

WEEK 37, 2019

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & TRADITION

PUBLIC DOMAIN



A scholar seeks discipleship with a Taoist master. "Quietly Listening to Wind in the Pines," 13th century before 1246, by Ma Lin. Hanging scroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.

An Ancient Chinese Story
Doing Business as Cultivation...4

THE EPOCH TIMES

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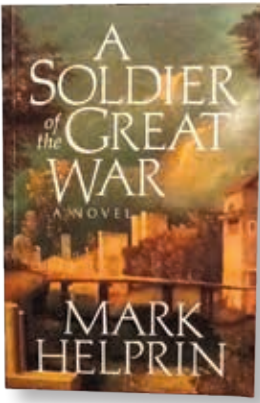
LITERATURE

War, Disillusionment, Literature, and the Divine

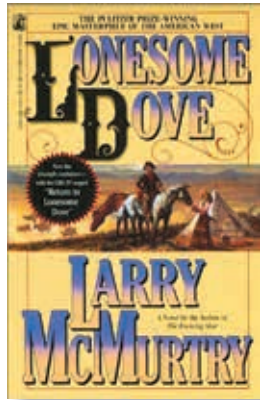
JEFF MINICK

This year marks the centennial of the Treaty of Versailles, formally ending World War I, that bloodbath which took millions of lives, broke apart empires, and spawned the evil realities of fascism and communism. That war also acted as an accelerant to the flames already eating away at Western culture. If politics is downstream from culture, then culture is downstream from philosophy. Since the Enlightenment, philosophy, once considered the handmaiden of theology, had deserted her queen to claim her own throne. By the mid-19th century, philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach contended that the Christian God was an illusion. And, philosopher Karl Marx actively promoted atheism, arguing that religion “is the opium of the people.” About the same time, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s “The Gay Science,” his character the Madman famously proclaimed “God is dead,” though few remember the end of that proclamation: “And we have killed him!” By the outbreak of World War I, nearly the whole of philosophy was secular in outlook. Following the devastation and carnage of that war, and undergirded by modern philosophy, Western culture experienced radical changes, a breathless race we still run today with no finish line in sight. Near the end of “This Side of Paradise,” published in 1920, F. Scott Fitzgerald declared “Here was a new generation ... grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken ...” His words serve as well as any for the epitaph for the old culture and its arts.

The Broken Bridge Between Heaven and Earth
This division between the arts and religion was new. For thousands of years, in Europe and throughout the world, art had served as a bridge between heaven and earth. In Western literature, all the great epic poems from Homer’s “Iliad” to Milton’s “Paradise Lost” made this connection. The plays of Shakespeare, the poems of John Donne, the works of Tolstoy, the sculpture and paintings of Michelangelo, the music of Bach: All of these and many more not only put themselves in the service of their craft and their patrons and audience, but also paid homage to the Divine.



Mark Helprin’s book gives insight into why so many artists have turned away from faith.



Why is God not mentioned in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “Lonesome Dove”? Set in the 1870s, faith would have been a part of the American landscape.

Since 1919, however, in all the arts—dance, music, painting, sculpture, drama, and literature—we find religious faith abandoned, widespread disillusionment, and in many cases a new primitivism, which became what some might call barbarism. Here is but one small example. Google “music from the 1900s,” and compare the songs popular with our ancestors—“Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” “You’re a Grand Old Flag”—to Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” or Linkin Park’s “In the End.” In modern literature, this absence of the Divine sometimes becomes ludicrous. Again, let me offer one example: In Larry McMurtry’s novel “Lonesome Dove,” a well-told tale of a cattle drive from Texas to Montana, we meet dozens of characters: cowboys, outlaws, sheriffs, dance hall girls, and ranchers. Only rarely in

this 864-page novel do any of these men and women mention, much less discuss, the ways of God, an absence highly unlikely given the place and the time. In many cases, modern and postmodern disillusionment in literature leaves a bitter taste in its audience. For 15 years, I taught Advance Placement Literature to homeschooling students. These juniors and seniors were bright young people who wrote well and loved reading. During one classroom discussion of Hemingway’s “The Sun Also Rises,” a student raised his hand and asked, “Mr. Minick, why are so many of the books and poems we read so pessimistic?” His question gave me pause. I am reasonably certain I stumbled through an answer, but whatever I said, I am also reasonably certain I didn’t answer his question. The works he referenced didn’t include the likes of Geoffrey Chaucer, Jane Austen, or even Fyodor Dostoevsky. He meant the novels of 20th-century writers like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy, all writers found on the list of Advanced Placement recommended reading. That student had hit on an important point. The works of 20th-century writers now considered literary masterpieces are overwhelmingly devoid of the Divine and bleak in their take on mankind. In “A Soldier of the Great War,” novelist Mark Helprin provides one reason for this lack of faith found in so many of our artists and in our culture at large. Here, an elderly professor of aesthetics is speaking to a young machinist. The young man asks the professor a question: “You believe in God, don’t you?” “Yes.” “How can you? What did He ever do

▲
The war to end all wars ushered in drastic changes to art and poetry. “Gassed,” 1919, by John Singer Sargent. Imperial War Museum London.

for you?” “That’s not the point, what He did or didn’t do for me. In fact, He did a great deal, but for some He’s done a lot less than nothing. Besides, one doesn’t believe in God or disbelieve in Him. It isn’t an argument. “Though I used to argue it,” the old man said, “even with myself when I was younger. His existence is not a question of argument, but of apprehension. Either you apprehend God, or you do not.” Many moderns, including artists, have failed to apprehend God. This failure leads to other misapprehensions: mistaking ugliness for beauty, falling for lies rather than embracing truth, and replacing God with scores of false gods, including the grotesque belief that human beings may themselves become as gods. These false pathways lead in turn to the unhappiness of our times, to the irony

of being blessed with so many material goods unimaginable to our ancestors while at the same time experiencing an angst also unthinkable to most of them.

Grass Pushing Through the Pavement
And yet, like unruly grass pushing through pavement, some authors in the last hundred years do feature religious faith and God in their work. G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Sigrid Undset, J.R.R. Tolkien, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Marilynne Robinson: These and others bring spiritual and religious perspectives to their novels and poems. Sometimes, too, we must search for signs of this faith. In Graham Greene’s “The End of the Affair,” for instance, Maurice Bendrix, a novelist and an atheist, falls in love with a married woman, Sarah Miles. During the London Blitz, a bomb renders Bendrix unconscious, and Sarah prays and promises she will leave Bendrix if God allows him to live. Abandoned by the woman he loves and without knowing the cause, Bendrix becomes insanely jealous, believing first that Sarah is seeing another man and then, when he realizes the reason for her separation, finds her vow to God ridiculous. At the end of this story, we listen as Bendrix rages one last time against God, only this time there is a subtle difference. Throughout the book, we find “he” in reference to God in lowercase. In the last few paragraphs, that “he” becomes “He,” indicating that while Bendrix may not love God, he has come to apprehend Him. These writers continue to build, or at least imagine, that bridge connecting the earthly to the celestial. They are the ones who give us hope in a broken world. Infused with a comprehension of the Divine, of an entity greater than the self, their words act as a bulwark against despair and help make us more fully human.

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 Ashesville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

THE EPOCH TIMES

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Taiwanese director Wei Te-sheng.

Taiwanese Filmmaker Living His Dream

With Courage and Persistence

MINGHUI WANG

With a pristine smile, Wei Te-sheng walks into sight; though he is perhaps not always the most noticeable, he constantly radiates charisma. Just as his movies have touched the hearts of millions, his own journey is equally as inspiring—from the son of clockmakers in Tainan to one of Taiwan’s most influential film directors.



Film director Wei Te-sheng on location. Wei’s movies have moved millions to tears.

Wei has directed two of Taiwan’s highest-grossing domestic films: “Cape No. 7” and “Seediq Bale.” Over the years, he has poured his heart and soul into every production he leads, even if it means bringing himself to the brink of bankruptcy. In the face of every imaginable adversity, he has persevered as “it is a natural instinct,” he told Elite Lifestyle Magazine during an interview in New York.

Like him, Wei’s movies are passionate and sincere, sensational yet down-to-earth. “Cape No. 7” captures the stories of ordinary people chasing their everyday dreams. This romantic musical drama was Wei’s first full-length motion picture, and it has become one of Taiwan’s most acclaimed movies. With “Seediq Bale,” Wei brought to light the often neglected tales of Taiwan’s indigenous people.

A New Perspective

Wei has written the screenplays for his films himself, including “Seediq Bale.” “‘Seediq Bale’ was an extremely crucial start; it established the way I view history and its values,” he said. Based on the actual events of the Wushe Incident, the movie recounts the conflict between Taiwanese aboriginals and Japanese soldiers during the Japanese colonial period.

Wei strove to capture the tragic incident as accurately and realistically as possible. He spent nearly two years conducting research, delving into primary sources until he held a vivid grasp of every detail. It was during these two years that Wei came to the realization that “in history, it is important to understand the motives of the people involved, because everyone fights for their meaning of life, and the

Wei encourages audiences to view history in a more compassionate and reflective light.



Taiwanese director Wei Te-sheng with the Golden Horse Film Award for Best Feature Film for his “Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale,” on Nov. 26, 2011.

This article by Minghui Wang, slightly edited, is republished with permission from Elite Lifestyle Magazine.

legacy of their souls.” Wei decided to make this newfound perspective the theme of “Seediq Bale.”

As the Rainbow-believers (aboriginals) encounter the Sun-worshippers (Japanese soldiers) in the Taiwanese mountains, they fight and bleed, dying to protect their different faiths—somehow forgetting to embrace the same sky,” he said. From this perspective, Wei showed audiences that the figures involved in the Wushe Incident were only seeking dignity and freedom.

Another one of Wei’s works, “Kano,” chronicles the journey of a high school baseball team and takes place in Japanese Taiwan. The team was a mix of Taiwanese natives, Han-ethnic Taiwanese, and Japanese players. In 1931, Team Kano won Silver at the Japanese National High School Tournament. “A lesser-known team, comprised of three different ethnic groups, ended up achieving such an honor,” Wei said.

In “Kano,” the collaboration between different ethnicities resulted in friendship; whereas, in “Seediq Bale,” anger and hatred led to a tragic ethnic conflict—the Wushe Incident. With these two stories, Wei encourages audiences to view history in a more compassionate and reflective light.

A Fearless Heart

Just like with any dream, Wei’s first attempts were not always met with victories. In 2003, he personally raised the funds for the trailer of “Seediq Bale”—however, this wasn’t nearly enough. Thus, the movie was put in a six-year-long hiatus. It was one of the hardest times of his life. Wei said that he felt lost and weary, as if stuck in a dark tunnel

with no light in sight.

Feeling uninspired, Wei decided to focus on “Cape No. 7.” He hoped that if the film was successful, he would have better luck financing “Seediq Bale.” Wei gave “Cape No. 7” his all, leaving no room for regrets. He even went so far as to mortgage his house to pay for the expenses. His hard work and dedication paid off. Although the movie attracted only moderate box-office success in its first few weeks, it spread quickly by word of mouth and eventually reached record-breaking success.

Wei had finally earned recognition, and he was able to fulfill his dream of bringing “Seediq Bale” to life. However, the Taiwanese movie industry in 2009 was far from Wei’s expectations. Nevertheless, and despite having limited resources, he managed to pull in expert scene designers from Japan, computer artists from Korea, as well as the “influencer of the action genre,” John Woo, from Hong Kong.

Yet even with everything prepared to Hollywood standard, the filming process for “Seediq Bale” encountered many roadblocks. Expenses piled on quickly, and anticipation and excitement soon turned into doubts and criticism. Nothing was going as Wei had planned; even his most trusted partner eventually left the team. However, Wei was ready to fight the battles, even if he had to do it alone.

The Taiwan Dream

Wei worked tirelessly, running between his studio and various companies to try and find new sources of support. Eventually, his hard work came to fruition. He was fortunate to receive just enough funding for “Seediq Bale” to hit the big screen in 2011. Thinking back on the experience, he expressed gratitude. “I was so lucky to have been able to accomplish all that I’ve dreamed of without a single penny,” he said.

As soon as “Seediq Bale” was released, it achieved overwhelming popularity, breaking the box-office record in Taiwan. As the result of its success, Wei began receiving invitations to work on productions all around the world. However, “that is not where my ambition lies,” Wei explained. “My spirit and dreams remain within Taiwan.”

For many, especially in the entertainment industry, happiness stems from fame and wealth. However, for Wei, happiness comes from having something to pursue. He is also looking forward to future projects and coming up with new ideas.

Just last year, he began the production of “Taiwan Trilogy,” which dates back 400 years to the era of colonial Dutch-Taiwan and chronicles the growth of his homeland. As with all of his productions, Wei doesn’t hold back—the intricacy and large scale of “Taiwan Trilogy” will make it his most expensive production yet.

Many have doubted the success of this project, and Wei has already faced many hardships regarding it. Nevertheless, he has persisted—Wei has never been one to back down from a challenge. As impossible as it might seem, the heavens will help those who are splendid.

ESSENCE OF CHINA

An Ancient Chinese Story Doing Business as Cultivation

ANONYMOUS

Two thousand years ago, a scholar failed the imperial examinations over and over again. He finally tired of pursuing fame and money. He became determined to learn the Tao and went to a mountain cave to seek discipleship with a Taoist master.

After carefully examining the scholar, the Taoist was delighted to have him as a disciple. The Taoist taught the scholar how to meditate, and taught him something new every day.

Several years later, the Taoist told the scholar: “I wish to build a magnificent palace. However, I don’t have the money needed. Please go to the city during the day to sell rouge. Then meditate each evening when you return.”

The scholar asked: “Master, I have no money. How can I buy rouge?”

“

I am a cultivator, not an ordinary being, so how could these human affairs move me?”

The scholar

The Taoist pointed to a pile of stones and, in a flash, it transformed into fine rouge. The scholar, confused, thought: “Master has the ability to transform stones into gold. Why is he asking me to return to society and sell rouge to earn money?”

But the scholar knew it was important to follow his master’s instructions. So, although reluctant, he left the mountain with the rouge and made his way to the market.

Overcoming Fear

The scholar was very shy, so he found it awkward to call out loudly on the streets. He set up a stand in a low-traffic location and spoke quietly, with his head down. Because he was as quiet as a mosquito, passersby could hardly hear him.

His master, observing from far away, saw that he was afraid of people and needed help to overcome this fear.

The Taoist transformed into a butcher with an overbearing manner. With knife

in hand, the butcher went up to the scholar and demanded to know what he was doing. Not lifting his head, the scholar replied, “I’m selling rouge.”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you!” the butcher shouted, placing the knife on the scholar’s neck. The scholar calmed himself down. Looking at the knife, he replied with a trembling voice, “I am selling rouge.”

“You have to shout if you want to sell something. The street is so busy and your voice is so low. Who can hear you?” The butcher yelled.

The scholar, confused, wondered why this ruffian suddenly appeared. Regardless, he knew he had to sell rouge to fulfill his master’s mission. His fear suddenly vanished, and he was able to call out loudly in order to attract customers.

That evening, it took the scholar a while to calm down and reach tranquility during meditation. He didn’t ask his master about what had happened, but



instead tried to enlighten to it himself.

The scholar realized that, as a spiritual cultivator, his heart should be wholly dedicated to cultivating his character. Only then could he remain unaffected by society. And as a cultivator, he had nothing to be afraid of.

A Heart Unmoved

A month passed, but the scholar still had not sold a single box of rouge. He wondered why selling rouge was harder than cultivation. But since his master asked him to sell rouge, he was determined to do it happily. The scholar realized that he needed to put his heart into both cultivation and selling rouge.

He knew that to sell rouge, he had to

Vendors and pedestrians are seen in this close-up of one section of the Chinese cityscape handscroll “Along the River During Qingming Festival,” by Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). Ink and colors on silk. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

find the right customers: women. But he wondered how he would be able to cultivate if he came into contact with women. Some of them put rouge on their faces and asked him if they looked beautiful.

The scholar eventually enlightened to a new understanding: “Human beings are human beings, whether men or women. I am a cultivator, not an ordinary being, so how could these human affairs move me?”

With this thought, the scholar became calm. From then on, though he came into contact with all kinds of people, his heart was unmoved.

After he reached a certain level in cultivation, heavenly fairies descended to test him. They transformed into beautiful women and made alluring gestures toward him. The scholar’s heart was focused on cultivation every second, and he was not moved. The fairies then left.

“You Helped Me Build the Palace”

One fairy came back disguised as an old lady. She bought rouge and put it on her face. In no time, she transformed into a beautiful young girl. People on the street witnessed the miracle and came one after another to buy the rouge.

That very day, the Empress Dowager went to burn incense at the temple. She saw people flocking to buy rouge and sent her servants to investigate. After learning that the rouge was magical, she ordered that all of it be bought with 10 pounds of gold.

The scholar thought that his master’s

wish would certainly be fulfilled now. He took the gold and happily went back to his temple.

On his way back, he encountered some soldiers on horseback who were harassing a group of young girls. The scholar felt that saving those lives was the most important thing he could do, so he shouted out: “I have 10 pounds of gold. I will give it to you if you let all the girls go.”

Dazzled by all the gold, the soldiers immediately freed the girls.

At that moment, all the gold disappeared, and the scholar was left with nothing. Crestfallen, he headed back to the temple, wondering how his master’s wish could be realized now.

At the temple, after the scholar recounted what had happened, the Taoist pointed to the sky. The scholar looked and saw a beautiful palace in the heavens. “You helped me build the palace,” the Taoist said. “You kept your heart unmoved while selling rouge, which allowed the palace to be built.”

The scholar suddenly enlightened. “Doing business is also a way of cultivation,” he exclaimed.

He also realized that his master was looking after him the entire time, transforming into different people to test him and help him improve!

Translated by Dora Li into English, this story is reprinted with permission from the book “Treasured Tales of China,” Vol. 1, available on Amazon.

LITERATURE

Confessions of a Late-Blooming Lover of Great Literature

SUSANNAH PEARCE

Anyone, at any age, can become a lover of literature and will be a better and happier person for it. Take me, for instance. “Literaphilia” didn’t hit me until after I graduated from college. I’m not proud of it, but television inspired me to become more well-read. I don’t mean in the manner of Groucho Marx, who said, “I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.” No, I was a more avid television-watcher than book-reader for most of my formative years. Nevertheless, somehow that path led me to an exuberant appreciation of good literature.

I know a lot of people who are bookies (the kind who haunt libraries and bookstores, not racetracks), and I hear that their childhoods consisted of hiding in closets to read novels instead of doing chores, teaching themselves to read at the age of 3, and, presumably, leaving the womb clinging to a book and flashlight. In comparison, I was practically illiterate as a child! But I’m making up for lost time now, in my middle age.

I learned to read at the usual age. I looked forward to school book fairs and spent time in the school library with all the other grade-school rabble. No one, however, would have called me a book-worm. In the library, I gravitated to the books about horses. Especially those with lots of pictures.

I liked books. The books I enjoyed were little books, children’s books, lavishly illustrated fairy stories. I loved being read to, whether by parents or teachers. I recall my anticipation of my dad reading “Black Beauty” at bedtime and the fourth-grade teacher reading “How to Eat Fried Worms” after recess. Probably, I had not heard of most of the classics nor even known the word “literature” in my younger years.

I have a clear memory of the first real chapter book I read on my own for enjoyment—in sixth grade. It was a horse story, of course, but this time with no pictures. I read literature in high school as well as college, but mostly by assignment rather than for love of reading.

Don’t tell anyone, but I had never even heard of Jane Austen until I was a grown-up. (Shhhhhh!) I don’t believe any of this should be held against me. What matters is that I have come to discover this marvelous world of great books that enlarge my mind, good books that bring pleasure, and the joy of reading, which allows me to, as Socrates said, improve myself “by other men’s writings so that I shall come easily by what others have labored hard for.”

Unlikely Inspiration

I might have come late to the party, but I’m at the party. Thankfully, it is not an elite party, and invitations can be issued even in the most unlikely of places.

There was a moment when I realized how little I knew literature. It occurred shortly after I had graduated from college, and believe it or not, it was television that brought me to the realization. To be precise, it was the supercilious Major Charles Emerson Winchester III, a character in the series “M*A*S*H,” who inspired me to become a reader and lover of literature.

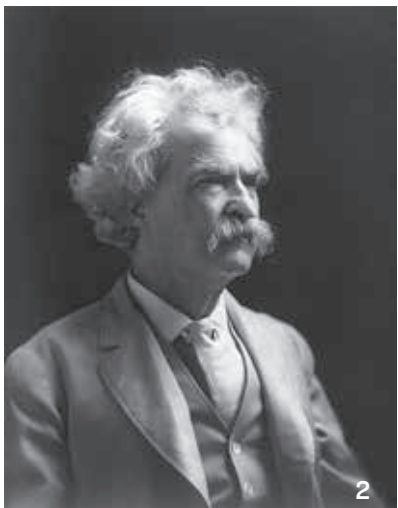
Major Winchester was the epitome of culture, discriminating taste, and Ivy League education. He blithely recited passages of Shakespeare and quoted poetry with ease. His colleagues often recognized the references, and they were not exactly what you would call highbrow. Next to them, there is no question that I was vastly deficient in culture.



“Reading Woman,” after 1866, by Ivan Kramskoy. Oil on canvas.



CHARLES BROWN THE STUDY OF THE GREAT BOOKS IN THE SAKURA



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PUBLIC DOMAIN

1. A portrait of Mortimer Adler.

2. Famous American author Mark Twain.

3. Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1878, by Stephen Alonzo Schoff. An engraving after a drawing by Samuel Worcester Rowse, Library of Congress.

of Major Charles Emerson Winchester III.

The True Aim of Education

It is not just a matter of vanity to become conversant in literature in order to be able to spout off impressive quotations. And it goes beyond just reading a lot indiscriminately. It is a project that will increase the reader’s empathy, vocabulary, and sense of history. To become familiar with the canon of writings that has withstood the test of time from epochs past is to grasp the unchanging workings of humanity.

Albert Einstein expressed it thus: “Somebody who only reads newspapers and at best books of contemporary authors looks to me like an extremely near-sighted person who scorns eyeglasses. He is completely dependent on the prejudices and fashions of his times, since he never gets to see or hear anything else.”

Reading the great works allows one to grapple with the big questions of life vicariously. When one begins, one enters into a great conversation that has been ongoing for centuries. The works of literature that have risen to the top over these centuries help to form great individuals and, consequently, better societies and a better world. Science fiction author Ray Bradbury issued the alarming warning: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

Author and professor John Senior recognized this truth at a time when education was becoming ungrounded. Through teaching, he sought to do his part to reclaim a culture on its way to destruction.

He was one of the founders of the renowned Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas in the 1970s. It captured and directed the imagination of many a wandering soul by inspiring and cultivating their sense of wonder. He placed his focus on the humanities—great literature, the beauty of creation, the soul-satisfying order of learning—to restore meaning to education, which had become merely a fragmented collection of information.

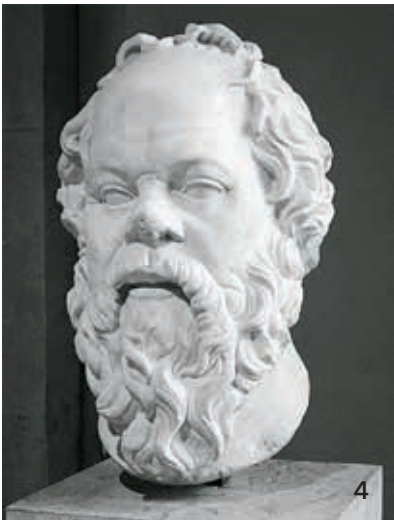
The aim of true education, whether institutional or self-directed, ought to be the growth of the student to become more fully human. This is a far cry from the idea we encounter all too often today that the purpose of schooling is to form a better human tool for the machinery of production. The phrase “a productive member of society” ought not to be the compliment we often take it to be. An educated person is one who has contemplated and assimilated the wisdom of the ages, who has recognized and reflected on beauty, and who is ever inclined toward the good.

How I wish I had been guided by these and other great minds from my earliest days of learning. But I wasn’t. However, since they are still there now to guide me through their books and those of their admirers, I can begin where I am. I take comfort in the words of Mortimer Adler: “In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you.”

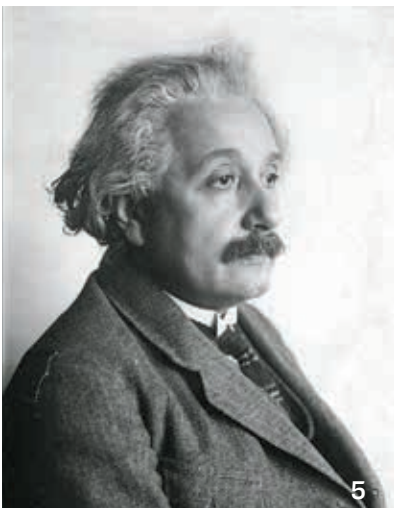
The great part of being a late starter is that I will never run out of good things to read! More likely, I will die having only scratched the surface of the good stuff. The good advice of Henry David Thoreau rings true: “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.”

And if I follow the course of real education through great literature, I save myself the wasted time and trouble of reading the banal and wretched.

Susannah Pearce holds a master’s degree in theology and writes from her home in South Carolina.



NEWSCOM GALLERY



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NEWSCOM GALLERY

4. A marble statue of Socrates in the Louvre.

5. Albert Einstein won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921.

6. Henry David Thoreau, circa 1850.



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.

FILM REVIEW

‘Killerman’

Jason Bourne as a Money Launderer

MARK JACKSON

Here’s “Killerman” in a nutshell: It’s Jason Bourne, except the lead character’s not an amnesiac spy; he’s an amnesiac money launderer.

Liam Hemsworth, younger brother of Chris Hemsworth (Thor), who is probably best known for divorcing Miley Cyrus, plays a dashing handsome young man, who apparently had no other options in life but to make drug-money-laundering rounds in a 1970s-level grimy New York City. Maybe his low-life destiny was foisted upon him by his name: Moe Diamond; it’s so gangster. Moe buys bricks of gold worth around \$600,000 with giant stacks of drug-cash, then he resells the gold, and receives checks in huge dollar amounts—laundry cycle complete. Life is pretty nice; he’s got a drop-dead-gorgeous Colombian girlfriend (Diane Guerrero) and a baby on the way.

However, Moe’s got a buddy named Skunk (Emory Cohen), who, while safeguarding a separate giant stack of cash for his uncle (Zlatko Buric), has the brilliant idea of using uncle Perico’s money for a sweet little side drug deal.

Skunk feels it’s time to break out on his own, get something started for himself. Moe’s not so sure. Why? Skunk’s uncle Perico is an old-school, Slavic mobster with big plans for that cash-like buying some politicians to put in his pocket. What could possibly go wrong here?

Bonked on the Head

Who’s got the drugs? That would be “Debo, the Nigerian” (Coletrane Williams). The deal goes down, but, oops, the drugs-for-cash party is crashed by some dirty cops, and the ensuing car chase/crash bonks Moe mightily upon his noggin, and now he’s Jason Bourne.

Skunk emancipates Moe from his hospital bed, trailing IV tubes, because the

dirty cops are closing in. Moe still can’t remember who he is when Skunk attempts to jog his memory by showing him some drugs and cash. I mean you’d think that would work, right, because Moe knows drugs and cash?

So off they go to a nightclub: garish strobes, pounding house music, girls—how about some cocaine and some drinking? That’s so good for a concussion. But no. No deal.

Will Moe get his memory back? Will he marry his girl, or will she get shot? Will the dirty cops get their comeuppance? Will Skunk? Will somebody get chewed on by a K-9? One thing’s for certain: Everyone in this film is in sore need of a karmic comeuppance except the girlfriend.

Anything Good?

Let’s see. ... Nah. Unless you’re in need of a gratuitous violence fix. Had they trimmed the running time by a third and given Moe a character arc that, like Jason Bourne, eventually leads to his roundly denouncing his former profession and starting to elevate his moral character out of the dead and into the light, I’d almost recommend it.

Its main cinematic sin, however, is the pacing. There are too many long stretches of low conflict that, while trying for realism, just lead to boredom. In showbiz, there’s



Liam Hemsworth as an amnesiac money launderer and Diane Guerrero as his girlfriend run for their lives, in “Killerman.”

a saying: “Never be boring.” And the soundtrack might best be described as “Sonata for Plumbers Working in Your House, Banging on Pipes in the Basement.”

Director Malik Bader does a workmanly job playing one of the dirty cops. Mike Moh, recently turning in an uncanny Bruce Lee impersonation in Quentin Tarantino’s recent “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood,” is hugely underused. Emory Cohen, who was particularly effective as a small-time drug dealer in “Hot Summer Nights,” even though he’s playing a similar role here, is regrettably lightweight.

Hemsworth, while he looks good in anything he’s in, because, well, he’s very good-looking, looks a little bit bad for taking this role, because its dark nature requires an ability to, intensely, come from a darker soul place, and Hemsworth might be a bit too noble for it. I’m trying to avoid saying he’s less of an accomplished actor than, say, Matt Damon, who could knock this role out of the park, intensity-wise.

It’s been argued that “Killerman” is a throwback to the dark days of male toxicity, but that’s basically like saying, back in the days when rattlesnakes had toxic venom, they killed people.

Rattlesnakes have hemotoxic venom, and bad people who deal drugs, launder money, and kill people are toxic. End of story.

If you’re a sensitive, gender-fluidity-aware individual, who loves to sanctimoniously bandy the term “toxic masculinity” about, and whose personal toxic drug use fuels the toxic cartel activity in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, then, ahem—ain’t you part of the toxicity in the world today? So can everybody please shut up with the toxic masculinity already; most everybody in the world today is toxic.

In closing, the title turns out to be not as silly as it sounds, but if it’s the silly-sounding title that puts you off seeing this film—I recommend allowing it to do so.

‘Killerman’

Director
Malik Bader

Starring
Liam Hemsworth, Emory Cohen, Diane Guerrero, Zlatko Buric, Suraj Sharma, Nickola Shrelli, Mike Moh

Running Time
1 hour, 52 minutes

Rated
R

Release Date
Aug. 30

★★★★★

FILM REVIEW

‘Bennett’s War’

An injured military vet returns to face his threatened dream

IAN KANE

While many folks out there have likely heard about Pat Tillman, the young man who chose to join the U.S. Army over a promising professional football career and was killed by friendly fire, I’m guessing that few have heard about Tomas Young.

Young joined the military right after the 9/11 attack in order to exact revenge against those who caused the attacks. Only five days into his deployment in Iraq, he was shot in the spine and paralyzed from the chest down. Later, he became a war protester who criticized the Iraq War.

These events were all covered in a documentary directed by Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro called “Body of War.” It was a heavy, heavy film that pulled no punches and left an indelible mark on my mind.

‘Bennett’s War’

When I’d first heard of director Alex Ranarivelo’s (“American Wrestler: The Wizard”) new film about a young soldier returning home from overseas after suffering a potentially debilitating injury, I immediately wanted to see it. I hoped it would be a biopic based on a real soldier and wondered if it might even be about Young.

Ranarivelo’s film “Bennett’s War” is indeed about a wounded vet returning home, but it isn’t based on any particular real-life individual. Yet, after watching the film, I believe it could have been a real story, since many have faced similar circumstances upon com-

‘Bennett’s War’ is a decent feel good film that will appeal to the whole family.

‘Bennett’s War’

Director
Alex Ranarivelo

Starring
Michael Roark, Trace Adkins, Ali Afshar

Running Time
1 hour, 34 minutes

Rated
PG-13

Release Date
Aug. 30

★★★★★

Michael Roark as a soldier in the Iraq War, in “Bennett’s War.”



Michael Roark (L) and Ali Afshar in “Bennett’s War.”

ing back home.

The film’s titular character is Marshall Bennett (Michael Roark, “Beauty and the Beast”), a young U.S. Army Ranger sergeant serving with a Special Operations Motorcycle Unit in Afghanistan. With fervent patriotism wafting through each brief sequence, the opening scenes depict Bennett and his battle-buddy Riley (Michael King) going about their duties.

We learn that Bennett has some pro motocross racing experience, but he’s now doing his duty and serving his country.

During a particularly intense firefight, Bennett and Riley run into an improvised explosive device and are badly wounded. Both end up in a military hospital, where Bennett is told that because of his back and leg injuries, his soldiering days are over and his motocross ones probably are too.

The news is quite a shock to Bennett: His wife back in California, Sophie (Allison Paige), has just given birth to their first child, and now his major source of income is in jeopardy.

A year passes and we find Bennett with his wife and young son

on the family farm for which his dad (Trace Adkins) is having a hard time paying the mortgage. For a while, Bennett works for Cyrus (Ali Afshar) repairing motorcycles. But as time goes on, his passion for riding reignites.

There’s just one problem—his leg is still on the mend, and if it doesn’t heal correctly, he could end up being permanently disabled. On top of that, his wife doesn’t want him to race again, so his dreams of competing seem unrealistic.

Soon, a young up-and-coming motocross star begins making waves locally, which threatens to make Bennett’s career little more than an afterthought. This, coupled with the fact that his old man is facing the loss of the family farm, is the final straw. In a scene full of jaw-clenching machoism, Bennett mounts his trusty, oldie-but-goodie bike and puts it—and his injured leg—to the test on a dusty country road. Nothing snaps or breaks, so it seems that he does have a chance after all. If his leg holds up.

Will Bennett be able to persuade his wife to come on board and back him and his moto-crusade? Will he be able to rise to the challenge and

best the new young gun in town? And most importantly, will his leg hold up? (No Spoilers.) The rest of the film deals with these urgent questions in fairly convincing fashion.

Although this is definitely not a character-driven indie flick, the acting and direction are serviceable. The film manages to convey the desperation of Bennett’s circumstances. It does have its schlocky moments but doesn’t ever veer into pure sappiness.

And although the military scenes are pretty unconvincing (the producers obviously didn’t hire any military consultants), the motocross ones are visceral and commanding. I just wish there would have been a little more character development.

“Bennett’s War” is a decent feel-good film that will appeal to the whole family. Although it’s not particularly groundbreaking, you can feel that this film has its heart in the right place, and that’s good enough for me.

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

All That Glitters Can Deceive

‘Manon’ at The Metropolitan Opera



Opening Sept. 24 and running through Oct. 26, The Metropolitan Opera’s production of “Manon” features soprano Lisette Oropesa as the beauty whose tragic yearning for material pleasures leads her to fall from innocence into dissolution and death. Her besotted lover is sung by tenor Michael Fabiano.

Director Laurent Pelly has moved the story from the early 18th century to the late 19th century, the so-called Belle Époque, and Maurizio Benini conducts Jules Massenet’s lush score.



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