WEEK 23, 2019

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & TRADITION

"The Unicorn in Captivity," 1495–1505, South Netherlandish. Wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts; 144 7/8 inches by 99 inches. Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937. The Met Cloisters.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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TRUTH AND TRADITION

(Top) A B-17 crewman filming in "The Cold Blue," which relies on World War II archival film footage. (Above) B-17 bombers in close formation. (Right) Inside a B-17 during a World War II mission.

FILM REVIEW

FLYING HIGH, FLYING TRUE

The real deal: Arresting archival film footage from World War II

IAN KANE

The Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was one tough bird: It could land on airfields despite being heavily damaged—if it returned home at all. Sometimes, though, these immense planes would fly in such close proximity to one another that they'd actually collide, resulting in them plummeting to earth.

"The Cold Blue" is director Erik Nelson's sobering documentary, which mixes restored archival film footage of the brave men of the Eighth Air Force, who flew extremely dangerous sorties over Germany during World War II. The outstanding heroism on display in this film is almost hard to believe when matched up against today's cynicism and greed.

The film contains mainly footage shot by staunch American patriot, director, producer, and screenwriter William Wyler (1959 "Ben-Hur," 1939 "Wuthering Heights") and a small team of cinematographers. These men were part of the Eighth Air Force and filmed various crew members as they carried out their missions on board a particular B-17 called the "Memphis Belle."

Nelson has crafted the film not only from the 70-plus-year-old footage, but also from still photographs and gripping voiceover narration that details what happened.

The outstanding heroism on display in this film is almost hard to believe.

The Sacrifices

These mighty, no-frills aircraft were not only dangerous to fly in but also highly uncomfortable to travel in. Many of the men recount that the average temperatures in craft ranged from 20 degrees on a "good day" to as low as 60 below zero on others.

And unlike the British bombers, which normally flew during nocturnal hours, Americans were tasked with flying their bombing runs in broad daylight, while facing a veritable plethora of German antiaircraft batteries on the ground, aimed directly at them.

In fact, these missions were so harrowing that one of Wyler's cinematographers, Harold Tannenbaum, was shot down during the documentary's filming, and Wyler himself suffered hearing loss in one ear.

Wyler, a Jewish man who was born in Mulhouse, Alsace (then part of the German Empire, now part of France), came to America in the early 1920s. He signed up for the United States Army Air Forces in 1942, where he earned the rank of major and served a total of three years.

Flying the many dangerous missions over Germany gave him and his team the perfect opportunity to shoot a documentary, originally titled "The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress."

The restored, assembled footage played a single night (May 23) in theaters and will see a proper debut on HBO on June 6, which just so happens to be the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

Composure Under Fire

The average mission length for a B-17 bombing run was 11 hours—five and a half hours to the plane's designated target, and five and a half back. If they survived, of course.

The young men who flew on board these flying fortresses averaged in age from 19 to 25. Typically, they were God-fearing men who had families that they wanted to return home to. Unfortunately, B-17 crews usually flew at least 25 missions, with an average survival rate of less than 25 percent.

Those aren't good odds.

Therefore, the name of the game for the B-17 crews was to fly hundreds of miles to their target mark, unload their two tons of bombs, and then fly back as quickly as they could.

And, they had to be as accurate as they could in their targeting. Indeed, they often were: It's reported that around one-third of their munitions placed within 1,000 feet of their designated targets—a testament to the men's levels of fortitude, in spite of being under inordinately stressful circumstances.

The film has an almost surreal quality to it, with many oversaturated colors and tones. We get to see inside various Army Air Force briefing rooms, where German targets are mapped out with stark precision. We also get to look at the various ways that the crew members decked out their B-17 bombers with decorations—a human touch that details how they attempted to lighten their dreary environments.

"The Cold Blue" was dedicated to the 28,000 men of the Eighth Air Force who sacrificed their lives in the service of our country, including cinematographer Harold Tannenbaum.

For the entire film, the surviving members of the Eighth Air Force downplay their heroics with a degree of humility that is simply astounding.

It is an important film that captures the patriotic zeitgeist of the 1940s, and details the selfless humility of the men who flew on board their beloved fortresses in the sky.

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

'The Cold Blue'

Director
Erik Nelson

Rated
NR

Running Time
1 hour, 12 minutes

Release Date
HBO showing June 6

★★★★★

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POETRY

New Poetry Worth Reading

An introduction to William Baer

JEFF MINICK

For a good number of years, I attended various poetry readings. Some were wonderful, some mediocre, and two were disasters that remain seared in my memory.

In Boston in 1976, in a bookstore whose name I have long forgotten, a poet, whose name is also lost in time, read incomprehensible verse for almost an hour. Like the bookstore and the poet, her abstract ramblings have gone missing from my memory. What I do recollect is sitting in a crowded room, wedged between people on a bench, with no possibility of escape, perspiring, claustrophobic, tortured by a river of unintelligible words. When at last I set foot in the street, I gulped air into my lungs like a submariner touching shore after months at sea.

My second such incarceration occurred about five years later in a room above a bar in Charlottesville, Virginia. Here the staff had pushed together several tables, and a group of us sat round them and listened to a man in his late 20s read his verse. Again the words were like the earth in Genesis, "without form and void," and again the seating arrangement eliminated the opportunity to slip away. Pitchers of beer on the tables did alleviate some of the pain, and I remember the poem involved riding a motorcycle. I recall, as well, some mention of shattered glass, so somewhere in that jumble of words the motorcycle may have crashed.

Perhaps if I had read the words of these poets, I might have understood their work. But poetry is a spoken art, meant for recitation or reading aloud, to enter the ear of the listener and so sway the heart and mind. The lines delivered by these two poets entered the ear, but without effect.

Does Poetry Matter Today?

Nearly 30 years ago, The Atlantic published an article "Can Poetry Matter?" in which it addressed the demise of poetry's influence on our culture. Poetry, the article points out, "has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group." As a result, "a 'famous' poet now means someone famous only to other poets."

To corroborate this decline in poetry's influence on the culture at large is easy. Ask your family members or friends to identify a living poet. In the middle of the 20th century, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Dylan Thomas were household names. How many people today could identify the 78-year-old Billy Collins, whom The New York Times once dubbed "the most popular poet in America"?

Some might give a nod to Bob Dylan, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," but the label that first comes to mind as a description of Bob Dylan is songwriter, not poet.

In addition to its turn toward abstraction and specialization, poetry lost some of its broader appeal by shifting away from meter, form, rhyme, and other devices. Our hearts and minds

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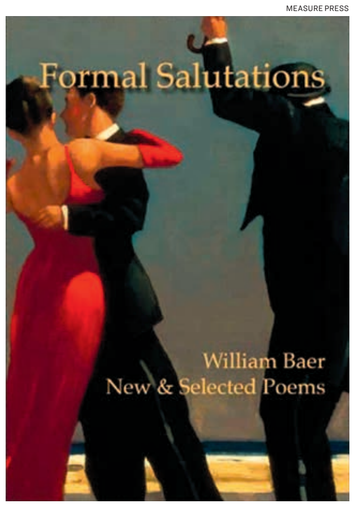

'Formal Salutations: New & Selected Poems' by William Baer. Published by Measure Press. 206 pages; hardcover, $25.

dance to the rhythm and beat of words. Children memorize nursery rhymes with ease, and adolescents and teens, at least as I observed them as a teacher, take far greater pleasure in poems like Kipling's "If" or Robert Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee" than in, say, William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow."

Of course, some contemporary poets have continued working in traditional forms, employing rhyme, and meter, and aiming their poems at all of us. One of these is William Baer, a poet, novelist, and playwright, the recipient of numerous literary prizes, and the founding editor of The Formalist, a literary journal that helped bring about the New Formalism movement among poets.

William Baer's 'Formal Salutations'

In his 2018 "Formal Salutations: New & Selected Poems," Baer treats his readers to poems in blank verse, villanelles, sonnets, terza rima, couplets, and other forms. Along with this banquet, he serves up translations, parodies, ballads, love sonnets, poems inspired by the Bible, and verse about topics ranging from issues of national importance to the antics of children.

Baer is a writer of many literary gifts, including his ability to surprise readers. Here, for example, is "Conspiracy," a sonnet befitting the times in which we live:

> You know the truth about the suicide
> of the emissary's wife, the cocaine bust
> in Venice, and the plagues at Passiontide.
> But whom can you tell? Whom can you really trust?
> Desperate, you fly to Washington, D.C.,
> to your ex-lover. "Meet me anywhere."
> "Of course," she says. "Let's meet at N.S.C."
> Later, walking from McPherson Square,
> you start to tell her on the Mall, but "No,"
> she puts a finger to your lips. "Don't say
> a word. Please. I really don't want to know."
> Instead, she kisses your mouth: you pull away.
> You check your watch. It's two a.m.
> There's not much time. Your love is one of them.

Baer's narrators range from a "bad girl" who "drives with her headlights off at night" to a man we first mistake for a peeping Tom, from a drug pusher to Dante, from a "little boy who couldn't rhyme" to a telephone psychic.

Let's end our brief visit with William Baer with one of the most moving and beautiful pieces in "Formal Salutations," "The Swimming Pool Float":

> He remembers, before she died last May,
> watching her as she slowly blew-up and inflated
> that circular reddish float, puffing away,
> as their eager little children waited.
> He recalls her love, her yellow bathing suit,
> that every breath we take in the summer breeze
> contains some fifty-million super-minute
> molecules once breathed by Sophocles....
> Tonight, holding the float, when the night is cool,
> he moves her chair to exactly the same place,
> opens the valve, and sits beside the pool,
> then feels her breath rush gently over his face,
> alone with loneliness, alone with death,
> he inhales her last remaining breath.

Poems have been reprinted with permission from their author.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, North Carolina. Today he lives and writes in Front Royal, Virgina. See jeffminick.com to follow his blog.

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"The Hunters Enter the Woods," 1495–1505, South Netherlandish. Wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr. The Met Cloisters.

"The Unicorn Is Found."

A detail from "The Unicorn in Captivity."

FINE ARTS

How to Capture a Unicorn

'The Unicorn Tapestries' at The Met Cloisters

LORRAINE FERRIER

In a meadow of a thousand flowers, a rather serene unicorn can be found resting in a circular, golden pen. The unicorn is gently tethered to a pomegranate tree by a golden chain linked to a richly colored collar. The pomegranate tree is laden with fruit, some of which appears to have burst its juice onto the unicorn in three distinct areas.

But something is awry.

On closer inspection, while the fruits are pomegranates, the leaves of the tree are not those of the pomegranate tree at all, and the fence containing the unicorn is so low that the unicorn could easily escape. The pomegranate juice that stains the unicorn's fur could even be blood.

So what's actually happening here? No one knows for certain what this tapestry represents or who commissioned the opulent piece. Indeed, it is as cryptic as the unicorn it features, but there are symbolic clues in the design.

Scholars suggest it could be part of a series of seven tapestries, made between 1495 and 1505, which are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection and on display at The Met Cloisters. The actual order of the tapestries is unknown, as there are no records of their early history, other than when they were first mentioned in 1680. Scholars are even unsure whether the series is a whole sequence or several sets.

The Unicorn Hunt

"The Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry seems to be the last of the seven, and the end of a storyboard on how to capture a unicorn, but it could equally be a scene on its own.

The six other tapestries, each delightfully and in some cases graphically, depict the methods one must use in order to snare a unicorn: There's the tapestry showing the anticipation of the hunt, where "The Hunters Enter the Woods," as they set off on their adventure.

Yet, when "The Unicorn Is Found," the men crowd around the creature with a look of collective bewilderment, almost as if they now don't know what to do.

Let's surmise that after "The Unicorn Is Found," then comes the inevitable tapestry: "The Unicorn Is Attacked." It's in this tapestry that the heat of the hunt comes to a climax. It's all action: There are hounds chasing down the unicorn, hunting horns being heartily blown, and spears converging on the unicorn from every which way. There's no escape.

In the next tapestry, "The Unicorn Defends Itself," it bucks and plunges its horn at one of the hounds.

Of course, as most people know, the only way to truly entrap a unicorn is with the help of a virgin, who can hypnotize or subdue the poor thing and carry out "The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn."

After this tapestry, the fate of the unicorn seems sealed in the scene woven in "The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle." However, it's not the end of the story because the last tapestry appears to be "The Unicorn in Captivity."

'The Unicorn in Captivity'

Only a wealthy patron would be able to afford to commission such a luxurious piece.

The design is thought to be French, probably Parisian, but the weavers are thought to be from Brussels, in the Netherlands, who were renowned for their exemplary weaving.

The weaving was done on a large loom using dyed fine wool yarn, and silk with metallic threads. The tapestries' primary colors come from plants: for example, yellow from weld, red from madder, and blue from woad. The diverse textures and jewel-like colors of the clothes, animal fur, leaves, stalks, and bark all come from mixing these simple colors.

There is no depth of field to the tapestry; plants and flowers lay on a flat, dark background–a style called "millefleur," which literally means "thousand flowers." The actual number of different blooms that feature in "The Unicorn in Captivity" is not a thousand but still an impressive 101, and astoundingly, many of the flowers are botanically accurate in their depictions.

From the early 1500s onward, it was more common for millefleur tapestries to show flowers that are more stylized than naturalistic.

Secular and Sacred Symbology

"The Unicorn in Captivity" is blooming with both religious and secular symbols. From a Christian perspective, the unicorn could represent Christ and his purity. "The Unicorn in Captivity" scene could be seen as Christ's resurrection. In prior scenes, we saw the death of the unicorn, yet here it is alive, as if in a sublime meditative state. The unicorn is penned in a circle, which represents eternity in Christian art, hinting at the fact that faith in something higher and purer: In this case the unicorn, as Christ, is eternal. If another fence post is behind the pomegranate tree, there are 12 in total, and each post looks like a stake that points up to the heavens, perhaps a hint at the 12 apostles.

In the tapestry "The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle," a horse carries the dead unicorn. The unicorn wears a ring of thorny branches of oak that symbolizes Christ's crown of thorns, and on its leg is a wound that could equally mirror the marks from Christ's crucifixion.

Another way to interpret "The Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry is as an allegory of marriage and fertility. Folklore says that unicorns could be captured only by a virgin, and there are many symbols of fertility in the scene. The pomegranate with its lush seeds is one, and flowers that feature in the tapestry, such as wild orchid, bistort, and thistle, were used to aid fertility for both sexes throughout the Middle Ages.

Then we see the letters "A" and "E" bound by a length of rope. The initials could simply be the unknown patron who commissioned the works, or perhaps the rope signifies the knot of marriage between the unknown partners A and E. The scene could therefore be about the purity of marriage.

The low, circular fence that's easy for the unicorn to jump over could indicate being bound by the eternal moral code of marriage, yet not confined.

All in all, whatever their meaning, "The Unicorn Tapestries" will continue to enthrall.

To find out more about the tapestries, go to MetMuseum.org

ALL PHOTOS BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

"The Unicorn Is Attacked."

"The Unicorn Defends Itself."

"The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn."

"The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle."

FINE ARTS

Chinese Landscapes *of* Tranquility

Inspired viewers record their impressions over time

ANTONY YUEFENG WU

On a certain autumn evening in the late 16th century, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) scholar-official Li Minbiao (1515–1581) passed by the home of a friend who possessed a handscroll that contained a small landscape painting by Zhao Yuan, a painter who lived two centuries before Li's time. As was customary at the time, a handscroll had a large section of blank space to the left of the painting for a colophon, a space available for literary men and connoisseurs to write down their commentaries or responses to the artworks they viewed. Impressed by Zhao's work, Li wrote a short poem in the colophon to record his transcendental viewing experience:

"... On a mundane market day
I saw the bearing of this picture of stream and mountain;
With a chill wave I suddenly sense my mind opened,
Attacked by harsh frost, when the foliage took leave of the branches..."

Li was a literatus, a man of letters who had earned a post in the Ming government through official literary examinations. In these verses, he praised the genius of the painter who had managed to depict every detail of a beautiful landscape in a mere eight-inch-tall picture. He specifically noted his own emotional response of refreshment and tranquility in the presence of the work.

"Landscape," late 14th century, by Zhao Yuan. Handscroll; ink on paper; 9 13/16 x 30 1/2 inches.

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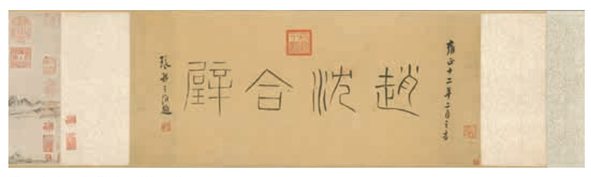
"Bamboo Grove," late 14th century, by Shen Xun. Handscroll; ink and color on paper; 9 13/16 x 25 inches.



"Frontispiece," 1734, by Wang Shu.

His viewing of Zhao's landscape took him, for however brief a moment, out of his busy routine and away from the worldly troubles that had haunted his mind. Through this visual interaction, he was able to mentally enter the painting and feel the peacefulness conveyed by the stream, the mountains, the vegetation, and the secluded residence–an idealized hermitic lifestyle that many literary men like him desired.

Art in an Age of Political Turmoil

The painting that Li Minbiao viewed was created by Zhao Yuan, also a literatus, but one who lived in a turbulent age, when China was ruled by the Mongol court (1271–1368). Particularly known for his painting, Zhao worked in a landscape tradition that dominated literati circles of the time. In the preceding dynasties of the Tang (618–917) and the Song (960–1279), the genre had gradually come to embody the longing of educated men for nature and their desire to escape the mundane world that they inhabited, in search of higher spiritual pursuits.

However, as the Song court came to be infected with severe corruption and eventually ceded control of the country to the Mongols, the conventional Confucian career path in civil service became increasingly limited for the literati. As a result, their political ambitions diminished, and the escapist sentiments among these men of letters intensified.

Unattainable was the ideal of achieving high government positions through intensive study so as to manage the state and establish just rulership in the realm. The scholar-gentlemen who had previously held government positions now resolved to live a life of seclusion, in which they tried to refine their own behavior and thoughts and those of their families in accordance with traditional moral standards. Their desire for a serene existence found an expression in the literati entertainments of poetry, calligraphy, and painting–especially that of landscape painting for its tranquil qualities that reflected their peaceful states of mind.

Zhao Yuan's 'Landscape'

In this piece, untitled, as many of the genre were, Zhao Yuan followed the traditional model for landscape paintings that was perfected during the Song Dynasty, but he added a modern 14th-century tone of calligraphic expressivity.

The intense visual drama of nature contrasts strikingly with the peaceful inaction of man, as shown by the monumental and awesome mountain in the center and the quiet residence over which it towers. Situated in nature's wondrous sublimity, the tiny human figures are able to conduct themselves in such leisurely serenity that they appear untroubled by all worldly matters.

As a seated figure reads in a pavilion, another figure slowly paces about in the courtyard, while yet another roams the woods in solitude, perhaps in silent observation of nature. Indeed, a look at this painting seems to bring the viewer into the picture–into a world where the whistling wind gently strokes the leaves above and where the stream flows below, where birds chirp, and where the forest is filled with the humid aroma of the earth. In short, the painting calms the viewer.

One Scroll, Two Paintings

Mounted on the same handscroll is a contemporaneous piece by Shen Xun that depicts a bamboo grove by the water. The work is entirely devoid of human presence, with a mountainous backdrop barely visible in the distance.

According to another comment in the colophon, the two paintings were put together in 1562 for some "essential similarity in aura and taste," despite their completely different subject matters and pictorial compositions. Zhao's heavy landscape nearly fills the pictorial plane, while Shen's bamboos stand delicate and light, leaving ample negative space and giving the painting a capacity to breathe.

The atmospheric similarity for which the two pieces were combined might have referred to their shared nature of tranquility. The stillness of the bamboos and the inaction of the human figures seem to speak a common language that conveys a sense of quietude experienced by the artist-literati living in seclusion: They are able to entertain themselves with nature, knowledge, and art, and at that moment neither fame nor fortune mattered.

Thus had the two artists expressed their mental state in their works. Such depth of stillness portrayed in the pictures could only have been authored by those with tranquil hearts. In fact, this tranquility had moved the 16th-century viewers so much that they decided to mount the two paintings together.

In 1734, another scholar decided to commemorate the combination of these two pieces by adding to the handscroll a frontispiece of four characters written in an antiquarian style that reads, "Zhao and Shen joined in harmony."

The handscroll is on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Gallery 211. It is part of the exhibition "Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China," which will run until Aug. 4, 2019.

Antony Yuefeng Wu is a student of Renaissance art who entertains himself with Chinese painting, calligraphy, and world literature.

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.

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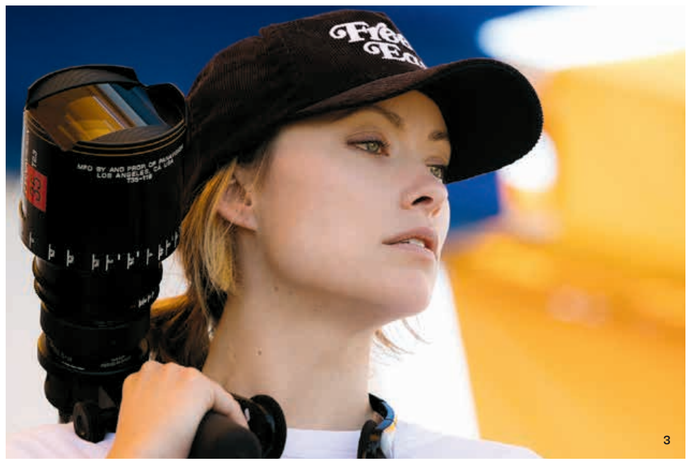

1. Nico Hiraga as Tanner.

2. Billie Lourd (L) plays an insane rich girlfriend, Gigi, and Kaitlyn Dever stars as Amy in "Booksmart."

3. Olivia Wilde on the set of her directorial debut, "Booksmart."

4. Jessica Williams as Miss Fine.

5. Beanie Feldstein (L) stars as Molly and Kaitlyn Dever as Amy in "Booksmart."

6. High school besties Molly (Beanie Feldstein, L) and Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) out for a joy ride.

Hilarious High School Movie

Uses Comedy to Boil Cultural Frog

MARK JACKSON

Jason Sudeikis, comedic-everyman actor, has often been teased about dating screen goddess Olivia Wilde. One interviewer said words to the effect of: You know you're "punching above your weight," right? (Like, how does a guy who looks like you date a goddess who looks like her?)

Well, that goddess has now aced her directorial debut, with one of the funniest high school movies ever. And there's your answer: Jason and Olivia are funny-people soulmates. Boo-yah. Good on ya, Jason. I wish I were you.

G.O.A.T.?

Is "Booksmart" the greatest high school movie of all time? The G.O.A.T., maybe? No, but it's definitely in the top 20. Maybe the top 10. It's heavily influenced by many of the greatest.

It borrows its it-all-happened-during-one-night time frame from "American Graffiti" and "Dazed and Confused," some soundtrack concepts from "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," and one of the lead characters is more than a little bit related to Cher from "Clueless."

Throw in the fact that actress Beanie Feldstein playing said character, Molly, is "Superbad" star Jonah Hill's little sister. ("Superbad" is also a high school movie, with roughly the same theme as "Booksmart": Unpopular high school kids try to party hard at the last minute, except it's a male version.)

Also, Molly's best friend Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) is a Jennifer-Jason-Leigh-from-"Fast Times at Ridgemont High" look-a-like, and that's a whole sack full of high-school-movie tribute going on right there.

It starts off as a bit of a comeuppance tale; über-nerd class president Molly and her equally brilliant-geek bestie Amy are kind of mean girls (another high school movie) when it comes to lording it over less intelligent classmates.

They are brainiac nerd-geeks to the max. Modern high school movies have a new twist on nerd-dom: Nerds know their worth now, and it translates into a modicum of coolness. In the 1970s, you didn't get nerds loudly and publicly flaunting their brain prowess and shaming jocks. In the '70s, nerds came in one package—the Napoleon Dynamite variety, and this variety got duct taped to lockers and wedgied profusely. Which probably still happens today, directly following any jock-shaming.

Anyway, during the time-honored high school scene of sitting on the toilet and hearing yourself get dissed, Molly, to her horror, discovers that all the cool kids she thought were her inferiors are just as smart, and one is actually going to the same Ivy League institution of higher learning that she is. Oops.

You see, Molly, as class president, had issued a decree that there should be no talking about who was going to which college, because she didn't want to constantly make her inferiors feel, well, inferior. Turns out they were just as intelligent—and had actual fun in high school, into the bargain.

As you can imagine, this kicks off an existential crisis. Who are Molly and Amy if all their hard work and sacrifice doesn't actually make them superior? What if all it made them was inferior, because all the other kids effortlessly aced college entrance exams while partying, skateboarding, scoring touchdowns, and binge drinking?

The situation needs to be remedied immediately. They can't be the same as everyone else, except that they had no fun. They gotta party, man. And there's only one night left to do it in!

And, by the way, this is the same scene that plays out with the VW bug-driving geek squad in "Dazed and Confused," where Mike (Adam Goldberg) says, "What everybody in this car needs is some good ol' worthwhile visceral experience," and they all resolve to screw up their courage and go to the cool kid's party.

The difference in "Booksmart" is that the party is extremely elusive in terms of them locating its location. It's a whole saga unto itself: Molly and Amy end up at a different party, on a yacht thrown by an even bigger loser than themselves. (There's nobody there except his insane girlfriend.) They hail a Lyft, only to find their moonlighting principal driving it.

Furthermore, they try to stick up a pizza-delivery guy (who may or may not be an actual serial killer), and they get sneakily "dosed" by said insane girlfriend, a la Timothy Olyphant's character dosing Emile Hirsch's character with ecstasy in "The Girl Next Door" (another high school movie). Director Wilde played a high school party girl in that movie, by the way. So now that's eight high school movie influences I count.

Will they find the party? Will they drink? Will they jump in the pool? Will they puke? Will they do sexual things? It's rated R, so probably all of the above.

A Well-Defined Cast of Characters

It's the outstanding side characters that make high school movies so fun, which is usually why the unknown actors in these movies tend to go on to have outstanding acting careers.

Here, we've got the crew of characters who are flamboyant wannabe-in-showbiz kids: the über-dramatic, fur-wearing, insane-girlfriend rich girl (Billie Lourd), who pops up everywhere, and her unsinkable but lovable, tries-too-hard, party-on-a-yacht-throwing boyfriend, Jared (Skyler Gisondo).

And there are a couple of excellent teacher roles.

But the two leads own the movie. They've got a lived-in, besties-since-third-grade type of language all their own, including the hilarious need to just break into not-particularly-cool, go-to-hell dances, while attempting to out-compliment each other.

It's 2019

This is definitely an update as to the current cultural goings-on of high school, which it shares with "Clueless" in the same way that that movie nailed its own particular time period.

As to whether it's an upgrade, in terms of, you know, have high school kids evolved? Like, ethically? Like, morally? Questionable. Like, seriously questionable. Kids definitely know how to have more fun these days. But they've also got unlimited access to porn and drugs, as witnessed by the hilarious Lyft scene where the principal accidentally puts a porn scene that the girls are "researching," on speakerphone.

The movie celebrates challenging heteronormality, and while that's a current thing, it also celebrates some teacher/student consensual yet statutory rape. Are these a good thing? Don't we have the moral equivalent of the boiling frog going on here? It's funny, so ... normalize it?

Seems like we're all cheerfully going to hell in a handbasket. If this keeps up, the massive skewed-ness of our culture from its original moral foundations will eventually cause an implosion and need rectification. That's a cosmic law. We wring our hands and bemoan the devastating effect that a film like 1995's "Kids" had on our children's morals, but then we just quickly get used to it and feel it's normal. It's not normal. It's most definitely deleterious.

What the film does right, besides be very funny, is celebrate friendship, to music that's highly reminiscent of that "Bow! Bow!" Ferris Bueller soundtrack.

'Booksmart'

Director
Olivia Wilde

Starring
Beanie Feldstein, Kaitlyn Dever, Jason Sudeikis, Noah Galvin, Skyler Gisondo, Billie Lourd, Mason Gooding, Lisa Kudrow, Will Forte, Jessica Williams

Running Time
1 hour, 42 minutes

Rated
R

Release Date
24 May

★★★★½
for humor/nostalgia/fun

★☆☆☆☆
for boiling the cultural frog some more

THEATER REVIEW

Heartfelt Letters

Illuminate a Dark Time

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK–In these days of email and social media, when one can dash off a few lines to a loved one half a world away in a few seconds, the practice of physically writing a letter is rapidly becoming a lost art. Not all that long ago, this method of communication was the only way most people could keep in touch. Such was the case with British actress Celia Johnson and her journalist-writer husband Peter Fleming, as lovingly shown in the very touching "Posting Letters to the Moon."

Originally seen in the UK in 2018, the show is now making its United States debut at the 59E59 Theaters as part of their "Brits Off-Broadway" series.

Celia and Peter had been married for four years when Great Britain entered World War II in 1939. Peter joined the army soon after and was posted abroad, working for army intelligence for most the duration.

Johnson, in addition to her acting duties–she was in a play in London's West End from April through September of 1940 until the theater was destroyed in the Blitz–became an auxiliary policewoman.

She was also raising their young son, born earlier that year, and playing host to various family members who were seeking shelter from the war. Peter had recently inherited a family estate in the English village of Nettlebed.

ALL PHOTOS BY CAROL ROSEGG

Lucy Fleming reads letters in "Posting Letters to the Moon."

Simon Williams.

Other than Peter returning for the very occasional leave, he and Celia could keep in touch only by exchanging letters, which sometimes arrived in batches, out of sequence, or after a great period of silence, owing to the state of mail delivery.

The letters, carefully preserved in an attic trunk, were discovered by some of the couple's children decades later. Here, they are read aloud by Lucy Fleming, Celia and Peter's daughter and an actress in her own right, and by Lucy's husband, actor Simon Williams.

It is through these letters that the audience gets an understanding of exactly who Celia and Peter were. The correspondence offers insights via declarations of their love, as well as quips, offhand remarks, and even some gently risqué comments.

Particularly amusing is Celia recalling the response to a WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) lecture on sexual relations (not to mention Celia's various attempts at cooking, and her learning to drive a tractor).

The bond Celia and Peter share forms the center of the story and offers the abiding hope that love will eventually conquer all. However, it's a bond tested by the adversity of long separations, the reporting of false information, and the effort of trying to go about one's daily routines amid the uncertainty of war.

Through the use of still photographs and the excellent delivery by Williams and Fleming, the show brings forth not only the feelings Celia and Peter had for one another, but also the dangerous times in which these letters were written. The very real possibility of death surrounds them, with tragedy sometimes striking close to home. A letter Peter wrote to his son about his experiences in combat shows just how dangerous things were.

Especially sobering are Celia's comments regarding the German V-2 rockets that began striking London in September of 1944. She notes that, despite the hope that the fighting was finally coming to a close, "the war has gone very grim again."

There are happier moments, too: When Celia and her sister-in-law had the opportunity to share an orange–fresh fruit being rare during the war years–or the delight she felt when the fighting finally did end, and she was able to sit outside at night with a light on.

Interspersed throughout the story are amusing bits of cinematic trivia as Celia recalls the different films she appeared in during the war years; probably the one most remembered today is "Brief Encounter." Her comments about such people as David Lean, Noel Coward, and Trevor Howard, as well as how she felt about different projects, provide an enjoyable counterpart to the grimness of the time.

Lucy Fleming, who compiled the various letters used in the show, and Williams are able to give touching and realistic portraits of Celia and Peter as they read the respective letters aloud. The two pause to add commentary to the piece, which helps the narrative to flow more smoothly.

If there is any complaint about the show, it's that it feels too short. One can't help wonder what other letters might exist between Celia and Peter. An adaptation of these letters into book form should definitely be on Fleming and Williams's list of projects for the future.

"Posting Letters to the Moon" (the title referring to a passage in one of the letters) is a lovely and heartfelt tale about two people who loved each other at a time when the world was coming apart around them, and yet who managed to stay in touch in the only manner that they could.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle. He can be reached at bnchpeop@aol.com

'Posting Letters to the Moon'

59E59 Theaters
59 E. 59th St., New York

Tickets
646-892-7999 or 59e59.org

Running Time
1 hour, 15 minutes (no intermission)

Closes
June 2

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Handel's 'Saul' Oratorio: An Age-Old Story for Today

CATHERINE YANG

The story opens with triumph: David has just slain the monstrous Goliath and returns to a joyous chorus of harmonious praise. But things soon take a turn for the treacherous.

For King Saul sits in his tent and starts to seethe with jealousy as David continues to take center stage. It is this seed of envy that sets off a drama that ends in tragedy.

George Frideric Handel's "Saul" oratorio is one of his great masterpieces, which he premiered the same year as his "Israel in Egypt," in 1739.

"The libretto is written by Charles Jennens, who also wrote the libretto for [Handel's] "Messiah," said Claudia Dumschat, conductor of The Church of the Transfiguration, by phone.

"It's one of Handel's most dramatic and, I think, his greatest oratorio," Dumschat said.

On June 7, The Transfiguration Choirs, soloists, and chamber orchestra, conducted by Dumschat, will perform "Saul" at The Little Church Around the Corner, as part of its concert series.

Envy Brings a Downfall

It's a rich story that reveals the complicated relationships between King Saul, his son Jonathan, his two daughters Michal and Merab, and the hero David–and is surprisingly relevant for modern times.

CHURCH OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

The Church of the Transfiguration's Men and Boys Choir conducted by Claudia Dumschat at a rehearsal.

"It's very pertinent to today's age; there's a lot of jealousy, and then people trying to get around the rules to keep their power," Dumschat said. Envy brings about not just Saul's downfall, but suffering to those around him. "The way that the oratorio is set does make you realize this."

"The music is evocative of the emotions ... David's arias are set with integrity and kindness, and probably a little bit of naiveté. Saul's arias are dark and brooding," Dumschat said. "I love the instrumentation ... It's a beautiful piece."

Dumschat had been in Jerusalem, the City of David, the past summer and returned to New York and a volunteer choir in time for a performance of "Saul." As she conducted, she noticed countertenor and harp player David Yardley sitting beneath the church's David window, playing the part of David, she felt it was a piece she had to do for their regular concert series.

The Production

The total material of the "Saul" oratorio comes to about three hours, but Handel would always cut and adapt the piece for different performances. Dumschat has put together a two-hour version for the June 7 performance.

The chorus performing is a combination of several different choir groups from the church, and the chamber orchestra will perform with early music instruments, including a celesta. The performance will be done in contemporary dress and is semi-staged by choreographer Jesse Obremski.

Soloist Joe Chappel will sing the part of Saul. The bass-baritone has performed with choirs across the city and on tour with concerts and operas. Countertenor and harp player David Yardley, who is also a composer, will sing the part of David.

The performance will also feature musicians Nina Berman, Bert Boone, Rob Colón, Alan Henriquez, Christina Kay, Nick Nesbitt, Leif Pedersen, and Erik Rasmussen.

If you haven't heard "Saul" before and want to listen to parts of the oratorio before the performance, Dumschat suggests the choruses "Mourn, Israel, Mourn Thy Beauty Lost" and "Oh, Fatal Consequence of Rage."

"It's about human relationships, the reality of those relationships, and it's eternal; the truth is eternal," Dumschat said.

Handel's "Saul" will be performed at the Church of the Transfiguration ("The Little Church Around the Corner") at 1 East 29th St., on Friday, June 7, at 7:30 p.m. Tickets can be purchased online or by phone at 212-684-4174, for $40 per adult, and $25 for students and seniors.

ESSENCE OF CHINA

ANCIENT CHINESE STORIES

Weighing Up Integrity

SALLY APPERT & SU LIN

It's said that every mark of the traditional Chinese 16-liang weighing scale represents a star, and that the scale measures not only weight but also the user's integrity and conscience.

Used by shopkeepers to weigh food and other items, the traditional scale is a balance scale consisting of three parts: a beam with 16 liang marks, a counterweight, and a plate to hold the items. The 16 marks are based on the Chinese system that uses the units of liang and jin, also called the tael (Chinese ounce) and catty (Chinese pound) respectively. In times past, 16 liang was equivalent to one jin (about 1.3 pounds or 597 grams).

It's understood that the marks must be either white or yellow in color, never black, as a businessperson needs to have a pure and honest heart, certainly not a "black heart."

The stars represented by the 16 marks also hold meaning. In particular, seven of them represent the seven stars of the Big Dipper. This symbolizes that the merchant must be unfailingly fair and impartial, like the Big Dipper, which can always be counted on to point to the North Star.

In addition, three of the marks represent the "Three Stars" from traditional Chinese culture–the three well-known deities who symbolize blessings (good fortune), prosperity, and longevity.

If a businessman cheats his customers on the weight, one liang short would lead to his "fortune reduced," two liang short would see his "prosperity removed," and three liang short would result in his "life shortened."

Below are two stories about ancient Chinese weighing scales.

Son Atones for Father's Cheating

A well-to-do grocer in Yangzhou during the Ming Dynasty had a son and two grandsons. While on his deathbed, the grocer showed his son a weighing scale and said: "This is the secret of my success. I had mercury inserted in the beam and cheated customers on the weight. That's how I accumulated so much wealth."

The son was shocked. He never dreamed that his father would compromise his integrity. He burned the scale after his father's death, and to atone for his father's sins, he did his best to help the poor and do charity work. In less than three years, more than half of his family fortune was gone, but he had no complaints.

However, his two sons died one after another. He was devastated. He blamed fate and felt short-changed, as his kindness was not rewarded.

One night, he had a dream in which the judge of the netherworld spoke to him. The judge said: "Your father's wealth was the outcome of his charity work in his previous life. The amount of money a person has is all predestined. The beam with mercury in it did not help to make him a rich man, but he did commit a sin by cheating his customers. He is suffering in the netherworld now."

"His sins also had an impact on you," the judge continued. "Your two sons were sent by Heaven to squander your family fortune. You were only allowed to earn meager sums, and your life was to be shortened, too."

However, the judge also shared good news.

"You have a heart of gold, however, and you've been doing good deeds to atone for your father's sins. So, by order of the God of Heaven, I have taken back your two undutiful sons, and you'll soon have a dutiful son to bring honor to your family. Your life has also been prolonged. Continue to do good, and do not blame Heaven or fate for being unfair to you."

As this story conveys, the balance scale is not merely a weighing device. It's also a reminder to businessmen not to cheat, or they'll in fact be harming themselves.

'When You're Honest, You Suffer No Loss'

"Stories to Awaken the World," a book by Feng Menglong, published in 1627, states: "When you are dishonest, you make no money. When you are honest, you suffer no loss."

In the early years of the Republic of China, there were two rice shops, Yong Chang and Feng Yu. Feng Yu's owner decided to take advantage of the chaotic circumstances to make money. He invited a scale maker to his shop and asked him in private: "Please make me a balance scale that's 15.5 liang instead of the normal 16 liang. I'll pay you an extra string of money."

His daughter-in-law overheard him. After her father-in-law walked away, she said to the scale maker: "My father-in-law is getting senile. He made a mistake. Please make a scale that's 16.5 liang instead of the usual 16 liang. I'll pay you two extra strings of money. But you must not tell my father-in-law."

The scale maker made the 16.5-liang scale and kept his promise of not telling the shop owner.

Feng Yu's business soon began to prosper. Yong Chang's patrons started to buy from Feng Yu, and later even people from faraway came to Feng Yu to buy rice. Feng Yu was making a lot of money by year-end. Eventually, Yong Chang sold its business to Feng Yu.

On the last day of the lunar year, it was time for New Year's Eve dinner. Feng Yu's owner was really pleased and asked everyone, "What do you think is the secret of our success?" It sparked a discussion.

The owner chuckled and said: "The answer lies in the balance scale. It's actually a 15.5-liang scale. For every catty of rice sold, I saved half a liang. That's how we became rich." He then told his family how he had bribed the scale maker.

His daughter-in-law slowly stood up. She said to him, "Father-in-law, there's something I must tell you, but please promise you'll forgive me." He agreed, and she went on to tell him how the scale maker had made the scale 16.5-liang instead.

She said: "You were right, Father-in-law. Indeed, credit should go to the scale for our wealth. But on our scale, one catty is not 16 liang but 16.5 liang. It may seem we're making less for every catty sold, but bigger sales mean bigger profits. It was our integrity that brought us wealth."

Her father-in-law, dumbfounded, went into his room without saying a word.

The next day, he gathered everyone together and said: "I'm getting old. After contemplating, I've decided to hand the business over to my daughter-in-law. She's in charge from now on."

CHINAVIEW/SHUTTERSTOCK

A traditional Chinese balance scale.

> **Continue to do good, and do not blame Heaven or fate for being unfair to you.**
>
> *Judge of the netherworld*

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