WEEK 50, 2020

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

CLARK LOUIS GUSSIN

(Above) "Bineshi in Wanblee," 2019, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on panel; 7 3/4 inches by 6 1/4 inches.

FINE ARTS

Painter Clark Louis Gussin's
Real American West

LORRAINE FERRIER

Clark Louis Gussin's striking paintings of America's West contain quintessential scenes of farming life, cowboy culture, indigenous communities, and more.

His paintings are a continuation of the world he saw as a child. "I grew up in a culture that tilled the land, was close to nature, and had a strong faith," he said in a phone interview.

Gussin tries to capture the spirit of everything that he experiences. "It's important for me to know about what and who I paint. I don't just paint an idea or paint some political statement. I'm painting what I experience and the people I know," he said.

Because Gussin paints only from his personal experiences, each and every scene he depicts has a story that he can just as eagerly tell you in "technicolor," if you ask.

A Budding Artist

Gussin spent his early childhood on his mom's family's small tobacco farm in North Carolina, while his father (a Marine) was stationed on Parris Island, South Carolina, during the Korean War.

After the war, the family moved permanently to Washington, D.C., his father's hometown, and Gussin spent summertimes working on the family tobacco farm.

When he was 11 and 12, his parents sent him every Saturday to the Corcoran Gallery of Art school in Washington, where he learned to paint.

Continued on ***Page 4***

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'A FIGHT FOR LOVE AND GLORY': LESSONS FROM 'CASABLANCA'

JEFF MINICK

Sometimes love blindsides us. We glance at a woman in a café and listen to her speaking with her friend, and she sweeps us away. We open a book by an unfamiliar author, and from the first few sentences we're enthralled. We taste a cup of tea we've never tried, and we're hooked.

So it happened when I first saw "Casablanca."

Since then, I have watched this movie numerous times and have never grown tired of it. The doomed love of Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) and Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), the high idealism and courage of Ilsa's husband Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), the secondary characters perfectly suited to their roles, and the impeccable script always move me.

Battered by an ongoing pandemic and a tumultuous election, many Americans, including me, feel as if we are in a storm at sea, without respite from fierce winds and driving rain.

Lessons drawn from "Casablanca" can help us navigate these troubled waters.

Wit and Verve

Our story is set in Casablanca in Morocco during World War II, which is under the thumb of the Vichy French government and Nazi Germany, in the days just before the United States enters the war. Refugees seeking to escape Nazi tyranny have flooded this city, seeking an escape first to Portugal and then to America.

Not all of those in Casablanca bend a knee to their oppressors. When a Nazi officer asks Rick, an American who owns a café in Casablanca, "What is your nationality?" Rick replies, "I'm a drunkard," which brings chuckles even from the stiff-necked Germans. When the same officer asks Rick what he thinks would happen if the Nazis invaded New York City, Rick answers, "Well, there are certain sections of New York, Major, that I wouldn't advise you to try to invade."

Throughout "Casablanca," the scriptwriters insert other, sharp witticisms, many of them coming from Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains), a policeman who exhibits that savoir-faire associated then with the French. At one point, Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) says to Captain Renault of the café, "I advise that this place be shut up at once" to which Renault replies, "But everybody's having such a good time." Forced to find a reason to close the café, Captain Renault tells Rick, "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here," at which point a croupier emerges from the casino, holds out a fistful of cash to the policeman, and says, "Your winnings, sir."

Near the end of the movie, when Rick finds himself forced to hold a revolver on Renault, he says, "Remember this gun is pointed right at your heart." I smile every time I hear Renault's cynical reply, "That is my least vulnerable spot."

These people face times as dire and horrific as our own, yet they refuse to buckle to their oppressors or surrender their dignity or their sense of humor.

Lesson 1: Put on a bold front and remember to laugh, especially at the absurd. Laughter truly is good medicine.

Be Intentional

Though Rick promises Ilsa that they will stay together after her husband and resistance war hero Victor gets safely away, he changes that plan and arranges safe passage for both Ilsa and Victor on the flight out of Casablanca. When Ilsa asks him for an explanation, Rick gives her the logical reasons why she must go and he must stay.

In making this decision, Rick reminds viewers of the need for analysis and rational thinking. He recognizes the importance of Laszlo's work in carrying on the fight against the Nazis and knows that Laszlo needs Ilsa at his side. He also knows that if Ilsa were to remain with him in Casablanca, both of them would likely end up in a concentration camp, a point reinforced by Captain Renault.

Lesson 2: Think, plan, prepare. Then act.

'Casablanca' teaches us some ways to fight for the right and the good.

The Inspiration of Others

"Casablanca" is a classroom teaching the importance of emulation. If we are to improve ourselves, if we are to embrace the good, often we need the example of others to light our way down a path thick with shadows and obstacles.

When we first meet Rick, he is a cynic, crippled by love, aloof from all who know him, a man who has turned his back on the world. "I stick my neck out for nobody," Rick declares, and he means it.

Enter Ilsa and Victor. Once Ilsa finally has the chance to explain why, a few years before, she didn't show up at the train yard to meet Rick and flee Paris ahead of the Nazis, Rick realizes that she has never stopped loving him, and his wounded heart is restored. That realization also gives him the courage to save both Victor and Ilsa from the Nazis.

Victor also helps bring Rick back from the despair with which he lives. When they first meet, Victor says, "One hears a great deal about Rick in Casablanca," to which Rick, clearly an admirer, responds, "And about Victor Laszlo everywhere."

In one key scene that reveals Victor as a hero who inspires others, the Germans in the café begin singing "Die Wacht am Rhein." Without hesitation, Victor marches across the room, stands before the café's band, and commands them, "Play 'La Marseillaise!' Play it!" The bandleader looks to Rick for permission. When Rick, who is on a nearby staircase, nods, the band plays the French national anthem with Victor conducting. Immediately the entire café begins belting out the words and drowns out the Germans. Having witnessed firsthand how Victor inspires others to resist tyranny eventually leads Rick to reassess his own doubts and skepticism.

Like Rick, Louis Renault is a cynic who abuses his office as police chief to enrich himself and prey on women trying to escape Casablanca. By movie's end, inspired by Rick, he also devotes himself to the cause of liberty, and the two men stride off into the foggy night to join the underground.

Lesson 3: Offer encouragement to the discouraged and the downcast. These days, we all need heartening words and deeds and to give the same to those around us.

Things Worth Fighting For

If we give way to the totalitarianism found in fascism, communism, and socialism, "Casablanca" reminds us of what we will lose: our constitutional liberties, the right to raise and educate our children, and the right to live our lives as we deem fit.

In "Casablanca," we see a "hard" totalitarianism at work. The Nazis use fear and intimidation, the threat of concentration camps, and even murder to force their will on this captive city and those trying to escape it. Such governments, as we all know, still exist around the world.

These days, especially in the West, a "soft" totalitarianism is at work, seeking control not with guns and physical brutality (at least for now) but with mandates, manufactured news, and forced political correctness. Those pushing this agenda work toward the same ends as all totalitarians—power and control—and with the belief that they are on the right side of history. Just like the Nazis in "Casablanca," they regard themselves as superior beings and the rest of us as cattle to be manipulated as they see fit.

Through Rick, through Victor Laszlo, and even through such minor characters as the gentle maître d' named Carl (S. Z. Sakall) we meet those who refuse to buckle and give way to oppression.

At one point, Rick asks Laszlo, "Don't you sometimes wonder if it's worth all this? I mean, what you're fighting for?"

"We might as well question why we breathe," Laszlo responds. "If we stop breathing, we'll die. If we stop fighting our enemies, the world will die."

We can take strength from such words, just as the characters in the film take strength from one another. Each of us in our own way can promote liberty and resist those who try to steal it from us.

Lesson 4: Stand fast for the true and the good. Our freedoms and traditions need stouthearted defenders.

The Same Old Story

Written by Herman Hupfeld, "As Time Goes By" was a modest hit until Dooley Wilson sang it in "Casablanca." It is the song shared by Rick and Ilsa in Paris, and it acts as a motif throughout the movie.

Though we think of "As Time Goes By" as a love song, let's take a closer look at the final stanza:

"It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die.
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by."

If we expand lovers here to include all those who truly love this world, who are willing to fight for love and glory, who are ready to do or die, we find here the key message from "Casablanca." Just as Rick, Ilsa, Victor, and others were fighting their oppressors because of their love of freedom, we can do the same today.

The actors and the scenery change from age to age, but one plot of the play remains unchanged: the quest by some for power, the struggle between good and evil, the battle between those who cherish liberty and those who seek to make themselves masters.

It's "still the same old story." And it always will be.

But "Casablanca" teaches us some ways to fight for the right and the good.

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, 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 to follow his blog.

WARNER BROS.

Rick (Humphrey Bogart, L) and Sam (Dooley Wilson) playing piano and singing "As Time Goes By."

WARNER BROS.

(L–R) Rick (Humphrey Bogart) ultimately inspires Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and is himself inspired by Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) in "Casablanca."

WARNER BROS.

Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) in Paris, just as the Nazis invade.

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ALL PHOTOS BY CLARK LOUIS GUSSIN

"Cherokee Matriarch," 2001, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on linen; 20 inches by 21 inches.

"The Whopper," 2015, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on linen; 36 inches by 48 inches.

FINE ARTS

Painter Clark Louis Gussin's

Real American West

Continued from ***Page 1***

Being in the presence of the gallery's great art deeply influenced him. He remembers being particularly inspired by Albert Bierstadt's painting "The Last of the Buffalo," part of the Corcoran collection that is now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Living in Washington, Gussin was able to easily study the old master paintings at the National Gallery of Art. He especially enjoyed the techniques of Renaissance artists and the Golden Age of Dutch artists, whose paintings still inform his art practice today.

"I always look back to the Renaissance or the Golden Age of Dutch painting because that fits my temperament. My temperament is to paint that way," he said.

Another strong but contemporary influence on Gussin's work was the art of realist painter Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth was painting his everyday America not too far north of where Gussin lived. And Wyeth's America reflected parts of Gussin's own upbringing.

Always Painting

Gussin's love for art has always been with him. "I've always painted no matter what I was doing," he said. He even sketched while serving during the Vietnam War, and created art for the military while upholding his normal duties. After he was discharged, Gussin settled in California where he still lives today.

Gussin earned his BFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts. Its program, he said, was a cross between postmodernist and traditional art training.

"When I grew up, postmodernism was at the forefront of art," he said.

After college, the option to become a traditional artist just didn't seem possible. "Norman Rockwell and a whole host of illustrators were making a living doing commercial work as opposed to doing it as fine art," Gussin explained. So he did a short stint as a freelance illustrator and art director; both seemed viable careers, but it turned out to be too stressful for him and his wife as they thought of raising a family.

American painter Clark Louis Gussin paints the American West with a heart full of gusto, faith, and integrity.

Painter Clark Gussin tries to capture the spirit of everything that he experiences.

Looking for stability, Gussin took a job at International Business Machines (IBM); at the time, a job at IBM meant a job for life. For Gussin, that was true. He worked there for 36 years and 3 months, and for half of that time, he painted. "I tried to paint at least five to eight hours a day even when I was working," he said.

Many of Gussin's paintings feature Californians and their rich heritage. Gussin says that some people may think his paintings are of another time and place because it's a California that people rarely see on the news. But he asserts that once people travel out of the cities, "California is very much a Western state," with a lot of agriculture.

Once out of the city, Gussin said, it's easy to find people farming the land and working on 200-year-old ranches. When he first moved to California after leaving the service, he said, "there were more cowboy rodeos and Indian powwows [there] than in any other state." A lot of his friends still live that way of life.

Painting America's West

"I try to live my life with integrity; so, when I paint, I want to paint with integrity," Gussin said. For him, that means painting with the same pigments that the Renaissance and Dutch Golden Age artists used and using the same techniques, although he paints on a ground (primer) of lead white but doesn't use an egg tempera underpaint.

"I'm an indirect painter. I paint in layers so you can get the luminosity from the pigments reflected back to the viewer, and my paintings can almost glow like Renaissance paintings do," he said.

'Bineshi in Wanblee'

Gussin met Bineshi while he was helping to prepare a site for a sun dance on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Hundreds of indigenous people from across the country came to take part in the spiritual rite.

Gussin had been invited to help with manual labor for the sun dance by a colleague at IBM. Gussin found the whole experience very moving and believes that he was the only nonindigenous person in attendance. "I was very much embraced there as part of it, as a nonindigenous person," he said.

He believes that indigenous Americans are "on the edge of survival." "We think of all the things going on in the world and people just totally overlook the indigenous people in America," he said. "They're still hanging on to their customs, and their faith, and their traditions as much as they can in this modern world."

The medicine man in charge of the sun dance, from Crazy Horse's lineage, lived on the reservation in the small town of Wanblee. "Wanblee is a very, very poor place. And you can see all the problems the indigenous people in America have to endure. It's almost encapsulated in that little town," Gussin said.

In Wanblee, Gussin noticed Bineshi, a young woman whom his friend knew, and he asked him if she would pose for a photograph so he could paint her later.

In the painting, Gussin used vermillion and lapis lazuli to great effect. He explained that traditionally the red and blue pigments were used by the likes of Raphael and Caravaggio to depict only holy figures such as saints, and people of high standing in the Catholic church. The pigments were extremely expensive, and so when the artists painted religious commissions, the church would pay for the pigments.

The painting is currently on display at the de Young Museum in San Francisco as part of the de Young Open, until Jan. 3, 2021.

'Cherokee Matriarch'

Dwaide Green, the lady in Gussin's painting "Cherokee Matriarch," used to be a regular visitor at the local art gallery with her son; they eventually bought a couple of Gussin's illustrations of indigenous people. A year or so later, Green approached Gussin to ask if he would teach her son Calvin art.

Calvin was highly creative. As well as making art, he tried to teach himself classical guitar, and he wrote poetry (which has been published in journals all over the world). But he suffered from schizophrenia and other mental challenges, Gussin explained.

Gussin believed that Calvin's artistic talent had promise, so every Saturday, Calvin would visit him and learn the fundamentals of art. The lessons continued for 40-some years.

Sadly, Calvin was killed by a DUI driver this year. Reflecting on Calvin's work and mental challenges, Gussin said: "He's done thousands of times more than some people I know who are fully functional and healthy. Sometimes I think he was just an angel in my life to help me see the difference. He was pretty amazing."

Gussin sold "Cherokee Matriarch" at his 2013 solo show at the Triton Museum in Santa Clara. The buyer is unknown to him but thought to be someone of prominence from San Francisco.

'Fallow Ground Fallow Heart'

Gussin often titles his paintings to make people ponder. Landscape paintings are often deeply personal to him. "Fallow Ground Fallow Heart" is one example. The painting is of the family tobacco farm with a packhouse hiding the house where his mother grew up. It's winter, when the land lies fallow.

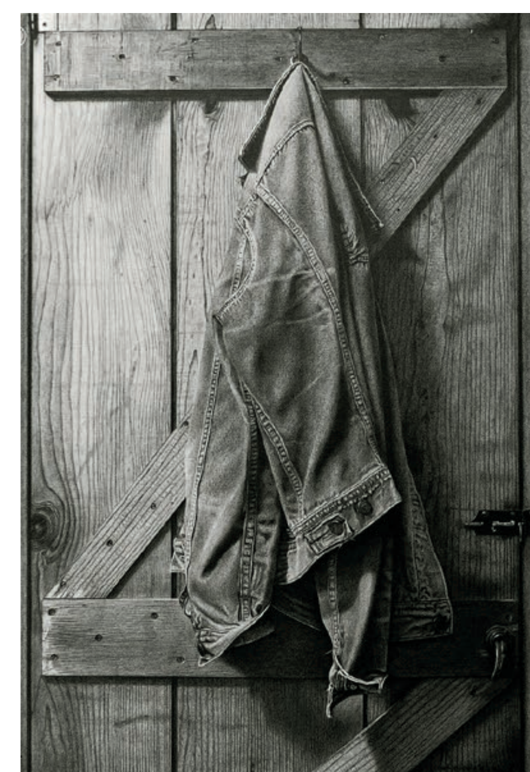
Gussin explained that because the tobacco plants take a lot of nitrogen out of the soil, tobacco farmers have to periodically leave the land fallow to heal. And crops are rotated on the land to help nourish the soil.

The painting also refers to Gussin's Christian faith. His strong Christian belief comes from directly studying the Bible as a member of his local church.

"In my faith, there are times when I have to let the ground of my faith fall fallow in order to renourish itself and grow," he said.

To find out more about Clark Gussin's art, visit ClarkGussinArt.com

"Fallow Ground Fallow Heart," 2018, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on linen mounted on panel; 14 inches by 18 3/4 inches.



(Bottom left)
"Chuck Jones Mountain Man," 2002, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on linen; 26 inches by 32 inches. Jones is the son of Dwaide Green portrayed in Gussin's painting "Cherokee Matriarch," and is Calvin Green's half-brother. Chuck received a Purple Heart during the Korean War.

(Bottom middle)
"Sabbath," 2012, by Clark Louis Gussin. Pencil on paper; 30 inches by 19 inches.

(Bottom right)
"Little Hoss," 2002, by Clark Louis Gussin. Oil on linen; 16 inches by 20 inches.

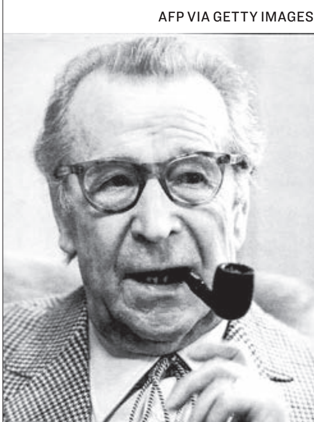
LITERATURE

Jules Maigret: The Common Man's Hero

BENJAMIN WELTON

JOHN THYS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

(Above) Books by Belgian writer Georges Simenon at the Museum of Letters and Manuscripts, now permanently closed, in Brussels. (Below) Belgian writer Georges Simenon in 1989.


AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

French publisher Librairie Arthème Fayard introduced the world to Jules Maigret, an inspector with Paris's Brigade Criminelle, with the 1931 novel "The Strange Case of Peter the Lett" (since republished as "Pietr the Latvian"). A slim, fast-paced police procedural, the novel helped to redefine crime and detective fiction in France less than a decade before the collapse of the Third Republic (1870–1940).

In 1931, there were two primary archetypes of the fictional detective: the ratiocination machine and grand puzzler-solver first created by American Edgar Allan Poe and perfected by the British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the so-called hard-boiled private eye of the pulp magazines and pens of authors Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Maigret conformed to neither tradition. Instead, the squat and bulldog-like Maigret is a workingman detective who eschews theatrics in favor of focusing on the easily corruptible nature of human beings. When working a case or not, Maigret enjoys simple pleasures like beer, his tobacco pipe, and his wife's cooking.

Fictional Jules Maigret is a workingman detective who eschews theatrics in favor of focusing on the easily corruptible nature of human beings.

Writer Georges Simenon

Maigret came from the brain of Belgian writer Georges Simenon (1903–1989). Born in Liège 10 minutes after midnight on Friday the 13th, Simenon's superstitious mother recorded his birthday a day earlier on Thursday. Simenon's family united the ancient ethnic divide of his native country, as his father, Désiré Simenon, was a French-speaking Walloon. His mother, Henriette, spoke Dutch and had roots in Dutch Limburg, including an 18th-century thief named Gabriel Brühl.

At age 16, Simenon began working as a journalist. This profession would take him to Paris three years later, where he covered local crime and the city's sordid nightlife. Simenon was a prodigious writer who apparently typed 80 pages a day. Between 1923 and 1933, he authored 200 pulp fiction novels under 16 different pen names.

Simenon would maintain this prolific output with his Maigret character. The inspector would go on to appear in 75 novels and 28 short stories until 1972. In the scope of French history, the Maigret novels survived the fall of the Third Republic, Nazi occupation, the divisive wars in Indochina and Algeria, the fall of the Fourth Republic and rise of the Fifth, and the epoch-making protests of May 1968.

Despite his craftsman-like approach to writing (he could write a novel in 11 days), Simenon's work is of the highest quality. Besides his Maigret novels, he also wrote what he called "roman durs," that is, more serious and psychological novels, like "The Engagement" (1933), "The Man Who Watched Trains Go By" (1938), and "The Strangers in the House" (1940).

Simenon's work earned comparisons to Anton Chekov by no less an authority than William Faulkner. The quality of Simenon's work is nothing less than miraculous given his schedule and turbulent personal life, the latter of which included a tumultuous marriage; moves between France, Switzerland, and the United States; and his awful appetite for extramarital affairs.

An Ordinary Guy

Maigret remains at the heart of Simenon's legacy for obvious reasons. The character, who has appeared on television and in movies since Jean Renoir's 1932 film "Night at the Crossroads," is one of literature's first true-to-life detectives.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes or Sam Spade, Maigret is a relatable everyman. He does not have superhuman strength or incredible genius. He is not an amoral dispenser of violence. He is merely a product of rural France and the son of an estate manager who became a police officer in order to earn a living. Maigret is a married man who is happy in the domestic sphere. His wife, Madame Maigret, is always disappointed by her husband's work because it ruins her vacation plans, and yet she never fails to cook him something nice for lunch. When it proves impossible to enjoy his wife's fine dining, Maigret prefers sandwiches and beer.

As a detective, Maigret shows a strong thirst for justice. Each Maigret novel presents the clues in order, plus Simenon always shows Maigret contemplating the case alongside his audience. Rare are shocking conclusions or illogical climaxes, both of which pepper the work of other mystery titans Conan Doyle and Dame Agatha Christie. The clues really are not that important to begin with, as the Maigret novels are less about puzzles and more about studying human nature.

Maigret cares the most about what drives people to kill—their motivations, their selfish desires, and their jumbled attempts to maintain a false sense of either innocence or righteousness. Maigret is never an imperious judge but acts more like a disapproving father. He understands why people do bad things, but he never excuses their bad behavior.

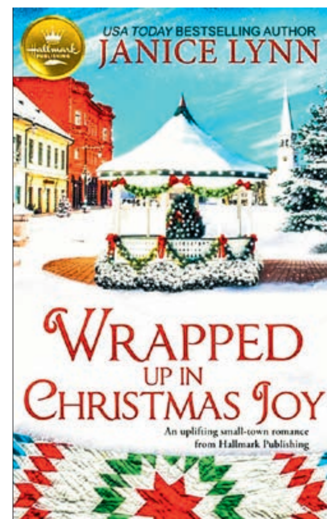
Simenon's Maigret novels are short, sparse, and incredibly well-written. They also serve as testaments to the power of common people. Maigret is nothing special, and the police officers he works with are ordinary too. This is no slight at all, as ordinary people are the majority in every country. Without ordinary people there would be no food, no services, and, in the world so beautifully crafted by Georges Simenon, no justice.

Benjamin Welton is a freelance writer based in New England.

BOOK REVIEW

The Healing Power of Love

JUDD HOLLANDER



"Wrapped Up in Christmas Joy"
Janice Lynn
Hallmark Publishing
Oct. 27, 2020
Paperback; 336 pages.

Every so often a careless gesture can end up becoming, in hindsight, quite a happy accident. So it is in Janice Lynn's tale of healing and romance, "Wrapped Up in Christmas Joy."

Former Marine Cole Aaron has settled into his new life as a firefighter in Pine Valley, Kentucky. However, he remains deeply tormented by his experiences in the service, blaming himself for his actions while under fire. Even though he has found a new set of friends in his colleagues at work, he refuses to let anyone get too close lest they discover his secrets.

It's a nice read when sitting in front of a roaring fire with a cup of hot cocoa.

Pine Valley is a town that takes its holiday traditions seriously, but Cole has little use for any Yuletide-related festivities, which makes it rather ironic when he finds himself chosen to take on the role of Santa in the town's Christmas parade.

Cole finds his vow to keep everyone at arm's length sorely tested when he has an encounter with Sophie Davis, a woman who runs The Threaded Needle, a local quilt shop. In addition to making objects for sale, Sophie is deeply involved with the Quilts of Valor Foundation. It's a group that creates quilts for wounded warriors. Sophie shows up at the fire station after coming across Cole's diary, which he had mistakenly put in with some books he had donated to the Pine Hill Church.

Initially examining the diary only to learn the writer's identity and thus return it, Sophie finds herself transfixed by what Cole has written. His visible torment calls to mind the pain her own father must have felt while in combat—a pain her dad was apparently never able to come to terms with.

Planning simply to give Cole back his diary, Sophie instead finds herself attracted to this guarded soul, while at the same time wanting desperately to help ease the pain she knows he carries.

Believing his past renders him unworthy of any type of relationship, Cole quickly shuts down the possibility of something developing between the two. Yet despite his efforts to the contrary, he finds himself running into Sophie again and again in situations that range from a rather humorous cat-in-a-tree rescue to being paired up with her as part of a Christmas toy drive. Sophie's bubbly personality and seemingly boundless optimism cause Cole to wonder if perhaps she sees him as something more than just an object of pity.

With "Wrapped Up in Christmas Joy," author Janice Lynn shows the importance of not allowing oneself to be defined solely by past events. This idea applies not only to Cole and Sophie but to other Pine Valley residents as well. Bodie, another former soldier, is well on his way to rebuilding his life; Rosie has outlived three husbands and is absolutely terrified of walking down the aisle for an upcoming fourth time. Yet as Lynn clearly shows, it's only by coming to terms with what has happened before that one can fully open up to future possibilities, with all the potential for joy they can bring.

In a story such as this, the outcome is not so much in question as is the journey the protagonists undergo. Lynn quite ably blends the "will-they-or-won't-they" issue with humor, drama, and sometimes painful reflections that ensure the reader won't simply skip to the last page.

Adding greatly to the story's appeal are the rich descriptions of the town itself. The depiction of The Threaded Needle, for example, calls to mind a store that one might enter after being attracted by the window displays, and then ends up prowling the aisles looking for the perfect gift for that special someone. The tale also conjures up enjoyable images of the townsfolk—particularly a group of women known as "The Butterflies"—while giving the reader the feeling of knowing these people.

An engrossing tale of two people learning to reach out to another via Christmas cookies, sledding, and the heartfelt offer of a helping hand, "Wrapped Up in Christmas Joy" makes for an enjoyable holiday treat. It's a nice read when sitting in front of a roaring fire with a cup of hot cocoa, or with a blanket wrapped around you while the heater hums.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle.

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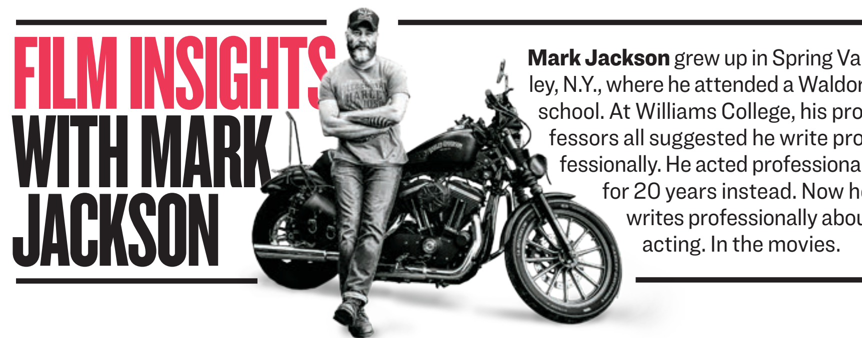
(Above) Charlie Brown feeling uncomfortable as usual around his biggest fan, Peppermint Patty.
(Below) It's ever-so-slightly sacrilegious that the little red-haired girl is actually depicted. She was heretofore never shown. The spell is broken in "The Peanuts Movie."

(Above) Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the Peanuts gang (Franklin, Lucy, Linus, Peppermint Patty, and Sally) revel in a snow day in "The Peanuts Movie." (Below) Snoopy in the midst of his favorite Walter-Mitty-fighter-pilot fantasy, dogfighting the Red Baron.



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.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

We Need More Peanuts!

MARK JACKSON

'The Peanuts Movie'

Director
Steve Martino

Starring
Trombone Shorty, Francesca Capaldi, Alexander Garfin, Noah Johnston, Bill Melendez, Hadley Belle Miller, Noah Schnapp, Venus Schultheis, Mariel Sheets, A.J. Tecce

Rated
G

Running Time
1 hour, 28 minutes

Release Date
Nov. 6, 2015

★★★½☆

Horror of horrors! In 2020, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" is no longer available on regular TV! Considering the general craziness of 2020, this is just adding insult to injury. It's a crime! Well, I'm here to help solve your upcoming Charlie Brown needs: Buy "A Charlie Brown Christmas" DVD. And watch "The Peanuts Movie."

You know how it's always slightly disappointing, at the end of a biopic, when they show the photo of the real person the movie is about? How they're never quite as dashing as the actors who portray them? "The Peanuts Movie" has the opposite effect.

When the credits roll, and they show the original black-and-white Charles Shultz illustrations of the 1970s Peanuts gang, the nostalgic rush of seeing the "real" Snoopy, Linus, Charlie Brown, and Lucy creates a curiously powerful wistfulness.

One is immediately struck by the genius of Shultz: The man could draw pen-and-ink like nobody's business. With the penultimate (no pen, er, pun intended) sparsity of lyrical line, Schultz portrayed as wide a range of human emotion as Rembrandt, imbuing these essentially stick figures with personalities arguably more realized and powerful than any cartoon before or since.

At the height of its popularity, "Peanuts" had 355 million readers, in 75 countries, in 21 languages. With 17,897 strips, it's considered the longest story ever told by one person.

These scratch marks on white paper are truly old friends. For those who weren't there during the gang's heyday, the "Peanuts" characters were American cartoon rockstars on par with John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger, Keef Richards, Robert Plant, and Jimmy Page.

'The Peanuts Movie'

So how's this little movie, you're wanting to know? Well, you know how anything, no matter how dumb or silly, if it got hung on the Christmas tree when you were 7, by the time you're 20—it's attained magical status and become the living myth and legend of your life?

The same goes for "Peanuts." Those little sketches are sacred. They should really not be "upgraded," digitally enhanced, CGI'd, and 3D'd! But they have been. So what's the result? Well, I suppose … it's not the end of the world. In fact, it's … pretty good. For 5-year-olds, it's very wonderful!

It's a cozy, wee movie, and while it may not grab the attention of you, the adult, the way it does your 5-year-old, it's guaranteed you'll feel a cozy nostalgia, remembering the way America used to look not that long ago in the days when neighborhoods, like Dr. Seuss's Who-ville, had twinkly lights, smoking chimneys, and unlocked doors. When there were Schwinn banana bikes, Big Wheels, and pogo sticks parked in driveways; ice skating on the local pond, paper routes, yellow school buses—and parental voices sounding like muted trombones. I do believe a certain beleaguered president has always referred to the above description with his campaign slogan and hat.

Peanut Synopsis

What kind of a plot are we talkin' here? Well, that little red-haired girl, she moves across the street from Charlie Brown. So it's a romance! Charlie Brown is legendarily twitterpated about the little red-haired girl. He must know her! He shows us the tongue-tiedness that must be overcome to meet the woman of your dreams.

To borrow a line from the movie "The Tao of Steve," Charlie Brown must win her approval by "Doing a great thing in her presence." He learns to dance! Yay! But he slips on a puddle of spilled punch at the dance! Boo! He gets a perfect score on a test! Yay! She loves that. But, uh-oh—it's Peppermint Patty's test, by mistake attributed to Charlie Brown! Booo!

But does Chuck lie about it? He does not. Charlie Brown is a good man. He telleth the truth, he suffereth the terrible, unholy child-shaming that nobody but a bunch of fellow neighborhood classmates, ganging up on a bad day, can administer more thoroughly. This courage does not go unnoticed.

Baron von Richthofen

Meanwhile, that incorrigible, creative, thoroughly self-involved beagle of his is riding around the sky in his Sopwith-Camel-which-looks-a-lot-like-a-doghouse. (A Sopwith Camel is a WWI fighter plane.)

Snoopy, Charlie Brown's pet dog, is the Walter Mitty of small canines, and he chases that dastardly fighter pilot, Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen—the notorious Red Baron—as in the days of yore, when the comic strip was de rigueur school bus reading for middle schoolers.

Snoopy does tons of this. I would like to have seen more of Snoopy's philosophical musings while lying atop the doghouse—such as the realization that when woken from sleep to a refilled dog food bowl, he finds that his head is awake but his stomach is asleep. Whereas later, in the middle of the night with an empty bowl, he finds his head is asleep but his stomach is awake. This is profound stuff, man … kids need to know this stuff.

Buy your kids the complete works of Charles S. Shultz for Christmas.

Getting the Girl

We get to see that Charlie Brown is like all of us: a little bit genius when he really applies himself. (He reads "Leo Toy-store's" entire book, "War and Peace" in one day.)

In the end, even though his lack of self-confidence succeeds so often in making him the goat (that's not today's meaning of G.O.A.T.—"Greatest Of All Time") instead of the hero, the little red-haired girl explains something to one and all: She has recognized that Charlie Brown, in his trying, did kind, compassionate, wise, truthful, and tolerant things. This is pure gold for children.

'A Charlie Brown Christmas'

Don't just buy or rent this movie—buy your kids the complete works of Charles S. Shultz for Christmas. Children must be initiated into the world and stories of the Great Pumpkin, kite-eating trees, 5¢ psychiatry, the saga of Linus's blanket, the incredible angst of having to learn Bible passages by heart for the Christmas pageant, the secret of the dust magnet that is Pig-Pen, what "Ha-Ha Herman" was, what was up with Frieda's flaccid cat, how Violet and Patty were the original mean girls, and much, much more. Charlie Brown books should come right after Grimm's fairy tales.

Just like Richard Dreyfus's character says at the end of "Stand By Me": "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was 12." Well lemme tell ya: I never really had any side-splitting, stomach-aching, teary-eyed, can't-breathe, runny-nosed, rolling-on-the-ground laugh sessions like the ones I had in 6th grade, recounting and reenacting the adventures of Charlie Brown and the Peanuts gang with friends and classmates during recess.

Oh! False alarm, folks! It appears that the "A Charlie Brown Christmas"-deprived masses raised a hue and a cry, and it shall therefore air on Dec. 13, 2020, on PBS, after all. Smiley-face emoticon!

(Left) Noah Schnapp as the voice of Charlie Brown. (Right) Alexander Garfin as the voice of Linus.

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REACHING WITHIN:
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Following Our Heart: 'The Inspiration of Saint Matthew'

ERIC BESS

I believe we all, at one point or another, struggle with authenticity in our lives. Some of us follow our hearts and hope for the best.

But what might it mean to follow one's heart? Is it merely to follow the ephemerality of our desires and to be compelled by the intensity of our emotions? Or is it to connect with something deeper, something spiritual, something eternal?

Considering this question makes me think of one of Caravaggio's paintings of St. Matthew.

St. Matthew's body also suggests the struggle between the holy aspirations of the mind and the temptations of the earthly body.

Caravaggio's Inspired St. Matthew

In 1602, Caravaggio painted a second version of "The Inspiration of Saint Matthew" after his first version was rejected by the patron for these specific paintings, Cardinal Contarelli.

St. Matthew is one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, an author of one of the four gospels, and one of the four evangelists mentioned in "Revelations." In that final book of the New Testament, the four evangelists are accompanied by four living creatures, with St. Matthew's being a winged man, an angel.

In "The Inspiration of Saint Matthew," Caravaggio depicted St. Matthew being inspired by an angel. The angel descends from above and communicates with Matthew amid a background of darkness. The angel, as he counts off directives on the fingers of his left hand, seems to give specific instructions to the saint.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Inspiration of Saint Matthew," 1602, by Caravaggio. Oil on Canvas; 9 feet 8.5 inches by 6 feet 2.5 inches. Contarelli Chapel, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

St. Matthew turns from his table and book and looks up humbly at the angel to receive the instructions. There appears to be a sense of urgency in the saint's demeanor as he simultaneously twists his body to accept the angel's instructions and readies his pen to touch the page.

Caravaggio depicted Matthew with one knee perched on a stool, a stool that appears to be wobbling under the weight of the saint because one of the stool's legs hangs over the ledge or platform that holds the saint, the stool, and the table.

Caravaggio used a technique often referred to as "trompe l'oeil" (French for "deceive the eye") to make the leg of the bench appear as if it is not a mere painting but part of our world. Trompe l'oeil was also used for the bottom of Saint Matthew's robe and the corner of the book that is foreshortened toward us.

All of these areas are made to seem as if they are real, as if we could reach out and help steady the bench, touch the saint's robe, or with one finger push the corner of the book back onto the table.

The angel descends to communicate a specific message, which is suggested by his hand gestures.

Restoring Faith Through Art

Caravaggio was painting for the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation (16th and early 17th centuries). The Protestant Reformation rejected Catholic art as idolatrous, and the Catholic Church's response to this accusation was to claim that art could help spread the Word of God and encourage faith.

Cardinal Contarelli commissioned Caravaggio to make three paintings of St. Matthew, Contarelli's patron saint, for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi. These types of paintings were typically commissioned by the Catholic Church, which believed in the importance of saints whereas Protestants did not.

Painting images that illustrated stories from the Bible alongside the lives of the saints reinforced the Catholic Church's stance on the importance of art.

Communicating the Pure, Innocent, and Heavenly

But what message might we gather from Caravaggio's painting for today? What might this painting offer our hearts and minds?

First, the angel is depicted as being very young. He descends from above and is dressed in a white robe. The angel's white robe and young age are symbolic of his purity and innocence; his descension is symbolic of the fact that he is not from this world but from heaven.

The angel descends to communicate a specific message, which is suggested by his hand gestures. The specific message of an angel whose nature is pure, innocent, and heavenly can only be a pure, innocent, and heavenly message.

St. Matthew has a halo around his head, representing his dedication to a holy life. He dons a red robe, a color that often represents the sacrifice, that is, the selflessness of Jesus's sacrifice. Matthew's body is turned toward the table and book on which he writes, but his head is turned toward the angel.

To me, the twisting of St. Matthew's body represents several things. It represents that the mind must turn away from worldly things and turn toward the pure, innocent, and heavenly if one is to lead a holy life; that is, the mind must turn within.

I find it interesting that the background is dark but that the angel and the angel's robe are painted in a somewhat semicircular shape to suggest a profile view of the human brain. Not only that, but the head of the angel is placed where the pineal gland would be located.

At this time in Western philosophy, the pineal gland was and had long been thought to regulate the flow of spirits or house the soul. Descartes, a contemporary of Caravaggio's (though writing after this painting was completed), would develop this idea further, suggesting that the pineal gland was the seat of the soul and the place where thoughts form.

Keeping this in mind, I think the contortion of St. Matthew's body also suggests the struggle between the holy aspirations of the mind and the temptations of the earthly body. Is this why St. Matthew seems to struggle in balancing himself on his stool, a stool that seems to fall into our world, a world full of temptation?

But what else in the painting appears to come into our world? The book does; it represents the message communicated by the angel—a message of all that is pure, innocent, and heavenly. Part of the red robe does as well, the part that drapes over the bench, a representation of selfless sacrifice.

Is it, then, that Caravaggio is suggesting to us that if we balance ourselves so as to turn away from temptation and sacrifice our worldly desires, we can access that part of our inner selves that houses the pure, innocent, and heavenly aspects of our souls? And wouldn't that help make us holier?

And if this is so, then wouldn't it be the case that this inner holiness—if we keep our minds focused on the pure, innocent, and heavenly aspects of our souls—can carry over into our careers, our hobbies, and our relationships so that we have a divinely inspired, trompe l'oeil effect on the world around us?

I've talked a lot about the mind instead of the heart, but I think it's undeniable that the two affect one another. Attributes such as selflessness, purity, innocence, and the heavenly can be applied to both the mind and heart. Resisting temptation can apply to matters of both the mind and heart.

Is this, at least to some degree, a starting point for embodying what it means to authentically follow our hearts?

Art has an incredible ability to point to what can't be seen so that we may ask "What does this mean for me and for everyone who sees it?" "How has it influenced the past and how might it influence the future?" "What does it suggest about the human experience?" These are some of the questions I explore in my series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart."

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

Gaelic Psalm Singing: A Tradition Like the Sea

The singing tradition that connects Scots with God and each other

J.H. WHITE

"This unique and primal music form has clung to me. Like the clinging of my mother's love, it never lets go," says Scottish musical artist and producer Calum Martin.

"What makes Gaelic psalm singing special is the mixture of the voices—the great voices, the voices that are not so great. That mixture in a communal, church setup makes it spiritually, totally unique."

Gaelic psalm singing is a Scottish tradition dating back to 1659, when Presbyterian ministers translated psalms into Gaelic. A precentor sings the opening lines of the psalm, and the church congregation—which, in the past, could have been a thousand members—float in. No instruments accompany them, so each person sings to his or her own tempo and rhythm, eventually returning to the same note in the melody.

Martin, who teaches Gaelic psalm singing, explains how the tradition simultaneously connects one with the congregation and with divinity.

"There are two things happening at a Gaelic psalm service: the vertical and horizontal," he says. "The vertical connection is between you and God when you're singing the psalms. You've got the basic melody in your head, but around the basic melody, you are weaving your own unique grace notes to it."

"At the same time, you're aware of the horizontal. You're aware of what other people are doing," connecting you to hundreds of people in worship. The song and tempo have been slowed down so much that even if a singer goes ahead, the others eventually catch up.

"People say it's like the to-ing and fro-ing of the sea," he says.

The Tradition

"Gaelic psalm singing is like a language. It's always been with me," Martin says. As a 4-year-old, his grandfather would take him to sing in church.

Martin explains that Gaelic psalm singing is first learned at home during family worship every morning and evening. Everyone in the family would sing together, learning the psalms. Then on Sunday, all the families would congregate for Sunday service.

"It was very important that everyone took part in the actual singing," he says. Since each singer adds his or her own grace notes, it's a very personal experience. Then, the singers all blend together into the melody, making it a connected sound and feeling as well.

The melodies sung in Gaelic psalm singing come from the 16th-century English Book of Psalms. But Sean-nós (Irish for "old style") singing, an ancient Scottish and Irish Gaelic tradition, also influenced Gaelic psalm singing. Sean-nós is a highly ornamental a cappella style, allowing singers free expression.

Martin emphasizes that Gaelic psalm singing is not a choir, which typically has a written four-part vocal harmony of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. A conductor then directs the specific tempo.

Gaelic psalm singing, in contrast, takes the core melody and slows it down.

"Tempo is suspended. It is going so slow that the offset of the tempo along with the grace notes makes it harmonic," he says.

Martin believes that the effect of just the voices to-ing and fro-ing without instrumentation is like nothing else in music. "The voice is so different from anything. There's nothing to compare to the voice."

Across the Ocean

The call-and-response style of "Gaelic psalm singing is in the melting pot of every form of American music," Martin says, repeating the words of Willie Ruff, a musician and a retired professor of the Yale School of Music.

Ruff told Martin that Gaelic psalm singing—like the rhythms from the Caribbean and call and response from Africa—was embedded into the fabric of what would become Americana music.

In the mid-18th century, Martin explains, 50,000 Gaelic-speaking Scots settled in Cape Fear, North Carolina. Both whites and blacks would go to church together and sing in Gaelic. The famous jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, of Scot descent, had told Ruff about this heritage of Gaelic psalm singing, Martin says.

But it wasn't until Ruff visited a black Presbyterian church that he really investigated Gaelic psalm singing. Ruff grew up in Sheffield, Alabama. In his youth, he went to a black Baptist church and sang in a form called "lining out," a forerunner of Gaelic psalm singing.

Lining out is done in a manner similar to Gaelic psalm singing, but it's in English, the language used before the psalms were translated into Gaelic. Lining out is still sung in certain churches in Alabama and Kentucky.

"Ruff went to this black Presbyterian church and, lo and behold, they sung exactly the same lining out that Willie remembered from his youth," Martin recounts. Ruff went to the church elders and asked them, "When did you black Presbyterians pinch our black Baptist way of singing?"

The black elders replied: "We've always done it like that. It is rumored that on the West coast of Scotland, white Presbyterians do it in the Gaelic language."

Ruff jumped on a plane and flew to the Scottish Isle of Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, where he met Martin and told him this story.

Preserving His Heritage

"The days of 1,000 people singing regularly at service on the island here at communions, we'll likely never see those days again," Martin says. "But I hope I'm wrong."

Martin explains that hundreds of thousands of Scots have never heard of Gaelic psalm singing.

"We didn't hide it from anyone, but it stayed within the church walls," he says.

As fewer and fewer Scots speak Gaelic, the singing tradition is at risk of being lost forever. Martin has been involved with many initiatives to preserve it, from symposiums with Indian singers to successful online classes during the lockdown, garnering over 10,000 views.

Calum Martin recently released an album with Grammy-winning composer Craig Armstrong.

Martin also recently released an album with Grammy-winning composer Craig Armstrong. The album, "The Edge of The Sea," consists of two new works: "Martyrdom" and "Ballantyne." The former is based on a traditional late-18th-century melody. For the latter work, Martin wrote the melody. The UK's leading string orchestra, the Scottish Ensemble, performs alongside a congregation that Martin curated from his home on the isle of Lewis and Harris.

"We've done something that's never been done before," Martin says. He's referring to the combination of instrumental music with real Gaelic psalm singing, which has always been unaccompanied. It was all recorded live, as one take, with no overdubs or sampling.

To Martin, Gaelic psalm singing isn't just a singing tradition. "It's part of our DNA. It's our spiritual tradition. It's part of who we are," he says.

J.H. White is an arts, culture, and men's fashion journalist living in New York.

BOOK REVIEW

Remembering Our Beginnings

LINDA WIEGENFELD

At this moment in history, let's remind ourselves of all we stand to lose if we turn away from tradition and the profound ideas that made the American experiment so successful. Mike Huckabee and Steve Feazel's new book, "The Three Cs That Made America Great: Christianity, Capitalism, and the Constitution," does this for us.

Mike Huckabee is a Christian minister and a political commentator who served as governor of Arkansas. He was also twice a Republican presidential candidate. Steve Feazel, a retired ordained minister, has produced three award-winning, faith-based documentaries.

"The Three Cs" is a thoroughly researched book, with so much information that I recommend not rushing through it. Read each section separately to allow time to absorb what is said.

Christian Heritage and Religious Liberty

The authors feel that America's greatness rests with its deep relationship with God. The morality of America's Christian heritage significantly influenced every aspect of colonial life and was at the heart of many of the laws beginning in the colonial days and continuing to today.

Other nations have looked to America as a beacon of hope, the authors remind us. Examples include the French during World War II, the Holocaust survivors when our troops freed them from Hitler's death camps, and today as people all over the world await a lifesaving drug to be created in the United States for COVID-19.

In covering how Christianity developed in the colonies, the authors focus on the religious fervor of early colonists, the charters of the different colonies, the religious ideas of the Founders, and so much more. We may have a general idea of religious life in the colonies, but reading the rich details included here leads to greater understanding of ideas we have today.

The authors contrast how Christianity was practiced in the old country with how it was practiced in the colonies. In Europe, the idea persisted that all people's religious beliefs must be the same, and this led to religious persecution for all those whose beliefs differed. Because of this, many of the colonists sought to establish their own unique relationship to God by escaping from Europe's tumultuous political climate. They were willing to risk everything for this freedom.

In thinking about our laws regarding religion today, the authors stress the First Amendment's "establishment clause," which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." This clause was not written to diminish Christianity's influence, but only to make sure that one denomination would not be favored over another. This was quite different from the way it was done in Europe, where there had been official state churches.

Many believe that separation of church and state is stated in the Constitution. It is not, the authors remind us. What is meant by that phrase is not that religion cannot be a part of government but that government cannot encroach into religion.

The authors conclude this section by saying that religious freedom is being chipped away one small bit at a time. Readers will likely agree, as Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. does; he recently echoed this thought when he said, "In certain quarters religious liberty has fast become a disfavored right."

Capitalism

At the heart of establishing the colonies was capitalism. The settlers were escaping feudalism, common throughout Europe, where the king owned and dispensed land to his nobles, who in return gave the king political security. Peasant farmers worked on the noblemen's estates but did not own the land. Land was the key to wealth, and the ordinary citizen had little or no hope of owning it or gaining his own wealth.

In America's early days, land was still the prerequisite for generating wealth, and the settlers of colonial America, hoping to escape the intrusive hand of government, were now able to own it. When the Revolutionary War left the United States hugely in debt to France, George Washington's first administration offered western land at one dollar an acre to help pay that debt. The cheap land had to be used or developed by those who purchased it. Also, the new nation did not have funds to pay the soldiers who won its independence, so instead of cash, the soldiers were paid in land grants.

Capitalism grew, and soon land was not the only means to wealth. The authors not only explain how this became a dynamic force in America but also cite how America overcame some of capitalism's imperfections over the years.

The most interesting part of this section puts a personal face on this dynamic with the stories of individual entrepreneurs: Cornelius Vanderbilt, Sam Walton, Alexander Graham Bell, Rush Limbaugh, Frederick W. Smith, and so on.

The quote by the authors says much about capitalism: "More people have been lifted out of poverty by capitalism than any other economic system ever to appear in the history of the world."

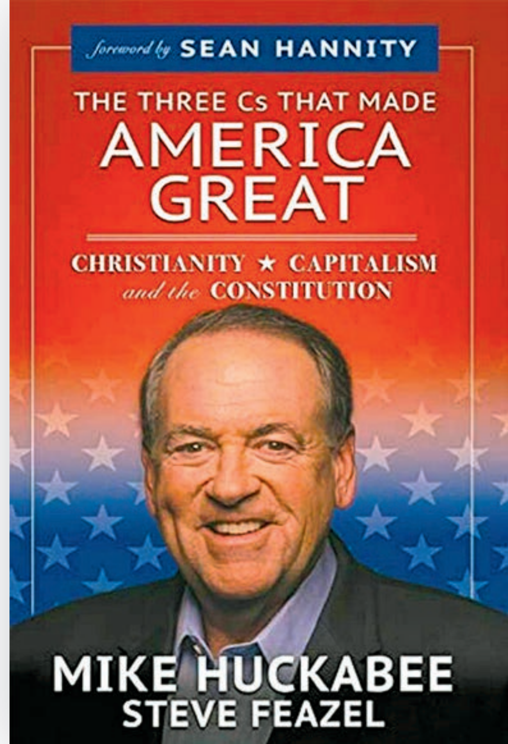
The Constitution

The Constitution of the United States begins with the words "We the People." These three words proclaim that the Constitution would be founded for the benefit of its people and not for those who would govern them.

"This was revolutionary at the time because most nations were ruled by a monarchy," the book states. "The Constitution of the United States is the oldest active constitution in the world and one of the shortest in volume."

The authors contend that most Americans today likely have no idea how precarious the situation was for our young nation during the summer of 1787. The 13 colonies had become states, united together to declare independence, and had fought a war together. But could it be guaranteed that all 13 would remain one nation? What if states of a particular region would want to form their own nation?

The idea behind a constitution was to have a foundation upon which the rest of the country's laws would be built. But the challenge in forming a new government through a constitution was that it had to create a government with enough power to act on a national level, but without too much power that might put fundamental rights at risk. The Founders knew government was a necessity, but they were suspicious of its becoming so big and so powerful that it would jeopardize individual liberties. They did not wish to create a government that would be a homegrown version of the one they had once suffered under.



Mike Huckabee and Steve Feazel's new book explores the foundations of our country.

Today, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments to the United States Constitution) are regarded as one entity that works to protect the liberties of the people by restraining the power of a centralized government.

At the end of the book, the authors have a section called "Corruption," which among other things exposes the current corruption in government and our culture and shows the reader how the Constitution is being undermined.

So far, the Constitution has withstood the test of time, but can it continue to do so? John Adams said: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Linda Wiegenfeld is a retired teacher with 45 years' experience teaching children. She can be reached for comments or suggestions at LWiegenfeld@aol.com

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Faith Born of Tragedy and the Mercy of Divine Intervention

IAN KANE

There are certain classic American films that I can't believe I've never seen—even those that have become timelessly inspirational and have captured the collective goodwill of our great country and peoples. Directed by Frank Capra in 1946, "It's a Wonderful Life" is one of those timeless classics.

George Bailey (James Stewart) was born and raised in the fictional town of Bedford Falls, along with his younger brother, Harry Bailey (Todd Karns). By all accounts, they had a good upbringing, having been reared in a modest household by their parents, Pa Bailey (Samuel S. Hinds) and Mrs. Bailey (Beulah Bondi).

Stewart begins as a wholesome pinnacle of small-town America who eventually descends into near madness.

Pa Bailey owns and operates a local building and loan business (which finances homes for locals) along with help from Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell); Pa wants to hand it down to George after he retires. However, although he respects his father, George has aspirations of traveling abroad and doing great things, such as designing and building grand constructs. In other words—he has big dreams.

Unfortunately, just as George is about to leave Bedford Falls and actualize those dreams, his father suffers a stroke and passes away. George resigns himself to taking over the reins of his father's business for a while longer. This puts him into direct conflict with Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), a conniving businessman who owns most of the town and has been trying to add Pa Bailey's business for years. With Pa Bailey out of the picture, Potter intensifies his acquisition plans.

As the years roll on, George, slightly bitter from having to stay in Bedford Falls, half-heartedly pursues good-hearted local girl Mary Hatch (Donna Reed). Meanwhile, Harry has gone off to college. (George nobly gave his own saved college money to his brother when he decided to stay and manage the family business.) When Harry returns, having graduated with some acclaim, George also discovers that Harry's new father-in-law has offered Harry a well-paying position at a far-off location.

George begrudgingly accepts his lot—that of a small-town businessman—and decides to tie the knot with Mary. As World War II begins, many of the townspeople go off to fight abroad, including Harry. George and Mary start their own family, while he and Uncle Billy constantly ward off attacks by the ever-scheming Potter. They barely manage to keep the family business afloat. Harry eventually returns from World War II as a hero.

As one particular Christmas season arrives in Bedford Falls, a financial tragedy befalls George's business, causing a domino effect of other bad situations. George makes a succession of bad decisions that take him to the crossroads; he contemplates suicide and begs God for help.

His prayers are answered; an angel named Clarence (Henry Travers) arrives. When George explains that he wishes he'd never been born, Clarence grants that wish and transports him to an alternate reality in which he never existed.

George doesn't quite believe the angel at first. But as he visits the people and places of an alternate Bedford Falls, he comes to see how his good-natured and self-sacrificing presence has had a profoundly positive influence. But has George realized this too late? Will he be able to return to the real existence he wanted to throw away?

Filmmaking at Its Best

As a fan of "what if" scenarios, I discovered this was a wonderful family drama (with some dark fantasy elements) that almost plays out like an enhanced "Twilight Zone" episode. Under Capra's phenomenal direction, the star-studded cast is a real pleasure to watch.

Stewart fits his role very well, beginning as a wholesome pinnacle of small-town America who eventually descends into near madness. He and Reed's romantic elements seem believable, with the latter's character trying as best she can to support her husband as he begins to crack under tremendous pressures. Mitchell, a revered character actor with a top-tier filmography, brings his Uncle Billy character to life as an extremely supportive familial influence who makes a critical error but later redeems himself.

Together with the other members of the film's fine cast, it achieves a level of grandeur seldom seen on the silver screen. And along with all of this is its hopeful message of God, family, friends, and community, of self-sacrifice and faith. "It's a Wonderful Life" is a surefire way to inspire even the most ardent of holiday curmudgeons. Just remember to keep some tissues handy because the ending is pretty tear-inducing.

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

RKO RADIO PICTURES

Wealthy businessman Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore, front L) tries to outthink George Bailey (James Stewart, R), in "It's a Wonderful Life."

An ecstatic reunion: George Bailey (James Stewart) with his children greets his radiant wife, Mary (Donna Reed).

'It's a Wonderful Life'

Director
Frank Capra

Starring
James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore

Running Time
2 hours, 10 minutes

Not Rated
PG

Release Date
Jan. 7, 1947 (USA)

★★★★★

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