

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

US-PD



Pranks, jokes, and general merriness can certainly help in tough times. "A Boy and a Girl With a Cat and an Eel," circa 1635, by Judith Leyster. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.

HUMOR

Giggles, Smiles, and Belly Laughs: Comedy and Culture

Humor can help us survive many a dark night as well as deepen our understanding of others and ourselves.

JEFF MINICK

In the film "Mary Poppins," Ed Wynn, Julie Andrews, and Dick Van Dyke sing "I Love to Laugh," a hilarious song that sends Wynn and Van Dyke floating to the ceiling from sheer joy and exuberance.

Here is the final stanza:
The more you laugh
The more you fill with glee
And the more the glee
The more we're a merrier we.

A piece on laughter, jokes, comedy, and humor may seem somehow out-of-place on an "Arts and Culture" page, but comedy is a core piece of our culture. Playwrights like Aristophanes and Shakespeare, a poet like Geoffrey Chaucer and his work "The Canterbury Tales," and writers like

Mark Twain, P.G. Wodehouse, and Lewis Grizzard all produced works that brought laughter to their audiences. The list of such writers is extensive, and their humor ranges from farce to satire, from broad, earthy humor that brings a belly laugh to sophisticated drawing room comedy—think Oscar Wilde—that produces a grin or a chuckle.

Sometimes, of course, reasons for laughter are in short supply. Certainly, the events of the past year have trounced those of us who enjoy a good joke or who find the absurd entertaining. True, the absurd and the ridiculous are in abundance these days, particularly in Washington, D.C., but most of us have trouble laughing at pandemic restrictions, senseless riots, and a barrage of executive orders. It's tough to laugh in tough times.

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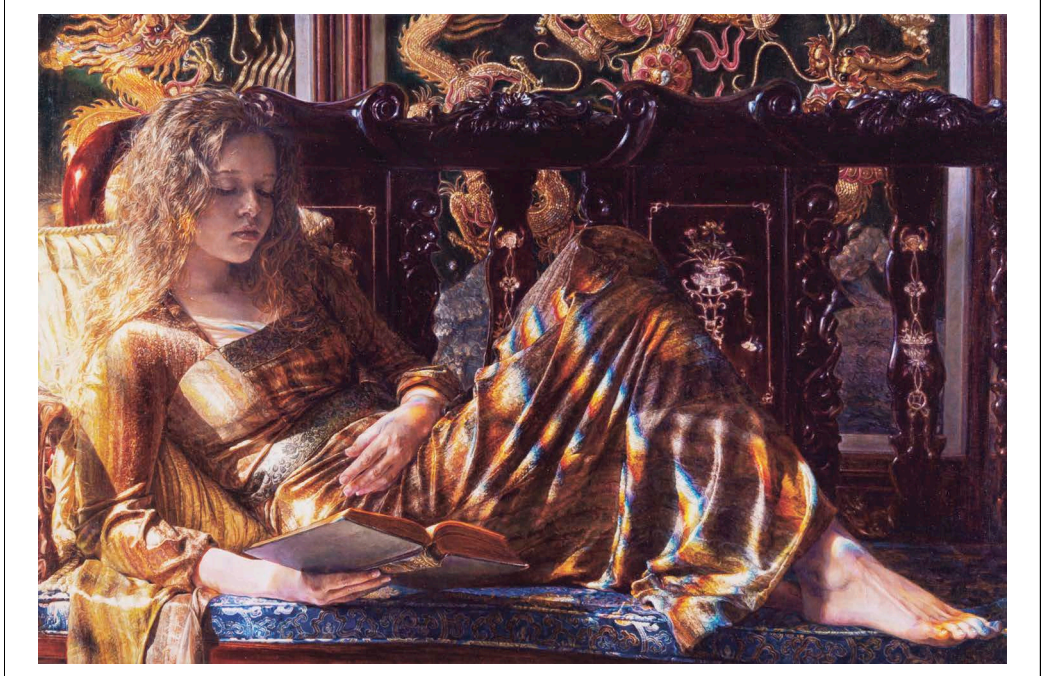
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FINE ARTS

‘Virginia Arcadia’ at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

LORRAINE FERRIER

What’s 215 feet high, 90 feet long, and has been admired in great art and literature for centuries—from Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia” to Herman Melville’s “Moby-Dick” to Frederic Edwin Church’s landscape paintings?

Here’s another hint: Jefferson bought it, along with 157 acres of land, from King George III of England for 20 shillings in 1774. And he owned it until he died.

The answer is Virginia’s Natural Bridge, a naturally occurring arch over 400 million years old that geologists believe was once the roof of an underground river cave.

The Natural Bridge is one of the most frequently depicted sites in 19th-century American landscape painting, according to Christopher C. Oliver, the assistant curator of American art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Oliver mentioned the fact as part of an impassioned online opening talk for the museum’s new exhibition, “Virginia Arcadia: The Natural Bridge in American Art,” which he curated.

The exhibition explores the phenomenon of the Natural Bridge as seen in 60 paintings, prints, photographs, and decorative art objects from 1775 to the early 1900s. It’s important to note that the site is a significant cultural, historical landmark for the Monacan nation, of the Eastern Siouan people, who long predate European and colonial connections with the Natural Bridge.

Oliver titled the exhibition “Virginia Arcadia” because the Arcadian

vision is so prominent in 18th- and 19th-century American as well European landscape painting, he says.

Beyond Picturesque: Sublime Thomas Jefferson described the Natural Bridge as “the most sublime of Nature’s works” in his “Notes on the State of Virginia.”

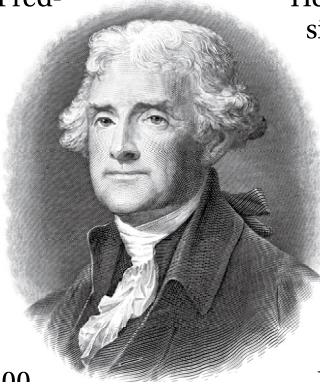
He added: “It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable!”

In his Monticello home, Jefferson hung two paintings of the Natural Bridge by Virginia artist David Roberts (which had been gifted to him when he was president) beside artwork depicting

another great American icon: Niagara Falls. “Jefferson, as we explore in this exhibition, becomes really the first and major proponent not only of the Natural Bridge, but sets its importance by rhetorically pairing it with Niagara Falls,” Oliver says.

To display how Jefferson placed the Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls artworks together at Monticello, the exhibition created a copy of a pediment window on the wall next to the paintings where they likely hung. The window was a prominent feature of the dining room.

Also included in the exhibition, which further illustrates Jefferson’s love for the Natural Bridge, is an unusual portrait of Jefferson. It’s unusual because rather than being portrayed in the more formal setting seen in his peers’ portraits, Jefferson is depicted



“The most sublime of Nature’s works.”

Thomas Jefferson, president

COURTESY OF REYNOLDA HOUSE MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



“Natural Bridge, Virginia,” 1860, by David Johnson. Oil on canvas. Winston-Salem, N.C. Gift of Philip Hanes Jr., in honor of Charles H. Babcock Sr., Reynolda House Museum of American Art. Reynolda House is an affiliate of Wake Forest University.

COURTESY OF VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



“Natural Bridge, Virginia,” 1860, by David Johnson. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

in nature with the Natural Bridge in the background, Oliver explains.

The portrait was put on display in the New York City Shakespeare Gallery, just days after Jefferson’s inauguration in 1801.

In the portrait, self-taught artist Caleb Boyle painted Jefferson almost as “a gentleman farmer type figure, erudite, though, in his appreciation of the landscape, here in the kind of hinterlands of the nation, in the wilderness of Virginia at the Natural Bridge,” Oliver says.

Romance of the Hudson River School

“The rise of American landscape painters that we so frequently call the Hudson River School, which has a firm basis in the tradition of English Romantic painting, really rises shortly after Jefferson’s death [in 1835],” Oliver says.

In 1851, American painter Frederic Edwin Church depicted the Natural Bridge. Church was a second-generation Hudson River School painter, known for his detailed and Romantic style.

“Church was following the mold of his mentor Thomas Cole, in that kind of subtle combination of landscape and history: That is, a painting could be a representation of contemporary landscape but also about American history,” Oliver says.

In Church’s Natural Bridge painting, two figures are slightly off to the center-right: A lady sits perched on a rock listening intently to a man, who is telling an animated tale.

The man is Patrick Henry, the first caretaker of the Natural Bridge, a former slave who purchased his own freedom and whom Jefferson employed. In the painting, he throws his hand skyward, and we might think he’s merely pointing out the bridge. But Oliver believes he’s pointing to the Western Trail that’s hinted at by a small fence, which Church painted on the arch. The Great Wagon Road, constructed between 1720 and 1763, took travelers near the Natural Bridge.

Oliver recounts how Church

painted the color of the Natural Bridge accurately. Church’s traveling companion and patron, Cyrus West Field, offered Church a selection of rocks he’d collected from the Natural Bridge site. He thought Church might find them useful to color match the Natural Bridge when painting the scene back in his New York studio. Church declined. He’d made a series of sketches onsite, some of which are in the exhibition; he’d used a number system to color code the scene, with entries such as “5—rich orange rust.”

Another second-generation Hudson River School artist was David Johnson. His painting of the Natural Bridge is also featured in the exhibition. Johnson was a luminist, focusing on detailed paintings with an emphasis on light and ensuring that the brushwork was concealed.

Two examples in the exhibition are known as “paired views,” where the artist would paint a wide-angle composition of a landscape and then paint another view that focuses on a particular detail.

A Whale of an American Icon

As for the Natural Bridge mentioned in Melville’s “Moby-Dick,” Oliver, in the exhibition’s opening presentation, brings the excitement of the first whale hunt to life as he reads Melville’s words:

“But soon the fore part of him slowly rose from the water; for an instant his whole marbled body formed a high arch, like Virginia’s Natural Bridge ...”

Oliver explains that Melville was aware, as all writers are, of the “visual currency” of iconic images. And across the globe, in Europe and in the United States, people would have understood Melville’s reference, he says.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibition “Virginia Arcadia: The Natural Bridge in American Art,” runs until Aug. 1. To find out more about paintings of the Natural Bridge, visit VMFA.museum



(Above) “The Natural Bridge, Virginia,” 1852, by Frederic Edwin Church. Oil on canvas. Gift of Thomas Fortune Ryan. The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia.



(Right) “Natural Bridge, Virginia,” circa 1835, by Jacob Caleb Ward. Oil on panel. Purchase, William Rockhill Nelson Trust. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo.



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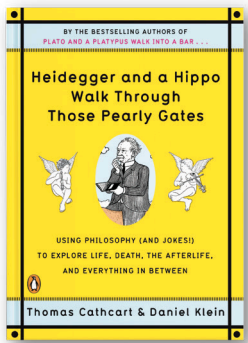
Don Knotts and Andy Griffith as their characters—Barney Fife and Andy Taylor—in a 1965 still taken from a CBS variety special.

HUMOR

Giggles, Smiles, and Belly Laughs: Comedy and Culture

Continued from Page 1

But times such as ours are exactly when we need humor, laughter, comedy, and jokes. They satisfy a real human need and can help us survive many a dark night as well as deepen our understanding of others and ourselves. Let's start our exploration of humor in the strangest of places: Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.



Humor as a Shield

Tyrants and repression are often the butt of jokes, though the teller must practice discretion or else face a prison sentence and even execution. Here are three jokes from the old days:

Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring are standing on top of the Berlin radio tower, looking down on the people below. Hitler says he wants to do something to put a smile on the faces of these beleaguered Berliners. Göring replies, "Why don't you jump?"

Three men are sharing a cell in a Moscow jail. When asked by his companions why he is under arrest, the first man says, "I criticized Karl Radek." The second man says, "What? I'm here because I spoke in favor of Radek!" The two men turn to the third, who shrugs and says, "I'm Karl Radek."

An elderly grandmother and her 12-year-old granddaughter were sitting in the kitchen slicing up potatoes for their supper. "Tell me, granddaughter," the old woman said, "about Communism. They must teach you about it in school. What will life become under Stalin?"

"Oh, Grandmother," the girl says. "They tell us that under Comrade Stalin and Communism the shops will be filled with food—butter, meat, milk, and all sorts of vegetables. You'll be able to buy anything you want."

"Ahi!" the old woman cried out joyfully. "Just like under the Czar!"

These and many other underground jokes enabled those under the lash of fascism and communism to keep up their spirits. Humor became a defense against Big Brother.

Laughing Away Fear

Here in America, the formal joke seems to have gone the way of coonskin caps and petticoats. Instead, the comedians I listen to and enjoy bring laughter to their audiences by personal reminiscences or cultural commentaries. They're funny, but they're not really telling jokes like the old comedians: Bob Hope, Phyllis Diller, Jack Benny, and so many others.

And few of my friends or family crack wise with the jokes. Most of them have a great sense of humor, but they rouse my laughter by recounting amusing anecdotes about the grandchildren, or their work, or their everyday encounters with other people.

In this sense, I wonder if I'm the last of a breed. I still love to tell jokes, stories removed from my own life with funny punch lines, particularly those about the afterlife like this one:

Joe steps up to the Pearly Gates, where St. Peter awaits him with a big book laid out on a desk. After Joe identifies himself, St. Peter studies a page in the book and then says, "You haven't really done much good in the world, I'm afraid. Maybe you can tell me something I'm not finding here."

"I do have one thing I could add," Joe said. "I was driving down the road when I saw three guys with motorcycles harassing

a young woman. I could tell they were up to no good, so I pulled my car to the curb, got out, took the tire iron from the trunk, went up to those guys, and told them if they didn't leave that girl alone they'd have to deal with me."

"Now that is impressive," Saint Peter said. "When did that happen?"

"Oh, about 10 minutes ago."

I found that gem in Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein's "Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through the Pearly Gates: Using Philosophy (and Jokes!) to Explore Life, Death, the Afterlife, and Everything in Between," a hilarious read and a goldmine if, like me, you enjoy jokes.

Cathcart and Klein use jokes to illustrate their philosophical points and to allay our fears of death and dying. By adopting this same lighthearted approach, we can relieve all kinds of stress in our lives.

Providing a Mirror

When we consider situational comedies, or sitcoms, we usually think of television shows like "The Andy Griffith Show," "All in the Family," or "Seinfeld."

But sitcoms are as old as greasepaint and stage props. Aristophanes's 2,500-year-old "Lysistrata" features a humorous battle between the sexes in which the women of Athens led by Lysistrata refuse relations with the men until they end the Peloponnesian War. Comedic writer Plautus could be said to have singlehandedly created Roman theater, and many centuries later, Shakespeare would incorporate one of his works into "A Comedy of Errors."

These plays, and some television shows as well, serve purposes other than inducing laughter. Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," for example, investigates marriage and relationships between men and women. Feste, the fool in the play who sees through the motives of others and laughs at their shenanigans, famously says, "Better a witty fool than a foolish wit." And those in the audience then and now surely nod in agreement with this bit of wisdom.

We laugh at Mayberry's Deputy Barney



PUBLIC DOMAIN

A portrait, before 1681, by Pietro Paolini, of Tiberio Fiorilli playing Scaramouche. Scaramouche is a stock clown character, usually a boastful coward, of the 16th-century commedia dell'arte.

In the last few decades, comedy has lost some of its class.

Fife in "The Andy Griffith Show," but for many viewers, I suspect that the show's lasting success—my children and grandchildren still watch it today—is also due to nostalgia, a longing within us for the simple life of a small town.

These performances therefore act as a mirror for us, a looking-glass reflecting our faults, foibles, and desires.

Good Medicine for Us and for the Culture

A good laugh can also improve our health. The Mayo Clinic reports that laughter can relieve stress, improve the immune system, and even relieve pain. In her online piece "Laughter Is the Best Medicine," forensic psychiatrist Kavita Khajuria discusses the mental, physical, and spiritual benefits of laughter and a sense of humor, reinforcing the findings of the Mayo Clinic and writing: "Of all the commonly endorsed character strengths, humor contributes most strongly to life satisfaction."

Laughter can also act as medicine for a culture. The humor in classics like Cervantes's "Don Quixote," Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," or Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita" may range from satire to simple jokes, but the intention of the authors is to bring a smile to our faces as well as a lesson to our hearts. Cervantes mocked chivalry, Dickens miserliness, Twain racism, and Bulgakov communist authoritarianism. And they did so in part by inducing laughter in their readers.

From the musical comedies of Gilbert and Sullivan, which poked gentle fun at Victorian manners and mores, to the sometimes savage satires of Evelyn Waugh, writers have used humor and wit to cast a light on what they considered the absurdities of their age.

In Rafael Sabatini's novel "Scaramouche," we find this line: "He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad."

That laughter helps keep us sane in a mad world.

Our Treasure Chest of Humor

In the last few decades, comedy has lost some of its class. Many standup comedians routinely lace their performances with obscenities, and some of the movies and television shows purporting to be comedies often offer entertainment that is as crude and juvenile as locker room humor in a middle school. Many of our writers and performers apparently believe that we have lost our appetite for the high-class drollery of an Oscar Wilde, or the innocent and zany buffoonery of a Lucille Ball, and give us dreck instead.

On the other hand, however, we have an attic filled to the eaves with clean traditional comedy, books, plays, poetry, and movies possessed by the power to entertain and teach, and to make us laugh. If we look just at one category, romantic comedies on film, we can find older classics like "It Happened One Night" or "His Girl Friday," musicals like "The Music Man" or "My Fair Lady," or more recent romcoms like "Sleepless in Seattle" or "Ground Hog Day." All of these bring smiles, and all have lessons to offer if we push into the story.

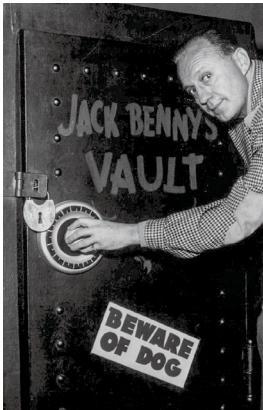
A good laugh brings sunshine in the darkest times. The writers of comedies aim to entertain their audiences and let some light into their lives.

All we have to do is open the shutters and blinds.

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 Jeff Minick.com to follow his blog.



Phil Connors (Bill Murray), in "Groundhog Day."



One of the long-running gags on Jack Benny's show was that he was a miser with a home vault.



Feste (Luis Hendricus Chrispijn), Shakespeare's witty fool, in a circa 1899 production of "Twelfth Night."

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Merriness can certainly help in tough times. "Two Children With a Cat," 1629, by Judith Leyster. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Authors Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein use jokes to illustrate their philosophical points.



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PUBLIC DOMAIN

ARCHITECTURE

Here’s Hoping for Beauty in America

Classicism versus modernism in architecture

DAVID BRUSSAT

One of Donald Trump’s final acts as the nation’s 45th president was to sign an executive order called “Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture.” He signed the order on Dec. 18, 2020, but it had been kicking around for many months since it was leaked from the White House last winter as a draft proposal with the more Trumpian title of “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again.”

At the time, it elicited raspberries from architects of all stripes but support from some, possibly most, classicists. Recently, on Feb. 24, Biden issued his own executive order canceling his predecessor’s tip of the hat toward beauty.

Last October, as if to nudge Trump toward signing the draft order, the National Civic Art Society, a Washington-based organization that promotes classical architecture and had been involved in generating the draft, released a survey by the Harris Poll. It found that almost three-quarters of Americans preferred classical architecture to modernist architecture for federal buildings and courthouses.

The result of the survey was no surprise. Anecdotal evidence and occasional academic research had shown such tendencies for decades. It was as if the survey had discovered, of all things, that people prefer beauty over ugliness.

The Modernist Goal: ‘We Must Kill the Street’

But isn’t beauty in the eye of the beholder? That is certainly the official stance of the architecture community, which has been staunchly pro-modernist since World War II. But many factors affect our perception of beauty, which is also located in the object of the beheld. Unlike classical and traditional architecture, which is based on a system of ornamented structure from ancient Greek and Roman times, modern architecture arose mostly after World War I.

The founding modernists, such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, invented a system of design based on structure shorn of ornament. Many people understandably blamed the crowned heads of Europe for the war’s slaughter, but these architects took that a step further, likening the crowns of royalty to classicism’s roof cornices, blaming the bloodshed on the buildings, as if the proper response was not to change Europe’s ruling aristocracies but to change their buildings.

The public never took to modern architecture. In 1925, Le Corbusier proposed leveling central Paris and replacing the Marais district with 18 widely spaced 60-story tower blocks. The Parisian government rejected his scheme. (Oh, to be a fly on the wall at that meeting!)

In 1931, the popular journalist and editor H.L. Mencken wrote in an editorial for his

(Top left) Classic architecture gives a sense of dignity to public spaces. The Parthenon in Athens, Greece, in 1978. (Top right) Pennsylvania Station, between 1910 and ‘20, as seen from the northeast. U.S. Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs division. (Right) The human eye craves details, which classical architecture provides. Caryatids on an ancient Greek temple in Athens.



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American Mercury magazine: “The New Architecture seems to be making little progress in the United States. ... A new suburb built according to the plans of, say, Le Corbusier would produce a great deal more mirth than admiration.”

Corbu, as his acolytes called him, shrugged all this off and went on in 1933 to write “The Athens Charter,” which promoted the construction of modernist buildings in historical settings to highlight the contrast between the old and the new, but also recommended the demolition of as many old buildings as possible. After World War II and no doubt to H.L. Mencken’s dismay, modernism crossed the Atlantic to America, and the charter helped shift U.S. architecture and city planning in the 1940s and ‘50s toward modernism and urban renewal.

Yet the dirty little secret of the modernists was that the lack of ornament and the rejection of traditional beauty faced considerable skepticism among the public. For modernists, eliminating the competition represented by traditional architecture would become a lifelong obsession. That elimination would make it easier for a new society, led by architects on behalf of socialism, to make headway in a democracy. “We must kill the street,” wrote Corbusier, who hated the disorder represented by humans’ freedom to act as individuals. “We shall truly enter into modern town planning only after we have accepted this preliminary determination.” Most architects know little or nothing of the deconstructivist philosophies that underlie their professional practices to this day. They revere Corbusier without understanding him, and they need only build as they’ve been taught to carry out Corbusier’s vision as expressed in such volumes as “Vers une architecture,” (“Toward a New Architecture,” 1923).

Who Knows More About Architecture?

In 1962, the federal government effectively mandated modernism for federal buildings and courthouses, but in 1963 a fateful decision doomed the monumentally classical Pennsylvania Station in New York City to demolition. This was a tragedy that sparked a historic preservation movement among Americans already anxious to avoid losing their neighborhoods to modern architecture and planning. And yet, backed by corporate elites, modernism firmly established itself in every center of power in the field but one—the housing industry—where individuals rather than committees still built or purchased their own homes. As confirmed by the Harris survey, the public has resisted decades of propaganda and coercion, and remains decidedly averse to modern architecture.

For who in society, from top to bottom, has not experienced architecture on a day-to-day basis since birth? We all have, from the houses we grew up in to the houses of neighbors we played with as children, to the schools we attended and the museums and monuments we visited with our parents, the theaters, galleries, restaurants, shops and stores, nightclubs, houses of worship, shopping districts, colleges and universities, city and town halls, government agencies, amusement parks and stadiums we worked at or enjoyed ourselves in as adults

again and again, for hours every day, day in and day out, for years and years and years.

Those of us who judge the other arts—cinema, theater, painting, sculpture, literature, and the rest—have terribly limited experience on which to judge compared with that we bring to our judgments of architecture. We may not be capable of designing a house, but given a choice we can certainly decide which of two houses we find more pleasing, which of two buildings we find more efficient.

People have every reason to be confident in their preference for beautiful architecture rather than architecture that professional architects have decided is functional—often in spite of technical flaws, inefficiencies, and endless lawsuits over leaks from flat roofs.

Among the modernists’ conceits is that any building deemed functional is by definition beautiful. All but a handful of architecture schools in the United States and around the world are strictly modernist in their curricula, and their first job is to eradicate traditional concepts of beauty from the minds of young students. The result is that on the basis of experience rather than training, the average individual has more sophisticated ideas about architecture than the average architect. This is confirmed by studies that demonstrate how differently buildings are judged by professional architects and the public.

A Look at the Science

While modernist architects claim that science supports their focus on function and technology, advances in neurobiological research indicate that human preferences reflect brain functions tracing back millions of years to survival techniques on the savanna of Africa. Specificity of detail trumps abstract generality in the ability to spot dangers in the natural environment. The perception of the shape of the nose of a lion, visible behind a distant tree trunk, could preserve a life.

The human brain has evolved since then, but the need for detail remains strong—consciously and subconsciously—explaining at least in part the preference for ornament in buildings. Eye-tracking research demonstrates that our visual perception is drawn to detailed surfaces and avoids blank surfaces. Research shows that patterns of biological regeneration tend to reflect the slow development of traditional architectural practices, which unfold generation by generation as builders find better ways to perform age-old methods of construction and design more effectively than the modernist practice of “starting from zero.”

Unlike modernist buildings, traditional buildings become more interesting the closer you get. This reflects nature and natural biological behavior, whereas the substitution of design practices inspired by machinery in the modernist toolkit result not only in deeply divergent results as measured by beauty, but also as measured by the efficiency that modernists claim as their lodestar.

All of these factors, some newly revealed by research and others dating back centuries or millennia, have caused generations of architects to shy away from beauty as a topic in professional and academic discourse.

Modernists are like Dracula confronted by the holy cross. Their incantation that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” can not be sustained for long, even after President Biden’s killing of President Trump’s executive order on behalf of beauty. In the end, beauty will out.

David Brussat has run the Architecture Here and There blog since 2009, and wrote a weekly column on architecture for the Providence Journal from 1990 to 2014. He lives in Providence, R.I.



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.



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/WALT DISNEY STUDIOS MOTION PICTURES

Fern (Frances McDormand) reflecting on life, in “Nomadland.”

Destitute Elders in Vans in America’s Badlands

MARK JACKSON

Here’s an interesting dilemma: “Nomadland” is a well-made movie with the feel of a documentary, since it uses many of the actual nomadic van dwellers written about in award-winning gonzo journalist Jessica Bruder’s book of the same name.

It’s got most critics out of their minds with happiness, but I had a hard time with it. It may be the most depressing thing I’ve seen in the last five years. What else should one feel about the subject matter? You’ve got elderly Americans forced out of secure lives by fate and into cruel states of Steinbeckian migrant survival, working the most menial jobs imaginable.

You’ve got your truck-stop toilet cleaning, sugar beet harvesting, and monotonous assembly-line-type Amazon factory

It’s movie journalism about what’s going on out there in America’s giant backyard.

house.” Yea, forsooth. So it was.

MARK JACKSON

“Not in my house!”

American basketball fans love this phrase. It’s attributed to 7-foot-2-inch NBA Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo of the Denver Nuggets, the second most shot-blocking player in NBA history.

Mutombo would swat an attempted shot away, wave his finger in the opposing player’s face, and say, “Not in my house!” Actually, the phrase has spread to all American team sports by now, and beyond. Any stuffed attempt at a goal now carries the fun, mock-scoolding message of “Nuh-uh, you don’t come in here, in our house, and try that. Ree-ee-jec-tion!!”

Sports coaches are the builders of character, courage, strength, forbearance, positivity, and faith.

“The House That Rob Built” is, therefore, a most fitting title for a film about the women’s basketball coach who built the house—make that powerhouse—of women’s basketball from the ground up.

Coach Rob Selvig and his Lady Griz team were so good that nobody could come in their Missoula, Montana, house and score. And the Lady Griz would go on the road to other teams’ houses; few opposing teams could tell them “Not in our

house.” Yea, forsooth. So it was.

MARK JACKSON

“Not in my house!”

A star player himself, who had NBA potential but ultimately weak knees, Rob Selvig took one of his coaches’ withering admonishments, “You play like a girl,” to heart and spent his life turning a girls’ team into the winningest team in history. Thus, the put-down came full circle and ended up a compliment.

Talk about your influencers. Sports coaches are lauded often in film, but they truly are the builders of character, courage, strength, forbearance, positivity, faith (often enhanced through team prayer), and morality in general, in our school systems. “The House That Rob Built” is a must-see not only for sports fans but also for all to be amazed at the gift this man gave to women, America, and the world.

We all know how passionate the best coaches are about their work—staying up late tape-watching for hours on end, making minute adjustments, and so on. But the clips of Selvig coaching courtside for the big games are the most captivating and also hilarious.

Selvig’s a manly man (look-wise maybe a mixture of Nick Nolte and Tom Brokaw) with stately, gravitas-exuding masculinity. And so it’s lots of fun to see him in self-admitted “psycho-coach” mode, ranting, gesticulating, hollering in huddles, stomping the court like Rumpelstiltskin, crawling on the court, snarling at referees.

One fan said that coach Selvig was more fun to watch than the actual game, and recalls seeing

‘Nomadland’
Director
Chloé Zhao
Starring
Starring Frances McDormand, David Strathairn
Rated
R

Running Time
1 hour, 47 minutes

Release Date
Feb. 19, 2021

Rating
4 out of 5 stars for documentary aspect, 1.5 for entertainment

jobs (the employers knowingly prey on the elderly), with no relief in sight. They live in vans that can easily break down in desolate stretches of nowhere, using five-gallon plastic containers as toilets. There needs to be a follow-up movie that depicts those for whom nomad life is, primarily, a calling and a joy. The mark of a truly great film is that you want to watch it over and over. The very thought of watching “Nomadland” again immediately lowers a cloud of melancholy. And yet it’s important information. It’s movie journalism about what’s going on out there in America’s giant backyard, with our elderly folk in dire straits, with no retirement options, while Washington seems out-of-touch.

What Goes On

Directed by Chloé Zhao, “Nomadland” stars Frances McDormand of “Fargo” fame as a fictitious protagonist—one of a scant few professional actors in the midst of a sizable group of the nomads, playing themselves, written about in Bruder’s book. It’s basically “The Grapes of Wrath” with McDormand as 61-year-old Fern representing a distilled version of the Joad family. Fern lost her husband and her job in Empire, Nevada, when the U.S. Gypsum Corp. (sheetrock) closed shop for good. Empire became a ghost town, and Fern hit the road in her white van.

It’s also “On the Road” in the Kerouac-ian sense—without the beatnik bongos and quest for dharma—where Fern meets the real-life van nomads, such as Swankie, a no-nonsense, crotchety van-life mentor of sorts; sweet, uncomplicated Linda, with whom Fern works at a South Dakota Badlands campsite disinfecting toilet stalls; and Bob Wells, who’s founded a sort of poor man’s “Burning Man” gathering (no counterculture, just van culture) in Arizona, called the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous.

Fern learns the van migrant worker itinerant and attends instructional classes offered at the Rendezvous, learning things such as what size plastic can to use for your van toilet, how to fix a flat tire, and the understanding that you can easily die out there, living in a van, on your own.

There are many bonfires, AA-meeting-type sharings about how they all got into

the life, fireside memorials for those who’ve passed on, and much trading and swapping of knickknacks, cigarette lighters, can openers, and so on. One gets the sense that most are here because they have no choice.

David Strathairn plays Dave, an elderly, white-goateed gentleman who takes an unrequited shine to Fern and pursues her mildly throughout, eventually inviting her to his son’s farm, where he’s decided to put down roots for a bit and try and play grandfather.

No “There” There

And that’s your basic plotless experience, sort of an elderly van-dweller version of Richard Linklater’s “Slacker,” but with none of the hope, promise, newness, and excitement of youth. It also functions as a companion piece to 2019’s “The Short History of the Long Road,” about a father-daughter van-nomad team, the father (Steven Ogg) being a good example of a guy who loves the nomad life.

There seems to be an odd inconsistency with McDormand’s character that undermined believability and subconsciously whittled away at the suspension of disbelief. Here’s a woman who admittedly remained a homebody in her bleak town, in her bleak house (grown exponentially lonelier by the death of her husband), till the bloody end, because she was endlessly attached to all of it.

Then, her sister tells her that she, Fern, was always the courageous one. And once on the road, Fern exhibits an almost pathological restlessness and skittishness, and a need to keep moving. She desires to be fully self-sufficient and not get too close to anybody. It’s two diametrically opposed states of being. Which one is she, really? It seems that if she’d always been as restless as she later appears to be, she would have hit the road far earlier.

Nomadland, No Man’s Land

America, in its current trend, may soon see many, many more houseless folks. But laws are quickly going into effect that prohibit houselessness, making America no longer Nomadland but no man’s land—you park, you get arrested. And those are badlands, in my book.

Star Basketball Coach Put Ladies First



FAMILY THEATER PRODUCTIONS/LOPI PICTURES

▲
Lady Griz coach Robin Selvig and his coaching staff, in “The House That Rob Built.”

‘The House That Rob Built’

Director
Jonathan Cipiti, Megan Harrington

Starring
Documentary

Rated
Not Rated

Running Time
59 minutes

Release Date
Feb. 20, 2020

Available on Amazon Prime Video

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

him, in a full-tilt rage, sit down, totally miss the chair, end up on the floor, and bounce back up a second later to scream at the referees—completely oblivious of the fact that he’d missed the chair in full view of a packed house.

Ladies First

Women’s basketball had been seriously underfunded and sidelined by the men’s game. Then along came Title IX, a federal civil rights law, part of the Education Amendments of 1972, meant to stop discrimination based on sex (in education programs or activities) that receive federal financial assistance. Equal scholarships and facilities on par with the men’s became available, and under Selvig’s nurturing, the Lady Griz program skyrocketed.

Selvig’s fundamental hammering, no-nonsense, hardworking, all-American style took the women’s team from a bunch of gangly little girls from Podunk, USA, playing to empty bleachers, to become the top powerhouse Western women’s college basketball program.

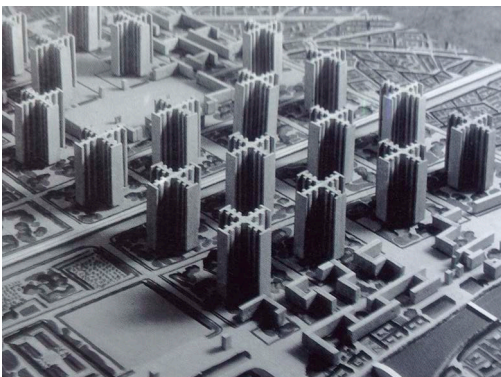
He had a galvanizing, never-before-heard-of philosophy: He coached the girls just as hard as he would have coached the men. Imagine that. As all his players concur, this allowed them to realize their full potential, not only as basketball players but also as empowered women.

Furthermore, Selvig elevated Montana state pride by recruiting almost exclusively from small towns, ranches, and Native American reservations, resulting in players like trailblazer Malia Kipp, who was inducted into the Montana Native Athletics Hall of Fame as the only woman. Coach Selvig was also inducted as the only white man.

Selvig was also the first male coach to flank and empower himself exclusively with female assistant coaches, whom he regularly recruited from the ever-growing stable of his former players.

Coach Selvig was head coach of the Lady Griz (the men’s teams are the Grizzlies) women’s basketball team at the University of Montana for almost 40 years, from 1978 to 2016. During his tenure, he was named Conference Coach of the Year 21 times, scoring 865 wins, 21 NCAA Tournament appearances, and 24 conference championships. Selvig was ranked eighth most successful women’s basketball coach in history.

Coach Selvig made the team attend a fellow player’s father’s funeral—he created a basketball sisterhood. It’s easy to understand why all the former players choke up when speaking about their beloved coach. “The House That Rob Built” was co-directed by Jonathan Cipiti (who also directed “Pray: The Story of Patrick Peyton) and Megan Harrington. Harrington herself is a former Lady Griz, turned filmmaker.



SIEFKINDR/CC BY-SA 4.0

▲
The model of the architect Le Corbusier’s 1925 plan to level the Marais district of Paris and replace it with 18 towers.

REACHING WITHIN:
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Appreciating Beauty Before It Slips Away: ‘Lost Illusions’



“Lost Illusions,” between 1865 and 1867, by Charles Gleyre and Léon Dussart. Oil on canvas, 34 inches by 59 inches. Walters Art Museum.

ERIC BESS

When we sometimes let opportunities slip through our grasp, forgetting that our lives are over in the blink of an eye. I was recently talking to a friend about hindsight. Have you ever thought, “If I could go back in time, I’d do that differently,” or “If I knew then what I know now?” Such thought experiments can leave us either ready for a more thoughtful future or melancholic about our past. Charles Gleyre’s painting “Lost Illusions” (also called “The Evening”) illustrates the melancholy and thoughtfulness that can derive from missed opportunities.

Charles Gleyre and ‘Lost Illusions’ Gleyre was a 19th-century Swiss artist who painted mostly in France. He used his academic training to produce romantic paintings, one of which was his most famous, “Lost Illusions.” “Lost Illusions” was a painting based on a hallucination that Gleyre experienced as a young man on the bank on the Nile during his travels in Egypt. In 1843, at the age of 37—almost 10 years after his hallucination—Gleyre painted “Lost Illusions” and entered it into the French Salon competition, where it received a gold medal and was purchased by the French State. The version depicted here is a reproduction painted in 1867 by Gleyre and his student, Léon Dussart, upon the request of American businessman and art collector William Thompson Walters.

The painting shows a man to the composition’s right, who lowers his head and slumps his shoulders in sadness. The moon in the purple and yellow sky suggests that it’s dusk, and the light from the setting sun almost silhouettes the man into darkness. He has placed his lyre on the ground to his side, as he sits on the dock and watches a boat carry away a dozen figures. The figures, unlike the man, are illuminated in such a way that all of their features are visible; it’s as if a separate light source illuminates them. All of the figures are women except for Cupid, who steers the boat. The active women play musical instruments, read poetry, and clap their hands. The passive ones listen and watch the others. Cupid drops flower petals into the water as the boat slowly drifts away.

Appreciating Beauty There are certain aspects of this painting and its meanings that are obvious. The man is sadly watching these women performers sail away. Does this simply represent the man’s watching his youthful desires sail away on the stream of life as he approaches life’s dusk? Cupid, a typical representation of infatuation and passionate love, is throwing petals into the water as if these petals were missed opportunities for romantic relationships. The muse-like women, all representations of the art forms that relay beauty, are drifting away as if the man has missed out on life’s beauties, a loss that blankets him in the melancholia he now experiences. And what has caused him to miss out on so much? Is it his lyre, which he has now placed to his side? Is it possible that he spent so much time pursuing virtuosity with his lyre that he forgot to live? Was he so distracted that he failed to notice the beauty all around him, beauty he only now recognizes as it flees in the night of life?

All of this may be true, but this interpretation seems to miss a different perspective suggested by the painting’s title. Gleyre refers to all that is “lost” as “illusions.” For Romantic artists, illusion was paramount, a necessary balance to the 18th and 19th centuries’ extreme pursuit of scientific truth. Fantasy, imagination, and the beautiful things that captivate the human spirit were cast aside for objective and rational scientific study. Perhaps the melancholia experienced by the man isn’t confined to his own loss. Maybe he represents an age that had lost access to the beautiful things that once stirred the human spirit. Have these beautiful things—poetry, history, and music—that were once embodied by the muses and characterized so much of the human story cast away by a cold and calculated pursuit of scientific truths? Or, are these muses, feeling like there’s no longer a place for them, setting sail for a place, a time, an age that will appreciate them again?

Is this why the man sets his lyre to his side? Because there’s a lack of appreciation for his musical pursuits in a world that’s becoming evermore cold, analytic, and scientific? Is this scientific extreme the source of his melancholy? Is he nearly silhouetted because scientific truths perceived to be universal obscure his unique individuality inherent in his appreciation of beauty and creative pursuits? Or is he silhouetted because creativity is less about self-expression and more about beauty in and of itself, hence the illumination of the boat’s figures?

Have you ever thought, ‘If I could go back in time, I’d do that differently,’ or ‘If I knew then what I know now?’ Maybe this painting is not an attack on science per se but a testimony to the loss caused by the extreme of cold, calculated objectification caused by scientism—a loss that we’ll look back on with the adage, “If I knew then what I know now ...” Perhaps this painting serves as encouragement to look at the future thoughtfully, with a newfound awareness and appreciation for the beauty encapsulated by the human spirit, a beauty the “illusions” of which serve to balance scientific extremes. The message and its warning is a poignant one and encourages reflection on how we might balance our scientific era, our lives, and our endeavors with an increased appreciation for life’s beauty before it sails over the horizon and forever out of view.

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

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

THE EPOCH TIMES Week 10, 2021

BOOKS

Anne Frank: A Voice for All Times

LINDA WIEGENFELD

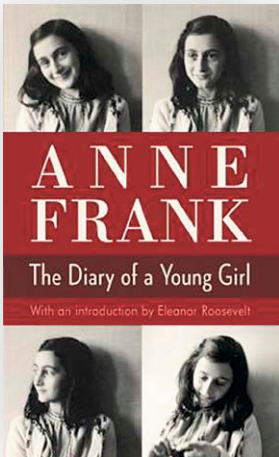
In this time of cancel culture, how can we explain our values to those who might not want to listen? How do we overcome the constant spew of hatred, and refuse to react defensively? How do we live a good, successful life no matter what our personal circumstances are? We look to those who have. During World War II, young Anne Frank tried to survive the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam with the help of her father’s employees who hid her and seven others in an annex. The group was supplied with food, medicine, and information about the outside world. Anne documented that time in her diary with the ultimate goal of seeing it turned into a book. Her goal was met, but of course after her death. Anne’s diary still shows the power of the written word and stands as the best argument against censorship. Her diary has been translated into many languages, is read worldwide, and could not be timelier. We see the beauty of first love, and we see the petty fights among people cooped up together. After all, the Franks and their housemates are in lockdown. Readers today will perhaps relate more closely than they have in decades.

At these times, her words, such as ‘Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy,’ collide with her stark fate and leave the reader heartbroken.

More importantly, what is so important about Anne’s diary is that it shows a different way of understanding the horrors of the Holocaust. We see Anne and the others who are confined with her as human beings and not just as a faceless group among the millions who will die. We see the individual versus the totalitarian collective. Anne’s individuality—her personality—comes across in different ways. She can be mean one moment, especially to her mother, and a philosopher the next. At these times, her words, such as “Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy,” collide with her stark fate and leave the reader heartbroken. “It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart,” she writes.

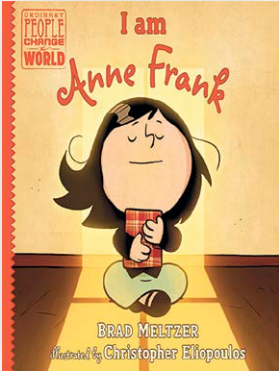
‘I Am Anne Frank’ by Brad Meltzer In addition to her own words, many books for different age groups have been written on Anne Frank. The children’s book “I Am Anne Frank” talks about the Holocaust in an age-appropriate way. Anne is portrayed as an ordinary girl with just one difference: She is Jewish. She tells about her sister receiving a “call-up” notice, which means that her sister will be sent to a concentration camp, a prison where Jews were locked up and made to work night and day with almost nothing to eat or drink. Her family goes into hiding in an annex behind her father’s office to avoid this fate. This book will not scare children, but it will make them think. It shows Anne’s living conditions: She often could not flush the toilet, walked in stockings to avoid making noise, and ate the same food day after day. The book also shows Anne deciding to look at the bright side of things: Her hiding place might be damp and lopsided,

Anne Frank’s diary is considered a 20th-century classic.



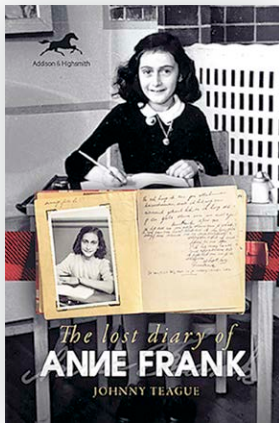
‘Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl’ Anne Frank Translated by B.M. Mooyaart Bantam Books June 1, 1993 283 pages

This children’s book is from the Ordinary People Change the World series.



‘I Am Anne Frank’ Brad Meltzer Dial Books Oct. 13, 2020 40 pages, hardcover

Johnny Teague begins his fictitious account of Anne Frank’s last days after she and her family were captured.



‘The Lost Diary of Anne Frank’ Addison & Highsmith Oct. 30, 2020 200 pages, hardcover



Anne Frank in 1940. Collection of the Anne Frank Foundation, Amsterdam.

but there are probably few more comfortable hiding places in all of Amsterdam. She finds solace in the attic, looking at a chestnut tree and in writing. Near the end of the book, with images of Shabbat candles and lit menorah candles—symbols of hope—is the beautiful thought: “You can always find light in the darkest places, that’s what hope is. It’s a fire within you. You decide when to light it. And when it burns bright, nothing can put it out.” The book ends with a shift to more modern times when a diverse crowd gathers at the Franks’ house. They discuss her fate in a language acceptable for children, while making the point.

‘The Lost Diary of Anne Frank’ by Johnny Teague “The Lost Diary of Anne Frank,” for mature teens and adults, completes the story where Anne’s diary leaves off. This much-researched historical novel is anchored in facts as reported by those who were eyewitnesses and camp survivors, along with testimonials and writings of her father, Otto Frank, and others dear to Anne. The author wrote the book faithfully adhering to Anne’s own, very personal, diary format in the process. The story begins with Anne and the others being captured. Anne has no idea who turned them in but prays for her father’s employees who were her extended family. All the helpers did was to love those who were hated. The book traces Anne’s journey through Westerbork, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. It details her separation from her father, whom she thought had died, and how she grows to love and respect her mother and sister during the last months of her life. There is also a tender reunion with her best friend, Hanneli. In this book, the reader learns about the selection process, the tattoos, and the atrocities. Details add to the reader’s pain: Anne has her head shaved, is tattooed with a number, and has to strip naked at Auschwitz. Her diary relates that she hoped her future husband would be the one to see her naked and not some strangers. Anne’s sister, Margot, becomes friendly with a guard, who gives her some extra food. But Margot quickly ends that friendship, unable to endure the hate

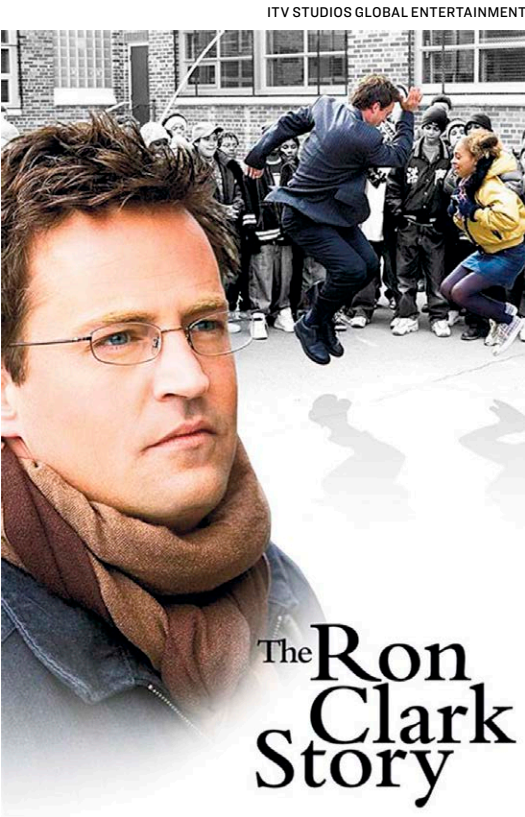
“It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

Anne Frank

crimes that he is committing. Other entries in the diary: Roll call, moving rocks from place to place just for the sake of destroying workers physically, and of course the gas chambers.

Johnny Teague on Anne’s Life Author Johnny Teague’s perspective on how Anne managed to endure the end of her life is that she stayed close to her family and continued to care for others. She did not give up hope, as daily she watched for rescue. “She held tightly to her underlying confidence in God and in others. She reminded the people around her that they were not numbers, but human beings. Remember, Anne wanted to be a writer, so she could bring hope to others,” he said. Teague wrote the lost diary with today’s in mind. “Current events are being shaped by a generation that has little or no knowledge of the atrocities committed in the past. To prevent such horrors from reoccurring, I have done my best to complete the diary that Anne Frank was forbidden to write.” Anne Frank’s voice is more relevant than ever. Linda Wiegenfeld is a retired teacher with 45 years’ experience teaching children. She can be reached for comments or suggestions at LWiegenfeld@aol.com

For more arts and culture articles, visit TheEpochTimes.com



Matthew Perry was nominated for a Golden Globe for his titular role in “The Ron Clark Story.”

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Unwavering Dedication to Poor Students

IAN KANE

Known as “The Ron Clark Story” in the United States (while titled “The Triumph” in several other countries), this biopic film follows the life of the award-winning American educator Ron Clark, a native of Chowinowity, North Carolina. Directed by Randa Haines (“Antwone Fisher” 2002, “Children of a Lesser God” 1986), the film opens with Clark as a teacher at Snowden Elementary School in middle-class Aurora, North Carolina. Although successful at enabling his students to achieve high grades and test scores, Clark begins to realize that he has a higher calling; he’s just not sure where that calling is. Soon, he travels to Manhattan to seek work as a teacher for underprivileged kids. He begins working at a restaurant, where he meets Marissa Vega (Melissa De Sousa). Although the two are attracted to each other, Marissa already has a boyfriend. Due to a recent vacancy at Inner Harlem Elementary School, Clark applies for a job there. The school’s principal, though, Mr. Turner (Ernie Hudson), takes one look at Clark’s squeaky-clean appearance and shrugs him off—doubting that he can teach Harlem kids. Ever tenacious, Clark convinces Principal Turner to give him a shot. The principal immediately offers him one of the school’s more accomplished and disciplined classrooms. Clark, however, notices another classroom filled with rowdy kids. It is here that Clark finds his calling: He implores the principal to let him teach this class, but the latter tells him that the troubled kids tested at the bottom of the New York City School District. Since one of Clark’s specialties is enabling children to achieve higher than average test scores, Principal Turner reluctantly agrees. In an unusual move, Clark travels to each of the students’ homes to get an idea of their individual circumstances. He comes away with the impression that these kids not only are dealing with

learning issues but also have rough living conditions, including abject poverty. During Clark’s first few days, some of the more rebellious students resist his efforts to enforce even a modicum of discipline. Some of the especially quarrelsome include Shameika Wallace (Hannah Hodson) and her instigator bosom buddy, Alita (Isabelle Deluce), as well as Tayshawn (Brandon Mychal Smith) and Julio Vasquez (Micah Williams). Clark’s first attempts at getting through to the kids ends up in frustration. In a fit of pent-up rage, he shakes Shameika’s desk and then storms out of the classroom. Since the class has been through many teachers in a short period of time, the kids chalk up Clark’s failure as inevitable.

The film drives home the lesson that unlimited and often untapped potential can be found within every child.

Clark takes a break to do some soul-searching. While out on a friend date with Marissa, she encourages him to persevere. Newly galvanized, he returns to the classroom, much to the shock of the kids. From there, through trial and error (which includes Clark making a fool out of himself to make the kids laugh), Clark begins to make some headway, even disciplining them enough to line up to exit the classroom. But when he catches pneumonia and is forced to teach his class through pre-recorded videotapes, this setback causes the children’s grades to slide. When Clark finally returns to the school, he finds that its faculty now acknowledges him much more than before. They recognize his dedication: He had continued to teach while sick until he collapsed in the classroom. And the students have changed toward him too; they follow his lessons much more



Hannah Hodson is splendid in her role as a troubled teen, in “The Ron Clark Story.”

diligently. It doesn’t hurt that he always encourages the kids and tells them that they can do great things if they only apply themselves. Soon, as the final exams loom on the horizon, Clark and his students have to accelerate their progress. To shore up the weak links, Clark dedicates much of his off-time to tutoring those who are falling behind. But will they ready in time?

Earnestness
One of the things that caught me off guard about this film is its sense of earnestness—it’s genuine instead of hokey. The young actors, for example, give outstanding performances, especially Hannah Hodson as Shameika. I also have to give kudos to Matthew Perry, who I’ve only seen in the long-running TV series “Friends.” He managed to convincingly portray Clark as a somewhat naïve, yet deceptively competent teacher with an indefatigable spirit. Frankly, it was one of the more incredible acting performances I’ve seen, period. Together with Randa Haines’s more-than-capable direction, “The Ron Clark Story” is a super-uplifting cinematic experience. The film drives home the lesson (no pun intended) that unlimited and often untapped potential can be found within every child, no matter what his or her socioeconomic background. Just remember to have some tissues handy.

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

‘The Ron Clark Story’

Director
Randa Haines

Starring
Matthew Perry, Ernie Hudson, Melissa De Sousa

Running Time
1 hour, 30 minutes

Rated
TV-PG

Aired
Aug. 13, 2006

★★★★★

Feb 11-Mar 14

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