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THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS& CULTURE

COURTESY OF THE SOCIETY OF GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

G.K. Chesterton and his beloved wife, Frances.

LITERATURE

The Goodness and Greatness of G.K. Chesterton

Literary wit and wisdom

JEFF MINICK

Though the England of his time was famous for its eccentrics, one man in particular captured the attention of satirists and the hearts and smiles of the men and women of that island nation.

Writer G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) was a giant of a man for his time, standing 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighing around 300 pounds. He was known for wearing a cloak and a broad-brimmed hat, giving him the appearance of a man casting about for adventures. He was disheveled, absent-minded, and frequently arrived late or not at all at his speaking engagements. Once when he forgot where he was supposed to deliver a lecture, he famously sent his wife, Frances, a telegram: "Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" Realizing he had already missed his lecture, his wife telegraphed back: "Home."

In his "Autobiography," Chesterton wrote of buying a glass of milk and a revolver on his wedding day: "Some have seen these as singular wedding presents for a bridegroom to give to himself, and if the bride had known less of him, I suppose she might have fancied that he was a suicide or a murderer, or worst of all, a teetotaller." That last qualification made me burst out laughing when I first read it. He went on to say, tongue-in-cheek, that he purchased the revolver to protect his bride from "the pirates doubtless infesting the Norfolk Broads."

Chesterton plunged into life and made it an adventure.

This quirky romantic was also one of the most popular and most talented writers of his time.

The Man

Because of his ability to combine self-contradictory propositions that then seemed true, Chesterton as a writer is often dubbed "The Prince of Paradox." The same might be said of the man himself. Fascinated with the occult as a boy, as an adult he became a devout Christian, entered the Roman Catholic Church, and wrote religious works like "Orthodoxy" and "The Everlasting Man," which are considered classics today and taught in some of our universities and schools of theology.

At the same time, he loved his cigars and a pint of English beer, and throughout his work celebrated the beauties and attractions of the world.

Continued on ***Page 5***

What Good Is Poetry? 'Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare'

SEAN FITZPATRICK

Math is not often associated with poetry, but it should be. "Poetry," from the Greek "poiesis," meaning "to make," is a language art that makes connections between the physical realities, while mathematics manipulates the metaphysical principles that govern them. Poetry helps us see that the quantitative functioning of matter is not all that matters, and whenever they go hand in hand, poetry and mathematics have a rare power to lay beauty bare.

One of the original mathematicians was the ancient Greek, Euclid, whose "Elements" is the backbone of geometry and number theory. It also provides a point of departure for logic and many other scientific systems. His treatise is beautiful indeed, and the American lyrical poet Edna St. Vincent Millay captured something about the beauty of Euclid's mathematics and mathematics in general.

> Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
> Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
> And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
> To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
> At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
> In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
> Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
> From dusty bondage into luminous air.
> O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
> When first the shaft into his vision shone
> Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
> Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
> Who, though once only and then but far away,
> Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

A 1914 photo of Edna St. Vincent Millay in Mamaroneck, N.Y. U.S. Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division.

Here is celebrated in verse the glories of the mathematical perspective. This poem seeks to wake those bound up in a narcissistic, goose-gabbling, self-important trance and enter the luminous vision that Euclid had. He saw the magnificent patterns in which the world has been constructed. To those who learn to share this awe-inspiring vision, St. Vincent Millay gives the title of "heroes," whose initial blindness in that shaft of the light of truth melts away to reveal the secrets of Beauty.

Mathematical principles have unfortunately become something of a neglected portal for a metaphysical view of the beauties of the cosmos—to the beauty of "light anatomized." For even though mathematics and the other scientific disciplines seemingly tend to eliminate the mystery of things, their reductive truths ought not to reduce the beautiful wonder inherent in things. For despite the clarity of computation, there is a reality animating such truths that is one of the reasons why they are good—and that reality is beauty.

And while beauty cannot be proven, per se, we know its presence by the mighty footprint it imparts upon the whole world, as permanent as a stamp in stone.

It is no secret that conventional education has largely replaced the otherworldly with the worldly, giving a high place to mathematics and a low place to poetry. This is partially yet particularly manifested in the exaggerated importance given nowadays in many schools to the physical arts over the metaphysical arts. It is hardly going too far to say that science poses as a new religion of sorts in purporting to explain what religion used to express.

Many syllabi, sadly, subordinate spiritual exercise of the fine arts to the acquisition of knowledge that is empirical and purely functional and utilitarian—and ultimately, as St. Vincent Millay alludes to, narcissistic. Of course, there are many societal trends that dictate the preoccupation with measurable and manipulative operations and objectives, given that many fortunes are earned through engineering and technical fields.

But there are essential mysteries of contemplation that defy empirical measurement, and their expression begins with the poetic. Plato and Aristotle, for instance, upheld the study of poetic human expression, as it provides a philosophical and theological platform rooted in wonder that rises above the accumulation of facts to, instead, the interconnectedness of all subjects understood in their proper relation to one another.

The ancients considered that this was both the beginning and the end of a liberal education, preparing people to live the good life. The harmonious union and cooperation of science and poetry in education serves to embody a complete worldview that is absent from the arena of modern education, where the measure of things is valued over the mystery of things.

Poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay invite the contemplation of both the physical and spiritual worlds together.

The efforts of physical science can reveal only half of the world—the other half belongs to a different form of knowledge. And for this reason, the poetic and the scientific are not mutually exclusive, as St. Vincent Millay demonstrates. They are mutually confirming: A full vision of things involves both the truth and the truthful, that is, respectively, the fact and the symbol—and, of course, the beauty that belongs to both.

One way or another, men and women must make sense of the world, but how best to understand it? A conglomeration of combined atoms? Mathematical equations and scientific proofs? Or is that too superficial? Poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay invite the contemplation of both the physical and spiritual worlds together. Let us resist the dusty bondage of materialistic fixation and seek release in the freedom of transporting and enduring beauty.

Sean Fitzpatrick serves on the faculty of Gregory the Great Academy, a boarding school in Elmhurst, Pa., where he teaches humanities. His writings on education, literature, and culture have appeared in a number of journals including Crisis Magazine, Catholic Exchange, and The Imaginative Conservative.

'The Stoning of Saint Stephen' by Renaissance Painter Aurelio Lomi

LORRAINE FERRIER

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

"The Stoning of Saint Stephen," circa 1602, by Aurelio Lomi. Pen and ink with oil over chalk on four sheets of paper; 37 3/16 inches by 30 11/16 inches. New Century Fund and The Ahmanson Foundation. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The painting is bustling with action, yet it's a beautifully rendered, harmonious scene.

In this study of "The Stoning of Saint Stephen," the late-Renaissance painter Aurelio Lomi captured the moment of Stephen's martyrdom. Surrounded by an angry mob pelting him with stones, Stephen doesn't shield himself. Instead, he's in awe of all that is above him. He looks up to heaven, where he sees Christ standing next to God, who is seated on a throne. And Stephen makes a compassionate appeal to God, asking him for forgiveness—not for himself, but for the people persecuting him.

The painting is bustling with action, yet it's a beautifully rendered, harmonious scene. The main focus is Stephen, those stoning him, and the way that Stephen directs our attention to the heavens through his gaze and body language. In heaven, we can see the divine beings waiting to welcome him. On earth, we can see the turmoil of religious persecution: those who are actively harming Stephen, and then on the right side of the painting, those elders, women, and children watching the fray yet not actively participating. There's fear and uncertainty on their faces.

Early this year, the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington acquired Lomi's study. In a press release, the gallery praised the work as an "exquisite example of the artist's meticulously constructed compositions and figures, as well as his ability to create works suffused with light. It epitomizes the transition from the stylization of late mannerism to the more naturalistic light, movement, and texture of baroque style."

Aurelio Lomi

Lomi was the older brother of another great artist, Orazio Gentileschi (father of painter Artemisia Gentileschi). In the last quarter of the 16th century, Lomi was the preeminent painter in Pisa, Italy, although he also worked in Genoa and Florence.

While living in Genoa, he created his study of St. Stephen, one of the patron saints of that city. The composition of Lomi's study refers to painter Giulio Romano's altarpiece in St. Stephen's Church in Genoa. Romano was a famed pupil of Raphael.

This particular study is similar to the altarpiece that Lomi created for the St. Mary of Peace Church in Genoa, although the composition of the study is more expansive and contains more figures, according to the NGA press release.

FINE ARTS

How 'The Spinners' by Velázquez Teaches the Consequence of Irreverence and More

LORRAINE FERRIER

It may be hard to imagine, but many well-known masterpieces are not how the artists originally painted them. In the past, paintings were often altered to fit into an interior design where it would be viewed. For instance, parts of both Johannes Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's "Bacchus and Ariadne" were overpainted, changing the compositions; Diego Velázquez's "The Spinners" was enlarged when it was hung in the new royal palace in Madrid; and Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" was trimmed to fit into a smaller space in Amsterdam City Hall (which is now the royal palace).

With the exception of "The Night Watch," each of the above artworks has been permanently restored, by human hands, to try to replicate how the artist originally intended it to appear. Experts at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam have recently used artificial intelligence to simulate the missing parts of "The Night Watch," to hint at Rembrandt's overall composition.

"The Spinners" or "The Fable of Arachne" by Velázquez is the most recent of those listed paintings to be restored to its original composition.

PRADO MUSEUM

In this image of "The Spinners," 1655–1660, by Velázquez, the shaded areas highlight the three edges of the original composition that were expanded in the 18th century.

2 Different Compositions

For the past few years, visitors to Madrid's National Museum of the Prado could see Velázquez's original 17th-century composition, but the frame that hid the 18th-century additions was not a permanent solution to preserve the work. On July 12, the museum unveiled a new custom-made frame allowing visitors to see the work that Velázquez originally created. And what a difference it has made.

Compare Velázquez's original composition to that of the enlarged painting (with the 18th-century additions), and we can see why some viewers of the later version mistook it to be a simple genre scene of women weaving.

"During that century, it had grown 50 centimeters [19 3/4 inches] at the top edge and slightly less than 20 centimeters [7 7/8 inches] on each side," the Prado's senior curator of Spanish painting, Javier Portús, said in a video. The 18th-century painters had extended the building in the painting to such an extent that rather than gently framing the scene, it dominated the composition. This caused the background scene to recede further, and in turn focused viewers even more on the foreground, where the women are weaving.

Not until the 1930s and 1940s did scholars realize that "The Spinners" contained mythological content. The figures in the background weren't, as many viewers believed, simply showing the tapestry woven by the women in the foreground. In the background, Velázquez depicted part of the Greek myth of Arachne, which is the central story of his painting and why its alternative title is "The Fable of Arachne."

Arachne's Pride

In "The Metamorphoses," Ovid described how Arachne, a girl of humble birth and parentage, wove cloth so exquisitely—from the spinning of the yarn through to the finished decoration—that "often the nymphs of Mount Tmolus deserted their vine-covered slopes, and the nymphs of the River Pactolus deserted their waves, to examine her wonderful workmanship." But Arachne always denied that her talent was bestowed by the goddess of handicrafts, Pallas. Full of bravado, Arachne challenged Pallas to a weaving competition to prove her point, vowing that if the goddess won then she would concede that her artistic gifts were divinely bestowed.

Pallas then disguised herself as an old woman, symbolic of wisdom, and told Arachne that "Not everything old age has is to be shunned: Knowledge comes with advancing years. Do not reject my advice: Seek great fame among mortals for your skill in weaving, but give way to the goddess, and ask her forgiveness, rash girl, with a humble voice: She will forgive if you will ask."

The defiant, young Arachne retorted that she too felt unheeded, and she asked why Pallas was not present for the contest. Pallas then dropped her disguise, and the contest began.

In Velázquez's painting, Pallas can be seen as the old woman at her spinning wheel. And on the right side of the painting, Arachne has her back turned to us as she ignores the old woman's plea. Consumed with competitiveness, she unravels her skein of wool.

Not until the 1930s and 1940s did scholars realize that 'The Spinners' contained mythological content.

PRADO MUSEUM

"The Spinners," 1655–1660, by Velázquez now resides in its new frame in the Prado. This frame hides the 18th-century additions and reinstates Velázquez's original composition.

Arachne's Fall

Pallas wove a moral lesson into the four corners of her tapestry. Each story was another compassionate warning to Arachne of the consequences that come to mortals who compete with or defy the divine. Pallas hoped Arachne would take heed.

Arachne, in her tapestry, wove instances of times when the gods acted improperly in the mortal world, such as when Zeus abducted Europa by disguising himself as a beautiful white bull.

Velázquez chose to re-create Titian's painting "The Rape of Europa" as the tapestry hanging in the background of his painting. Zeus, who abducted Europa, was Pallas's father. (Velázquez, as a painter of the Spanish royal court, would have probably seen Titian's painting in the royal palace.)

In front of the tapestry, we see Pallas as the goddess of war, with her helmet and shield, responding to Arachne's perfectly woven cloth. She is livid; Arachne dared to outshine a goddess.

Velázquez didn't depict what happened next in Ovid's myth: Pallas strikes Arachne with her shuttle. In unbearable pain, Arachne puts a noose around her own neck. At that moment, Pallas turns Arachne into a spider so that she must constantly weave and hang for eternity.

Different Interpretations

Besides the confusion caused by the 18th-century additions to "The Spinners," Velázquez created the painting in the last decades of his life, when he was known to have painted complex and ambiguous compositions.

On the Prado Museum website, the artwork is considered an ode to the nobility of painting, because Velázquez expertly used his brush and paints to depict the passage of time from when the material is spun, woven, and made into the tapestry. Velázquez not only told Arachne's story through the medium of painting, but he also used a famous painting to depict her accomplishments.

The website also notes that Velázquez was aware of mythologist Juan Pérez de Moya's view that the myth of Arachne demonstrated the constant advancement of art. In "The Spinners," Velázquez built a narrative about artistic progress and competitiveness by depicting the tapestry in the background and by reproducing an original painting by Titian which was, and continues to be, copied by many artists aspiring to mastery.

The American Friends of the Prado Museum and the American Express Foundation funded the new frame as part of the "Reframing the Prado" initiative, to ensure that the Prado collection is shown at its best. To find out more about "The Spinners" by Velázquez at the National Museum of the Prado, visit MuseodelPrado.es

PUBLIC DOMAIN

PUBLIC DOMAIN

(Far left) G. K. Chesterton at work, from Crisis Magazine.

(Left) A caricature (circa 1907) of G.K. Chesterton by Max Beerbohm.

LITERATURE

The Goodness and Greatness of G.K. Chesterton

Literary wit and wisdom

*Continued from **Page 1***

In his politics, he was also a practitioner of paradox as he pushed aside many of the positions held by both Progressives and Conservatives, writing: "The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected."

In an April 2015 article in The Atlantic, "A Most Unlikely Saint," James Parker offers this fine summation of Chesterton:

"Chesterton was a journalist; he was a metaphysician. He was a reactionary; he was a radical. He was a modernist, acutely alive to the rupture in consciousness that produced Eliot's 'The Hollow Men'; he was an anti-modernist (he hated Eliot's 'The Hollow Men'). He was a parochial Englishman and a post-Victorian gasbag; he was a mystic wedded to eternity. All of these cheerfully contradictory things are true, and none of them would matter in the slightest were it not for the final, resolving fact that he was a genius."

His Literary Legacy

Is there a genre of literature untouched by Chesterton?

In his career, he wrote over 80 books and thousands of essays. In addition to his theological works, he wrote mysteries, novels, short stories, poems, biographies, and articles on every topic imaginable. His Father Brown mysteries are still popular and have appeared on radio and television to great acclaim.

Novels like "The Man Who Was Thursday" and "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" continue to attract readers, his biographies of such luminaries as Charles Dickens and Saint Francis remain highly regarded by critics, and poems like "The Donkey" can still touch a reader's heart.

What is remarkable about his essays in particular is that so many of them remain relevant to our time. A century after he wrote them, his observations on so many subjects—politics, religion, modernity, the sexes, education, and more—still speak to us.

Is there a genre of literature untouched by Chesterton?

Out of the Many, One

"In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton" is the aptly named compilation put together by Chesterton experts and devotees Aidan McKay, Joseph Pearce, and Dale Ahlquist, who is also a co-founder and the president of the American Chesterton Society. From these 67 articles, I give you a look at just one here, his 1934 essay "On the New Prudery." Rereading this piece last week, I found myself laughing aloud at some of GKC's witty observations and marveling at both his style and the pertinence of his ideas as they apply to our present puritanical politicos. Here are a few selections:

"The New Prudery does not come out of stale sects or old shabby chapels: it comes out of all the new clubs, new leagues, new guilds of art and culture, new summer schools of science and philanthropy."

"The new philosophies and new religions and new social systems cannot draw up their own plans for emancipating mankind without still further enslaving mankind."

"All the nursery stories are to be subject to a Censor, who shall object if they are too pretty, as the very dullest sort of Victorian or philistine Censor would object if they were too ugly. … A new Paul Pry will be sent to sneak about our houses, or look through our keyholes, to find out whether (in some den of infamy) a child is being taught to admire courage."

The Acrobatic Aphorist

In addition to his title of Prince of Paradox, Chesterton might also be crowned one of the kings of the aphorism. We read his adages, the way they roll and twist and often stand matters on their head, and we sometimes feel as if we are watching performers made of syllables flipping or somersaulting from balance beams, tightropes, and springboards in a gymnasium or circus constructed from words.

Editor Dave Armstrong has collected hundreds of these maxims in his book "The Wisdom of Mr. Chesterton: The Very Best Quotes, Quips & Cracks From the Pen of G.K. Chesterton." Some of these were already familiar to me, while those that were strangers made me smile:

"Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly."

"People generally quarrel because they cannot argue."

"An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered."

"Chivalry is not the romantic, but the realistic, view of the sexes."

"The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

"I have never understood what people mean by domesticity being tame; it seems to me on of the wildest of adventures."

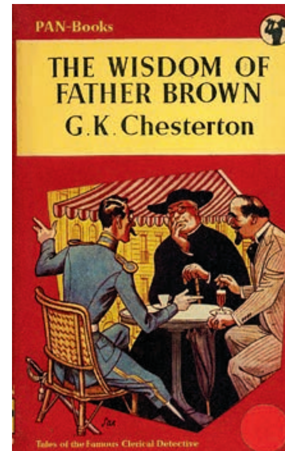
"Life in itself is not a ladder; it is a seesaw."

"If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."

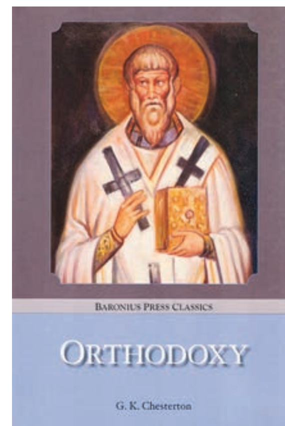
Good Humor, Good Heart

No one writer is beloved by all readers. Some of us may affirm the greatness of William Shakespeare at a cocktail party, but we have yet to recover from the agony of reading "Julius Caesar" in high school.

The same holds true for G.K. Chesterton. Some might find a good deal to admire in his essays but not his novels, and vice versa. In my case, I prefer his Father Brown stories to his other fiction—I need to give his novels another shot—and find his essays a wellspring of inspiration in my own work.



Chesterton's detective stories about Father Brown have been made into popular television shows.



One of Chesterton's religious works.

But one reason we might all find reason to learn more about Chesterton is the man himself. Here was someone who loved living, whose rollicking exuberance over the simplest day-to-day occurrences—a sunset, what he found in his pockets (yes, he wrote an essay about those discoveries), even eating cheese, for heaven's sake—was almost childlike in its innocence.

In his biography of Chesterton, "Knight of the Holy Ghost," Dale Ahlquist writes of him:

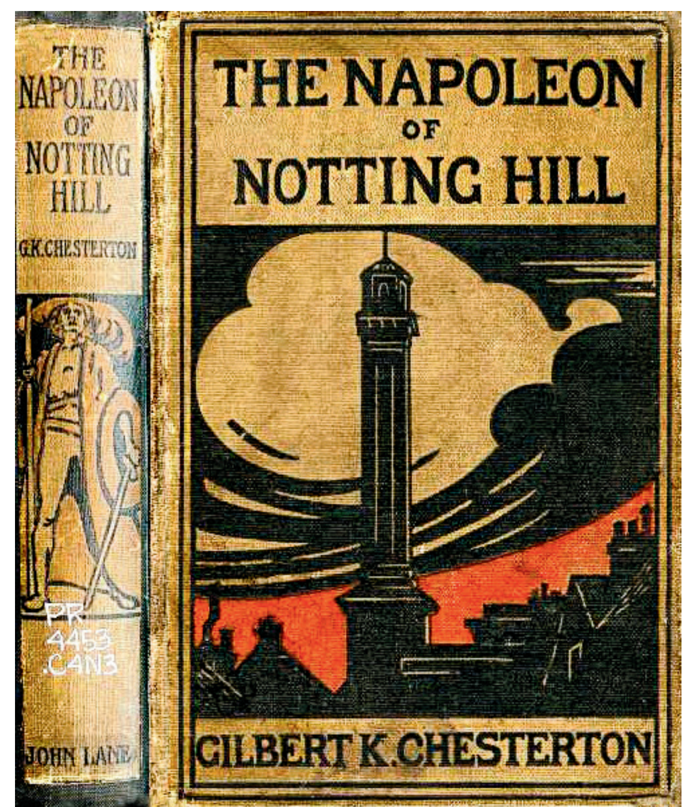
"From beginning to end, Chesterton was characterized as a knight. In the farewell poem (Walter de la Mare's tribute on the memorial card), he is portrayed as still at battle, still going his way, still paradoxical, for his fool's attire is actually wisdom, his joke is actually the truth, and the fight is a delight. The devil doesn't get the joke. The dragon can't be taken seriously. The knight, ever of good humor, is at peace, his heart at rest because it is compassionate and pure. And, even today, he is still lovable, which is why people still love him. Still truthful, which is why he is still controversial."

Chesterton plunged into life and made it an adventure.

Whether we read him or not, there's a great deal of wisdom in that attitude alone.

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.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



One of G.K. Chesterton's novels.

FILMS

Presidents in Pictures: 3 Classic Movies About United States Presidents

TIFFANY BRANNAN

Why are three movies made seven decades ago worth watching? History. American History—a lesson in a system that honors laws that treat all equally.

Although July 4 has passed, it's always a good time to celebrate American history with inspiring classic films. Hollywood during its Golden Era made many movies about U.S. presidents, using their biographies as the groundwork for inspiring, patriotic stories.

Three excellent classic films about famous U.S. presidents are "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" (1940), "Tennessee Johnson" (1942), and "Magnificent Doll" (1946). The first two deal with Abraham Lincoln's life and events, although Lincoln is unseen in the second film. The third is set during and after the Revolutionary War. In these films, a total of four U.S. presidents are depicted: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Johnson. Made in the 1940s, they reflect the patriotic feelings of World War II as well as the times in which they were set.

Three Patriotic Stories

"Abe Lincoln in Illinois" begins in 1831, when Abraham Lincoln (Raymond Massey) leaves his backwoods Kentucky home to transport pigs to New Orleans. He becomes a storekeeper in New Salem, Illinois, enjoying lovely Ann Rutledge's (Mary Howard) company. Abe eventually becomes the local postmaster and runs for State Assembly. He proposes to Ann after her fiancé is gone for two years, but she dies of brain fever before they can marry.

Abe wins his political position and moves to Springfield, where he studies law. There, he meets Mary Todd (Ruth Gordon), who declares that her future husband will become president of the United States. Abe reciprocates her romantic interest but is concerned about her ambitions for him. He breaks their engagement but eventually returns and marries her. As his political career advances, he constantly opposes his old rival for Mary's hand, Stephen Douglas (Gene Lockhart).

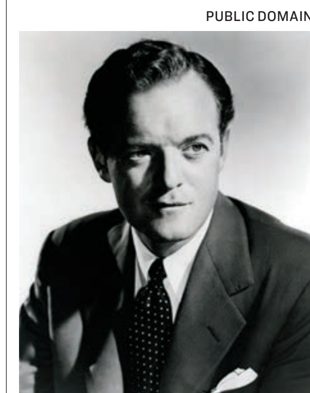
"Tennessee Johnson" also begins in the 1830s, when runaway apprentice Andrew Johnson (Van Heflin) persuades a friendly Tennessee blacksmith to remove his ankle cuff. While Johnson establishes himself as a local tailor, librarian Eliza McCardle (Ruth Hussey) teaches him to read and encourages him to fight for voting rights for non-property owners. They fall in love and marry. His speeches make him unpopular with local authorities, but he responds by running for sheriff. He is elected and begins his political career.

Years later, Johnson refuses to exit Congress with the other Southern senators when the Civil War begins. He fights for the Union and becomes Abraham Lincoln's vice president in his second term. As Lincoln's assassination forces him to spearhead postwar reconciliation, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens (Lionel Barrymore) fights to impeach him with powerfully crooked politics.

"Magnificent Doll" begins as the Revolutionary War ends, when Mr. Payne (Robert Barrat) returns to Virginia to sell his plantation and free his slaves. He also promised a dying friend that his daughter, Dolley (Ginger Rogers), would marry his Quaker son, John Todd (Stephen McNally). Dolley reluctantly agrees. Although her resentment toward Todd lessens in time, Dolley only realizes she loves her husband as he dies

RKO RADIO PICTURES

Raymond Massey as Abe Lincoln.


PUBLIC DOMAIN

A studio publicity still of Van Heflin, who played Andrew Johnson in "Tennesse Johnson."

These films remind us that the only way to save our country is by fighting for and not against our laws.

from yellow fever.

Now widowed, she and her mother (Peggy Wood) start a boarding house in Philadelphia. Their first boarder is Aaron Burr (David Niven), a charismatic congressman who romances Dolley. Another boarder, timid Sen. James Madison (Burgess Meredith), also loves her. Aaron entrances Dolley, but his greedy political ambitions frighten her. Eventually, she realizes she loves James's unselfish dedication to freedom, while Aaron's love for her and lust for power grow.

The Real Men

The introduction of "Tennessee Johnson" states, "The form of our medium compels certain dramatic liberties, but the principal facts of Johnson's own life are based on history," but this statement applies to all three movies. Each focuses on real historical figures, dramatizing or fabricating relationships rather than inventing fictional characters. This lends authenticity and provides an opportunity for getting to know the central characters. These three films bring the presidents to life.

Americans familiar with the faces of our Founding Fathers will notice that these actors bear faint resemblances to their real-life counterparts, except Raymond Massey. Aided by excellent makeup and flawless mannerisms, Mr. Massey convinces one by the end of the film that he is Honest Abe himself! His wiry frame, chiseled features, and solemn expression convey everything we know from the $5 bill, and more. This film portrays Lincoln not as being refined and confident but, surprisingly, as a man who is sensitive, with insecurities and fears. His droll voice and awkward, lumbering speech make him endearing and very human.

Van Heflin brings a similar sensitivity to Andrew Johnson. Like Lincoln in the previous film, Johnson spends most of his political career declaring himself unfit for positions that others encourage him to pursue. With his fiery temper, he passionately defends freedom and unity. This character transforms from a bitter, self-loathing youth to a confident, selfless patriot when Eliza teaches him that social classes have no place in America. During the Civil War, he stands alone among his fellow Southerners, since he is an American first. He puts aside political differences to join President Lincoln in the fight for the Union's preservation. The characterization is aided by Heflin's convincing aging and intensity.

Although "Magnificent Doll" focuses on Dolley Madison, it depicts two U.S. presidents, Thomas Jefferson (Grandon Rhodes) and James Madison. Founding Fathers Jefferson and Madison must fight for the preservation of the fledgling United States. Thomas Jefferson is a smaller character in this story, remaining friendly and honest while striving to fulfill his duty. As the Constitution's primary author, James Madison would presumably have every confidence in its ideas. However, we see him occasionally falter, wondering if this ideal government can survive. His wise wife's love and support encourages him to keep defending freedom.

The often-comical Burgess Meredith plays against type as the very serious but likeable Madison. For example, his explanation of America's fight for freedom to Dolley in the empty Senate is one of the most inspiringly patriotic speeches in Hollywood history.

Fighting for Freedom

When enemies of freedom arise, it's tempting to grab a musket or look for the nearest hanging tree. However, these films remind us that America cannot be defended by breaking our laws, even for a good cause.

In "Tennessee Johnson," young Andrew Johnson's speeches about equal voting rights lead to a fight and his friend's death. When his comrades want to form a mob and hang the murderous sheriff, Andrew explains that violence will only cause more death: "Mob fighting, shooting, and hanging, and burning, that ain't the way! ... Yes, I tell you to fight for your rights. But the Constitution ain't for the dead. It's to protect the living! ... It says the people got the right to make the laws! ... And that's how we're going to win our fight election day!"

Similarly, a mob wants to hang Aaron Burr after he is acquitted of treason at the end of "Magnificent Doll." Dolley uses all her persuasiveness to make the angry people realize that they will be killing more than one man if they hang Burr: "This is not freedom! ... Freedom is something you live, under law. ... You and I must live the example of a free people. We must prove ... that with clean hands and united hearts, we are able to deal with traitors as a people, under law and with order." This reflects America's history of putting fair laws above emotional reactions, a heritage of which we can be proud.

Let us find inspiration for guarding our freedom during the most trying times from the great leaders of the past. In a short, brilliant speech, Abraham Lincoln (Raymond Massey) says: "I don't think we want to be [the terror of the world.] I think we would prefer to be the encouragement of the world. The proof that at last man is worthy to be free. But we shall provide no such encouragement unless we can establish our ability as a nation to live and grow, and we shall surely do neither if these States fail to remain united. ... A house divided against itself cannot stand!"

These movies have gained greater value as they've aged. Instead of reacting with despair and un-American violence to the trials of political unrest, we can remember these movies, which remind us that the only way to save our country is by fighting for and not against our laws. As Dolley Madison poignantly says: "When you made those laws, you agreed to live by them and obey them. If they're not strong enough to protect you, strengthen them in orderly processes. But never take them into your own hands in mobs like this. This is not freedom!"

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

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

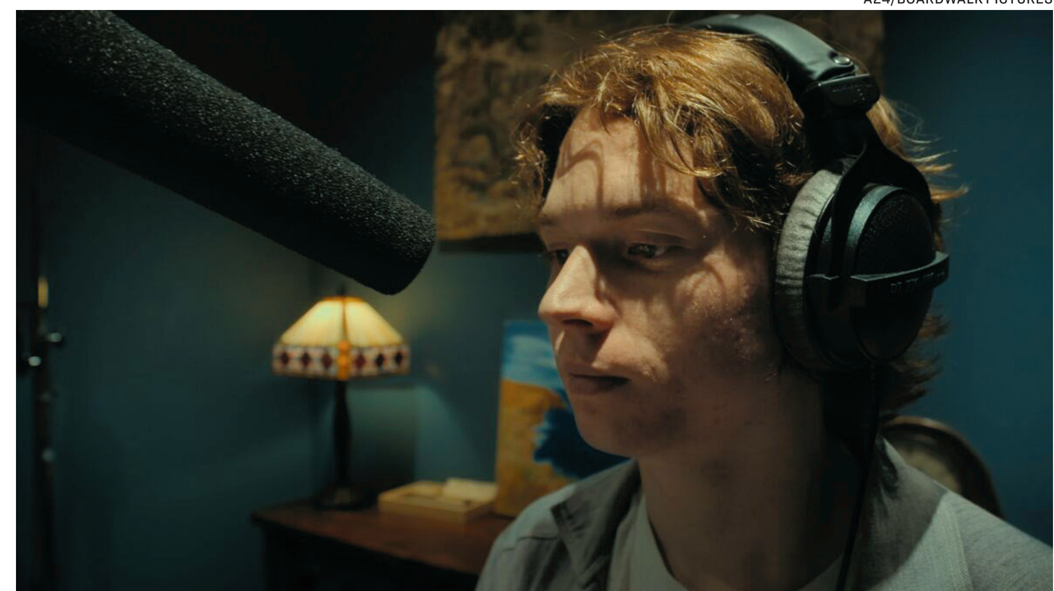
Ruth Hussey and Van Heflin in "Tennessee Johnson."

UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Ginger Rogers as Dolley Todd and David Niven as Aaron Burr in "Magnificent Doll."

A24/BOARDWALK PICTURES

Val Kilmer at home in "Val," a biopic about the actor's life and career.


A24/BOARDWALK PICTURES

Val Kilmer's son Jack doing the main narration in "Val" and sounding exactly like his dad.

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

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

Portrait of the Artist as a Young and Old Man

MARK JACKSON

Marlon Brando's famous definition of an actor goes: "An actor's a guy who, if you ain't talkin' about him, ain't listening." There's much truth to that. It might have been Jodie Foster who once said words to the effect of "I can't stand 95 percent of actors." It's part of why I quit the business. But good actors are good people, and Val Kilmer, as evidenced by his new documentary "Val," appears to be excellent people.

As with a lot of talented actors, we tend to associate them with the roles they're best known for, and so since 1986's "Top Gun," I've thought Val Kilmer was "Iceman" and imagined I wouldn't much like him in person. He's so cocky and arrogant! No, he's not. Iceman is cocky. Turns out, the real Val Kilmer is kind of a goofball—in the best sense of the word.

"Val" begins with a fun sleight of hand. Clearly, it's Val who's narrating "Val." But one notes that the man just had a major tracheotomy that saved his life from throat cancer; we've seen the trailer, heard him croaking through that plastic throat-plug. How's he suddenly sounding this clear? Val's signature laid-back So-Cal drawl is actually his son, Jack, on the voiceover mic. He's a dead ringer for dad.

What It Is

Style-wise somewhat reminiscent of early MTV, "Val" is an extensively curated life journey, an expressionistic collage of the pantheon of Val's recorded-filmed-photographed memories since early childhood. I say "extensively" because we're talking about a guy who's got reams upon reams of reels, from Super 8 film to Hi8 video, to phone footage, to childhood crayon doodles—all painstakingly stashed and boxed in a dedicated storage unit.

Val's passion is the craft of acting, and everything to do with acting, which makes "Val" an acting master class of sorts. But it's a bit too disjointed to actually, specifically be that because the film's about his whole life. But it still functions as that in an all-over-the-place kind of way.

It's a last stand; Val's looking death in the face—time to leave a legacy. This is what actors have to work with: When you're young, you play cops and lawyers; when you're old, you play judges; when you're really old, you play corpses. Or you write a book or make a movie about yourself, because when one gets to the end, one would like to say: "Here's all the stuff I did. Remember me" (especially if you have director tendencies and have carried a camera around your whole life).

The entire world is currently making curated life-movies using nonstop smartphone life documentation, or writing memoirs. (In the writing industry, memoirs are "hot.") Navy SEALs are writing memoirs even though that's highly frowned on in their community. But people want to hear stories about other people; we want to see how they did this thing called life.

With a lot of talented actors, we tend to associate them with the roles they're best known for.

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Val Kilmer as "Iceman" in "Top Gun."

'Val'

Directors
Ting Poo, Leo Scott

Starring
Val Kilmer

Running Time
1 hour, 49 minutes

Rating
R

Release Date
July 23, 2021

In the end, this film is a tale of the modern actor's journey, especially interesting for those actors who love the stage and the craft but go to Hollywood to make movies and end up celebrities. Val is the perfect example of a character actor trapped in the body of a leading man.

Batman

Kilmer was a classic golden-boy actor: youngest actor every to be accepted to the ultra-prestigious Juilliard acting conservatory, phenomenally good-looking, and phenomenally talented. After Juilliard, his career arguably hit its zenith with "Top Gun" and "Tombstone," but ended up stymied by the bat-suit.

The unwieldy, dense rubber suit functioned as a claustrophobic tomb with earplugs—he couldn't hear anything—and it was a challenge to project any kind of acting whatsoever through all that rubber. As he says, "It made no difference what I was doing."

He relates that fellow actors and crew on the set eventually just stopped talking to him. It was an actor's worst nightmare, and it led to his epiphany that all young boys want to be the actual Batman. You might think as an actor that you'd want to play Batman—but you'd be wrong. And, if you turn down the next Batman movie, you're labeled an ungrateful idiot.

Worse Than Batman

"The Island of Dr. Moreau" was worse. Kilmer took the job in order to work with (and hopefully learn from) his childhood idol, Marlon Brando. But the production was cursed. They tried switching directors in the middle of the stream, and thus director John Frankenheimer was playing catch-up ball and had zero time for any actor input.

Brando apparently had all kinds of fantastic, fun ideas for his role, but he was shut down creatively and then refused to be cooperative. This resulted in many of his scenes being filmed with a stand-in, and dashing Kilmer's hopes for a fruitful artistic collaboration.

But this inability to get truly creative in Hollywood, and the resultant disillusion, was there from the start. With "Top Gun," Kilmer thought the script was silly and didn't like the warmongering, but he was under contract with Paramount.

And at this point you might think to yourself, "Poor Val, he didn't want to be Batman, poor him." You might sing an altered version of Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing":

> "Now look at them yo-yos, that's the way you do it
> you play [the Batman] on the MTV
> That ain't workin', that's the way you do it
> Money for nothin' and your chicks for free
> ...
> Maybe get a blister on your little finger
> Maybe get a blister on your thumb
> We got to install microwave ovens, custom kitchen deliveries
> We got to move these refrigerators, we got to move these color TVs ..."

It's difficult to have empathy for the agonizing of actors doing jobs where their main complaint (while making millions) is that they have to stand in a rubber suit and can't hear anybody talk. But it all harks back to John Quincy Adams, who said, "I am a warrior, so that my son may be a merchant, so that his son may be a poet." We all find our particular woes woeful. The Buddha said, "All beings are suffering." Some of us suffer more than others ...

But Val definitely suffered. He's suffering right now. The first major tragedy of his young life was the death of his talented younger brother Wesley, who at age 15 drowned in the family jacuzzi during an epileptic seizure. Val and Wesley were exceptionally close, and Val felt he would have had a lifelong collaborative artistic partnership with Wesley.

Val's father, like many fathers whose sons become successful, felt entitled to piggyback his real estate dreams on his son's earnings. He secretly put Val's name on over 20 failed shell companies, eventually necessitating Val to make the choice of either suing his own dad or bailing him out of bankruptcy. Ever the good son, Val drained his finances, paid his father's debts, and went back to work.

Val's wife, actress Joanne Whalley, served him with divorce papers while he was on set, shooting a movie.

Rumors

Kilmer developed one of the worst reputations for "being difficult" on a movie set, and I personally bought all the rumors at the time—Kilmer is "Iceman," after all. "Val" is a revelation, though, because you get to see the sincere dedication to the craft that he doesn't want to compromise. It's a dedication to purity and a tireless search for perfection, which is noble.

We get to see the hard work: the unsolicited audition tapes many driven actors make for roles they're not up for but want nevertheless. Kilmer shot videos for "Full Metal Jacket" and "GoodFellas," neither of which he got. It was his audition tape for "The Doors" that got him the part. He cofounded a playwriting program while at Juilliard. He sold his giant amount of acreage in New Mexico to fund a traveling one-man show of a play he wrote and starred in, about Mark Twain.

When it comes to Hollywood rumors, ever since the off-the-charts ridiculous late-1970s rumor about Richard Gere (if you're over 30, you probably know what I'm talking about), I vowed never to pass judgment on public figures unless I've met them in person. I don't always succeed at this. It's good, though, to keep attempting not to be affected by America's celebrity rumor mill.

But one remains curious: How did Kilmer get throat cancer? Why did his wife leave him? Other than his dad wiping out his bank account, why is he still struggling financially? Also, it's mentioned early on that he's a Christian Science devotee. I knew a hockey player in college who was a Christian Scientist. He got his left eye knocked out by a puck and refused to see a doctor because, the rumor went, he was waiting for it to grow back. How did Christian Science affect Kilmer's throat cancer treatment plan? Curious minds wish to know.

Iceman

Val's signature role is still paying off, luckily. We see him at fan gatherings, signing posters, T-shirts, and hats. As he says (not exact words): "I'm selling basically my old self and my old career. I end up feeling really grateful instead of humiliated, because there are so many people." Still, speaking of installing microwave ovens and moving color TVs, the exhaustion of being a cancer survivor and working long hours at a big convention center like Comic-Con is shattering.

What's most shattering about "Val" is the juxtaposition of footage of Kilmer as a stunningly handsome young drama student rehearsing Shakespeare, and shots of him now looking wispy and frail as he puts on his beloved mother's turquoise bracelets, ostensibly to draw closer to her memory, and then weeps inconsolably.

And speaking of Shakespeare, the tragedy of how quickly Val's horizonless youthful possibilities slipped away can only be described as Shakespearean. The trouble is, we think we have time. Watch "Val." Seize the day.

BUENA VISTA PICTURES

Val Kilmer (L) and Kurt Russell in 1993's "Tombstone."

AMERICAN TREASURES

Meredith Wilson: The Real 'Music Man'

MICHAEL KUREK

WARNER BROS.

Shirley Jones, Robert Preston, and 76 trombones star in the first film version of Meredith Willson's "The Music Man."

They say authors should write about what they know. If anyone knew what it means to be a Music Man, it was Meredith Willson (spelled with two L's, 1902–1984), composer and playwright of the celebrated 1957 musical by that title. It turns out that Willson's real life as a jack of all musical trades was incredible and even more fascinating than his fiction.

"The Music Man," one of four Broadway shows Willson wrote (including his 1960 hit, "The Unsinkable Molly Brown"), won six Tony Awards, including Best Musical (beating out "West Side Story" for that award), and ran for 1,375 performances on Broadway over three and a half years. It has had two movie adaptations, in 1962 and 2003, and countless ongoing productions in local theaters. There was a Broadway revival in 2000 with Rebecca Luker as Marian, and a much-awaited new revival, starring Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster, is now set to open at Broadway's Winter Garden Theatre with eyebrow-raising ticket prices in February 2022.

Willson's own story began, like "The Music Man," in the small Iowa town of Mason City, on the Winnebago River, hence its nickname, "River City." There, he got to know the people whose personalities were so colorfully reflected in his show. His own musical start, likewise, began in a marching band, playing the flute and piccolo. You may recall Willson's title character, Professor Harold Hill, asking the town hooligan, Tommy, to occupy himself by inventing a marching music stand for the piccolo.

At age 17, Willson put his piccolo into his pocket and took a train to New York City. There, he enrolled in Frank Damrosch's Institute of Musical Art, later renamed The Juilliard School, and took flute and piccolo lessons with some of the most distinguished players of those instruments. He wound up playing under the direction of the march king himself, John Philip Sousa, and touring the United States, Mexico, and Cuba with Sousa's band from 1921 to 1923. Then he settled down for a career as a member of the New York Philharmonic from 1924 to 1929 under the famous Arturo Toscanini.

From Piccolo Player to Hollywood Composer

That might have been enough for many musicians to last for many years, but this music man hopped another train all the way to San Francisco. (It is not hard to imagine what inspired him to later write the rhythms of the train song "Rock Island" that opens "The Music Man.") There, he landed a job as musical director of the radio station KFRC, which led to his important position in the 1930s as a musical director for the NBC radio network in Hollywood.

Never missing an opportunity, our real-life music man got in on the ground floor of musical scoring for Hollywood films, composing the score for several films beginning in 1929 and 1930, including "All Quiet on the Western Front." By 1940 and 1941, he garnered two Academy Award nominations for best film scores, for Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator," and for William Wyler's "The Little Foxes," which starred Bette Davis.

During World War II, as a major in the Armed Forces Radio Service, Willson was teamed up with George Burns and Gracie Allen and, in addition to directing the radio big band, began hamming it up in speaking character parts. In the post-war years and into the early 1950s, he began hosting his own network radio shows, including "Meredith Willson's Musical Review," "Sparkle Time," and "The Big Show," which was a variety show with many big stars cohosted by Tallulah Bankhead. For its closing song, Willson wrote the classic recorded by many great singers, "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You."

WARNER BROS.

Robert Preston played the lead, Harold Hill, in both the stage version and 1962 film version of "The Music Man."

The Development of 'The Music Man'

While working in 1950 as a music director for a musical theater special at the Hollywood Bowl, Willson met Franklin Lacey (1917–1988), a playwright and screenwriter, who became a crucial consultant on honing Willson's story line for "The Music Man." Willson tinkered with the show for eight years, through 30 revisions, finally keeping the best 20 (not counting reprises) of over 40 songs he wrote for the show.

He created different orderings and reprises for the songs of the 1962 movie version from the 1957 stage version, with the main difference being the substitution in the film of the new song "Being in Love" for the stage song "My White Knight." The latter is the one still performed in stage productions, which may be unfamiliar to those who are only familiar with the movie, but there is a passage that is the same in both songs.

In the original stage production, Robert Preston stole the show as the title character, with the role of Marian sung by the great Barbara Cook. But when it came time to cast the movie, Jack L. Warner wanted to cast a bigger Hollywood name, including Bing Crosby and then Cary Grant, who famously told Warner that he wouldn't even go to see the movie if Bob Preston was not in it. Warner also proposed casting Frank Sinatra, but Meredith Willson himself adamantly insisted on keeping Preston, for whom it became his signature role. Shirley Jones (Marian in the film) was already a favorite, having previously played the lead in the movie musical versions of "Oklahoma!" and "Carousel."

Meredith Willson was never one to sit still, it seems, and continued diversifying his musical enterprises throughout his life. He composed two symphonies and a variety of other classical works, all performed and well-received in their day. He wrote a Billboard No. 1 hit for Glenn Miller (with a Ray Eberle vocal), "You and I," which was also recorded by Bing Crosby and by Frank Sinatra with Tommy Dorsey.

Willson also wrote the perennial "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," the "University of Iowa Fight Song," and many other songs, scores, and arrangements. In 1987, President Ronald Regan awarded him, posthumously, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Now that's a music man!

American composer Michael Kurek is the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "The Sea Knows." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com

PUBLIC DOMAIN

A publicity photo of Joan Weldon and Forrest Tucker for the original U.S. national tour of the musical "The Music Man."

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

Another of Meredith Willson's hit musicals, "The Unsinkable Molly Brown," starring Debbie Reynolds in the film version.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

During World War II, Meredith teamed up with George Burns and Gracie Allen with the Armed Forces Radio Service. Burns and Allen are pictured here in 1952.

G SEEGER/SHUTTERSTOCK

BOOK REVIEWS

Three Books Honoring America and Its Strengths

LINDA WIEGENFELD

Traditions help form the structure and foundation of society, help define our past, shape us today, and provide ideas for our future. If we ignore traditions, America's identity may be lost. Therefore, it's worth exploring some recent books that highlight traditional American values.

American Patriotism

For some, American patriotism—a traditional idea—has been put on the back burner. To educate young people about the values that make America great, Prager University has put out a new series of books to reawaken pride in our country. The series is "Otto's Tales," and the first book is "The National Anthem and Pledge of Allegiance."

Although advertised as a booklet for K–12, adults can also learn from it, as history has been neglected in curricula for decades.

The story opens with Otto the bulldog and his young friend Dennis dressed in red, white, and blue, watching a battle near Fort McHenry during the War of 1812. All during the night, the British bomb the fort, yet at dawn the American flag is still raised high. Francis Scott Key, who sees the battle unfold, writes a poem about this event, which later becomes the lyrics for "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Dennis and Otto next visit a school during the time when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, our 34th president who added the words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. Eisenhower wanted Americans to remember that our rights ultimately come from God, not from the government.

This book definitely meets the need for entertaining, educational, and pro-American content.

Policing With Integrity

Many Americans understand that they cannot enjoy the benefits of living in America if they don't feel safe expressing their views, conducting business, and just living their daily lives.

One positive book on the police is "I Hate Campaign Hats: Police Stories of a Young State Trooper Making His Way with Faith, Love, and Silly Humor." Written by Massachusetts State Trooper Randall Stevens, it is the story of how a typical policeman helps the defenseless in small as well as big ways.

In one chapter, Stevens describes the experience of finding his first dead body. After determining that no crime was committed, he goes to great length to ensure that the body gets to the funeral home. He even finds a neighbor willing to board up the broken pane on the home's rear door until the family can fix it properly.

Another chapter recounts how Stevens finds information that might tell him what happened to Magnolia, a horse that had died in a hit-and-run accident. Learning about the variety of skills that Stevens uses to investigate is enlightening and gives insight into his daily work.

Multiply Randall Stevens's devotion to duty by the number of those police who think like him, and you have a powerful force for good.

It is an American tradition that clear, consistent justice—especially when protecting the innocent—be applied equally to all individuals.

Note: The title of the book refers to Stevens's headgear, which is part of the uniform worn by state troopers.

Founding Father Defends Justice for All

"Equal Justice Under Law" is written above the main entrance of the Supreme Court Building in Washington. It is an American tradition that clear, consistent justice—especially when protecting the innocent—be applied equally to all individuals, no matter their race, creed, color, or politics. This societal ideal has influenced the American legal system from the beginning.

Lately, though, the country has been pushed farther and farther from this goal by what seems to be different standards for different citizens. Laws can no longer be deterrents if this policy continues.

In "John Adams Under Fire: The Founding Father's Fight for Justice in the Boston Massacre Murder Trial" by Dan Abrams and David Fisher, we meet John Adams, our second president, who believed that laws should be broad and apply to everyone.

On the night of March 5, 1770, shots were fired by British soldiers on the streets of Boston, killing five civilians. This has been referred to as the Boston Massacre. The question at the time was whether the British soldiers committed an unprovoked massacre of peaceful Boston citizens, or whether the soldiers were defending themselves from a mob.

Into this fray came John Adams, a 34-year-old Boston attorney who agreed to defend the British. Adams accepted the case because he was convinced that the soldiers were wrongly accused and had fired into the crowd in self-defense. Adams also believed that if the law was to gain a foothold in America, it had to serve in the most troublesome instances.

No transcript of the trial of Captain Thomas Preston, who led the British troops in Boston, has ever been found. However, there are extensive details in the book about the second trial, that of the soldiers under his command. Adams not only had the unenviable task of defending despised British soldiers, but he also had to be careful about how he portrayed the colonists who had gathered, acted out, and took an aggressive posture toward the soldiers.

"John Adams Under Fire" includes absorbing details about the court battle between the colonists and British as well as the added bonus that readers can see the emerging modern legal system. The book also covers the facts that led up to the trial, and Adams's involvement in opposing British rule.

To Adams's credit, most thought the British soldiers received a fair trial, despite the hatred directed toward them and their country. Adams wrote in his diary: "Judgement of death against those soldiers would have been as foul a stain upon this country as the executions of the Quakers or witches, anciently. ... As the evidence was, the verdict of the jury was exactly right."

Today, criminal defense lawyers regularly cite John Adams's defense of the British soldiers as an example of why they are morally obligated to represent certain unpopular clients.

This is the traditional American view. May it prevail.

Linda Wiegenfeld is a retired teacher. She can be reached for comments or suggestions at lwiegenfeld@aol.com

Exploring recent books that highlight traditional American values:

'I Hate Campaign Hats: Police Stories of a Young State Trooper Making His Way with Faith, Love, and Silly Humor'

Randall Stevens

Self-published
Feb. 25, 2021

275 pages, paperback

I Hate Campaign Hats

Police Stories of a Young State Trooper Making His Way with Faith, Love, and Silly Humor

RANDALL STEVENS

Campaign hats are part of the official uniform of state troopers.

'Otto's Tales: The National Anthem and Pledge of Allegiance'

by PragerU

Independently published May 24, 2021

32 pages, paperback

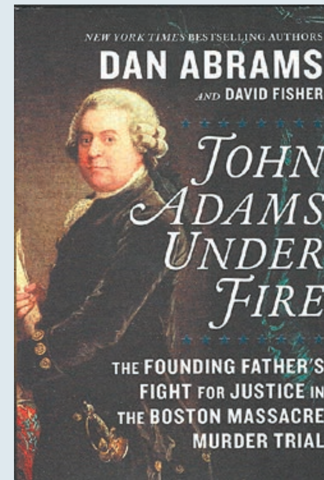
Prager University has started a series to reawaken young readers' pride in our country.

'John Adams Under Fire: The Founding Father's Fight for Justice in the Boston Massacre Murder Trial'

Dan Abrams and David Fisher

Hanover Square Press; March 3, 2020

320 pages, hardcover



The case taken by lawyer John Adams for those accused of the Boston massacre is still cited in courts today.

FILM REVIEW

Yawn-Fest With Deep Spiritual Insights

MARK JACKSON

"The Green Knight" Rotten Tomatoes score: The Critics: 90 percent—Fresh! The People: 52 percent—Rotten!

"The Green Knight," a film adaptation of the Arthurian poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," is one of those languid, art-house-type movies that cause critics to wax poetic and audiences to hate it. I'm with the people. Why? It's boring! Zero tension. Pretty? Yes, but I insist of movies that they do not violate the No. 1 rule of show business: "Never be boring."

What Happens

Gawain (Dev Patel, yes, the Indian actor—this is the version where Indians and black folks lived in Great Britain in the 14th century) belongs to the court of King Arthur (Sean Harris) and hopes one day to be knighted. He's got a woman named Essel (Alicia Vikander), whom he relegates to the woodpile due to her, er, lowly station.

On Christmas Day, the mysterious Green Knight (Ralph Ineson), looking like Groot from "Guardians of the Galaxy," rides his mighty steed into the middle of the Camelot festivities and throws down a gauntlet: If any man can manage to even nick him with their weapon of choice, they get to win his giant green ax.

Ralph Ineson plays the titular Green Knight.

However! There's a catch! If they win, they have to go on a six-day trek to the Green Knight's Green Chapel, a year hence, to man up and endure the same wound they originally doled out to the Green Knight.

Seeing as how nobody wants to mix it up with this forest-y Brobdingnagian, Gawain, wanting to make his bones in this vaunted company, accepts the challenge.

And forthwith, Gawain choppeth off the head of said mystical knight!

But what is this?! The Green Knight—that original headless horseman—immediately picketh up his bark-and-twig head, mounteth his steed, and leave-eth.

A year goes by, and with all hope that it was just a game eventually fading, Gawain, honor at stake, sets out for the Green Chapel.

The rest is a phantasmagorical dreamlike quest, some of which might be allegorical, some of which might be the character seeing through his third eye. It's hard to guess which mode of perception (and which reality) it might be at any given point. The main thing is—Gawain is tested, both physically and spiritually.

Basically, this is a becoming-a-man tale, on the surface of it. The director has woven a few unrelated Arthurian legends in with this Green Knight telling, but whether this is a pure telling or an enhanced one is unimportant. What it really is, is a tale of spiritual enlightenment—as are most of the Arthurian legends.

Salvation communities such as the monasteries and nunneries of Christianity and Buddhism (and actually most humans prior to the Industrial Revolution) consider enlightenment to be the sole purpose of being human, and that is why there are so many stories thereof. "The Odyssey" is an enlightenment tale.

A Little More Synopsis

The biggest test is that at some point, Gawain reaches the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert (known here as "The Lord," played by Joel Edgerton), who is Gawain's host before his arrival at the Green Chapel.

At The Lord's castle, Gawain is submitted to tests of loyalty and chastity. The Lord sends his wife to seduce Gawain. He also proposes a bargain: He will give Gawain whatever creature he kills on his daily hunts, on the condition that Gawain give him anything that he might possibly gain during the day. Gawain accepts. The next day, the wife visits Gawain's bedroom and tries to seduce him, but he allows her only a single kiss in his attempt to remain chaste (and also not to offend her). When The Lord comes home and gives Gawain a deer he killed, Gawain gives him a kiss, but doesn't tell him where it came from. And so on and so forth.

'The Green Knight'

Director
David Lowery

Starring
Dev Patel, Alicia Vikander, Joel Edgerton, Sean Harris, Sarita Choudhury

Running Time
2 hours, 10 minutes

Rating
R

Release Date
July 30, 2021

ALL PHOTOS BY A24

Sir Gawain (Dev Patel) is on a spiritual quest, in "The Green Knight."

The critical line in the sand in terms of spiritual enlightenment is chastity.

Gawain tries very, very hard to remain chaste. In the movie version, he is, let us say, somewhat less successful. But that doesn't necessarily mean what you think it means—even a thought counts in the testing of one's purity.

Will Gawain Keep His Head?

In a nutshell, the main lesson—the gold nugget of wisdom—is as follows. Personally finding the topic of salvation deeply engrossing, what jumped out at me was the fact that at one point The Lord's wife explains to Gawain that red ... is the color of lust.

Why is that important? The critical line in the sand in terms of spiritual enlightenment is chastity. This is why it's considered to be the most difficult challenge that humans can attempt. You want to become an immortal, a saint? The biologically embedded, procreationally necessary tendencies toward lust, and all thoughts about it—have to be overcome. Complete and utter purity of soul is the name of the game.

Whether this is the distilled essence of the tale or not, what I see is that the Green Knight himself symbolizes purity and chastity. Why? Do you know what happens if you stare at a patch of red for an extended period of time and then suddenly look at a white wall? Your brain produces a powerful, ghostly phantom image of pure green. And so I interpret this as follows: Those who want to attain the state of chastity in spiritual enlightenment must strive to become green knights—the complementary color, and polar opposite color, of lustful red.

For in order to attain true immortality, all human things must be jettisoned. The 14th-century monks knew this. We don't know it at all today. But unless broody, moody, mystical movies are your cup of tea, if you're interested in this topic at all, I'd suggest reading some good books about it instead.

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