Looking back on Will Smith's body of work, it's clear that he is a more-than-capable actor in both action-oriented ("I am Legend," "Hancock") and dramatic roles, and of course, comedic ones ("Hitch," "Focus"). But in Italian director Gabriele Muccino's "Seven Pounds," Smith is cast against type as a much more tragic character than we're used to seeing.

In Muccino's 2008 drama, Smith plays Ben Thomas, an IRS agent with a big secret. Ben is on a mission to be of service to seven total strangers in order to pay off a debt of penance. He blames himself for the death of his beloved wife because of some cellphone fumbling while driving.

The film attempts to be intriguing by leaving us with questions: Why does Ben set up shop in a run-down motel room? Why does he have jellyfish as pets?

One thing is for sure: Much of the film's lengthy, two-plus-hour runtime drags because viewers are almost expected to develop feelings for Ben and for those whose lives he touches. There's the sad, blind telemarketer Ezra (Woody Harrelson in a ridiculous-looking mullet wig); a poor domestic violence victim, Connie (Elpidia Carrillo); a social worker with cirrhosis of the liver, Holly (Judyann Elder); and so on. Each of these strangers is introduced when Ben drops in on them to see if they're wor-



Will Smith has shown his wide-ranging talent in many films. "Seven Pounds" isn't one of them.

thy of receiving his mysterious gifts.

From set to set, we are transported in a revolving carousel of misery: a run-down house, a seedy bar, a dreary hospital. Each place seems more depressing than the last. The seven characters not only have problems but also are awaiting some sort of termination of their lives because of different illnesses.

What is Ben's secret, and what is his ultimate goal?

**Too Much Manipulation**

Because of the stilted performances and

saccharine score, I frankly didn't care what those answers were.

Normally, I enjoy Smith as an actor. He was fantastic in films such as "I am Legend" and fun to watch in "Hancock," and any of the "Men in Black" films, to name a few. However, he just wasn't believable as a morose taxman.

And although Muccino tried to set the film up in a mysterious fashion, it comes off as disjointed more than anything else. Overall, the emotional parts of the movie seem manipulative. The low-spirited piano

plunking and the obligatory cello strumming signal that viewers are supposed to feel sad.

Some of the most obvious examples of these types of scenes are the many slow-mo shots of Ben's wife looking forlorn, or in long shots of Ben sitting down somewhere with sorrowful, tear-laden eyes. By the end of the film, I wondered how many bottles of teardrops the production crew went through.

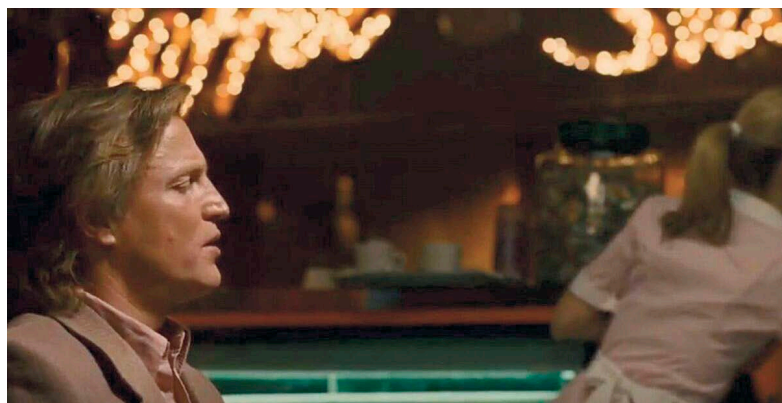
While I feel that Smith was sadly miscast in this wannabe tear-jerker, the supporting actors aren't entirely believable either. Harrelson in his goofy wig has the opposite effect, a guffaw, of what was intended. And that's coming from a big fan of his.

### The emotional parts of the movie seem manipulative.

"Seven Pounds" might have a decent message buried somewhere in its overly long, tear-drenched script, but by the time the film ends, I'd had enough of warm, fuzzy, and syrupy cinema, and felt highly manipulated. The only thing that I came away with, after the end credits rolled, was that it's bad to fiddle with cellphones while driving.

I don't think two hours and three minutes of my life was needed to learn that.

*Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit DreamFlightEnt*



Woody Harrelson plays a blind telemarketer.



Ben Thompson (Will Smith) helps seven strangers; Emily (Rosario Dawson) is one of them, in "Seven Pounds."

**'Seven Pounds'**

**Director**  
Gabriele Muccino

**Starring**  
Will Smith, Rosario Dawson, Woody Harrelson

**Running Time**  
2 hours, 3 minutes

**Rated**  
PG-13

**Release Date**  
Dec. 19, 2008 (USA)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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