

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Few boys had as many adventures as Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer. First edition frontispiece, 1876, from "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

LITERATURE

Where the Wild Things Are

Literature, boys, and manhood

JEFF MINICK

Mark Twain ends the "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" with these words:

"And so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble that was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before."

Read by generations of boys is 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.'

Until relatively recently, it was common for boys even of Huck's age—he was 12 or 13—to "light out for the Territory," though not in the sense Huck meant. Just a century ago, teenage males often graduated eighth grade in school and then metaphorically lit out for the territory by joining the work force, laboring on farms to help out the family, seeking adventure in travel, or if they were slightly older, enlisting in the military.

Meanwhile, even just 60 years ago, many adolescent boys found adventure close to home. They took long canoe trips without adult supervision,

camped in the woods with friends, shot at targets with their .22s, played rough games of war and sport, and came home only at supper after leaving the house after breakfast. I know these things because I was one of those boys.

And like many boys then and now, I was inspired in my adventures by stories I read in books, tales of boys out and about in the world, indulging in stunts and escapades, and coming of age as they faced challenges, obstacles, and enemies.

Continued on Page 4

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FILMS

Gossip, Convention, and Barbara Stanwyck

‘My Reputation’ from 1946

TIFFANY BRANNAN

“Who steals my purse steals trash. But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.” This quote from “Othello” begins “My Reputation,” and it is a strong reminder of how our conduct, even if well-intentioned, can affect others. Jessica Drummond (Barbara Stanwyck) has just lost her husband. They had two sons together, who are now 12 and 14. Family lawyer Frank Everett (Warner Anderson) is a good friend and real comfort during this difficult time, but Jessica’s mother, Mrs. Kimball (Lucile Watson), on the other hand, just wants to tell her what to do. Kimball seems more concerned about following conventions than about her daughter’s happiness.

When Jess’s sons go to boarding school, she becomes terribly lonely. Her friend Ginna (Eve Arden) invites her to spend the winter at a cabin with her and her husband (John Ridgely).

While out skiing one day, Jess meets Maj. Scott Landis (George Brent). They take an immediate liking to each other, but after she resists his romantic attentions, he abruptly leaves. Back home, she eventually hears that Maj. Landis has been stationed nearby. She arranges to “coincidentally” see him at a nightclub, where they resume their acquaintance-ship, and then begin seeing each other regularly.

Although their relationship is entirely wholesome, local gossips quickly begin rumors about them. Jessica’s mother cautions her against defying the convention for widows, but the mounting gossip just makes Jess want to ignore her so-called friends’ criticism of her behavior. Eventually, she must decide whether to follow a shortcut to happiness or traditional virtues of femininity and selflessness that

bring a more harmonious outcome.

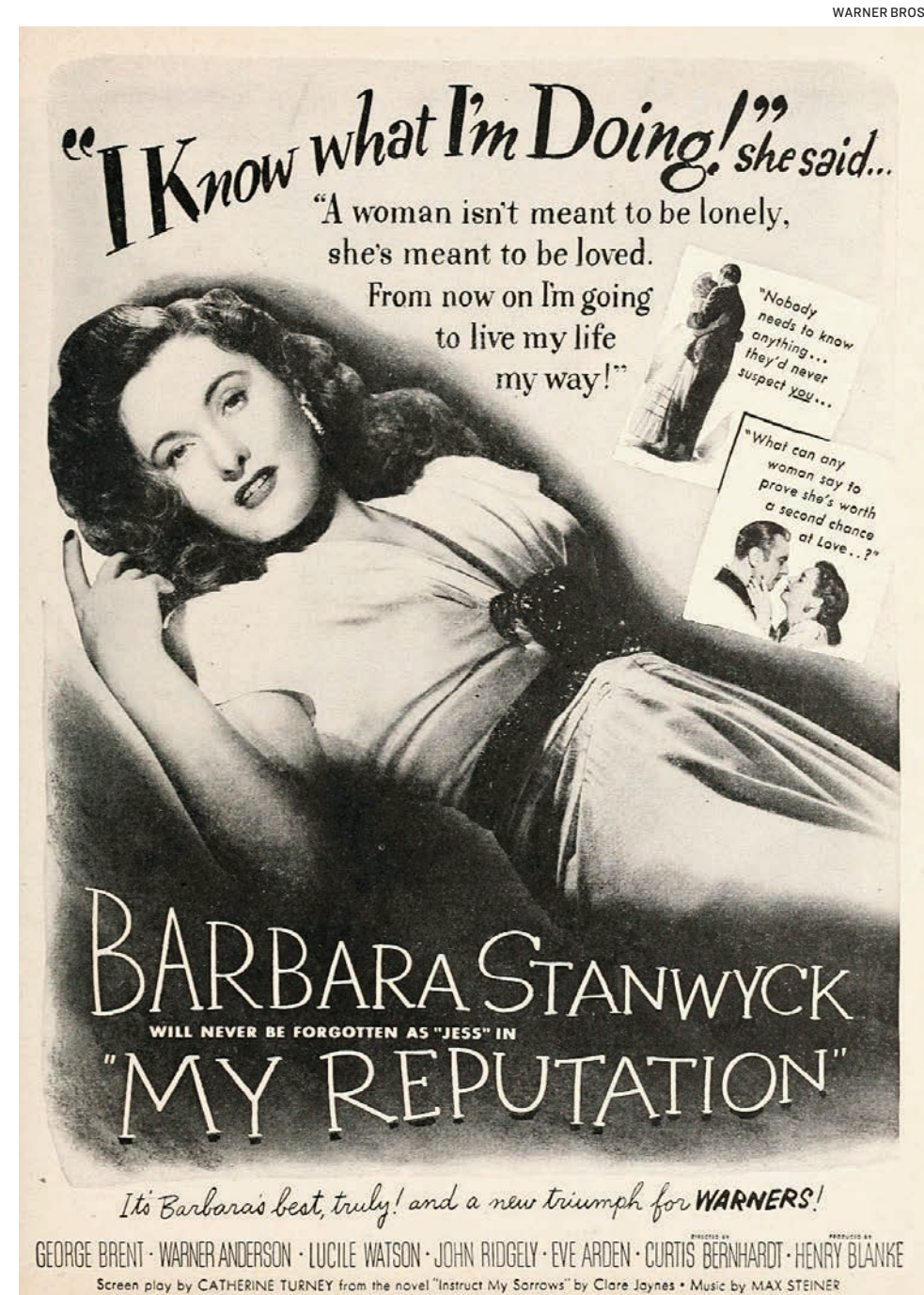
A Different Reputation

Barbara Stanwyck is often remembered for her controversial roles in Pre-Code films, early talking pictures released between 1930 and 1934. Although the Motion Picture Production Code (commonly called the Hays Code) was officially adopted by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in 1930, it wasn’t effectively enforced until 1934, when Joseph I. Breen headed a new branch of the MPPDA: the Production Code Administration (PCA).

The earlier, unregulated time was Hollywood’s Old West, when filmmakers shot it out for Depression Era audiences’ tickets, using shock value as ammunition. Although the chief motivation behind this marketing impropriety was selling tickets, many modern film buffs tout Pre-Code films as daring trailblazers in American entertainment. In contrast to Code films’ restraint and emphasis on decency, some find Pre-Code standards (or lack thereof) appealing. Some celebrate the female characters in these movies, who defy moral rules and societal conventions to get ahead. Barbara Stanwyck brought some of these most infamous characters to life, including Lily Powers in “Baby Face” (1933).

“Baby Face” based its promotional campaign on advertising its heroine’s bad reputation, using tag lines like “She stopped at nothing and made ‘IT’ pay” and “She climbed the ladder of success—wrong by wrong!” Barbara Stanwyck’s suitability for the part was emphasized by the tag line, “Played to perfection by the only girl on the screen who isn’t afraid to let herself go, BARBARA STANWYCK.”

Filmed only 11 years later with the same actress and same leading man (George Brent) at the same studio, “My Reputa-



Barbara Stanwyck’s character learns that taking a shortcut to happiness can sometimes cause a world of pain. The poster for “My Reputation.”

tion” presents a very different story. Because it is a Code film, this film shows that flouting conventions is not liberating; moral rules exist for a reason.

A Woman’s Reputation

Pre-Code women like Lily Powers are now praised as strong, empowering female characters. Ignoring traditions and conventions, these women used their bodies, wiles, and cunning to get anything they wanted, including money, possessions, and other women’s husbands. They defied moral conventions of previous generations, with the implication that promiscuity was the modern way. Although not all Pre-Code bad girls lived happily ever after, they rarely faced the consequences that would undoubtedly have befallen women who behaved thus in the 1930s.

In contrast, “My Reputation” shows the consequences of innocent yet indiscreet behavior. For example, Jess ignores her better judgment by visiting Scott’s apartment. They quickly decide to go to a restaurant, but not before being seen by one of her mother’s friends. Before long, everyone in town is talking about the romance between the young widow and the handsome soldier.

The gossip does not merely stay in whispers, however. It quickly escalates to the point of making her a social outcast. Society’s “holier than thou” attitude grows increasingly hypocritical to Jess, who feels spurred toward rebellion by her judgmental friends’ suppositions. However, when her sons hear and believe the rumors, she realizes that a sullied reputation also has consequences.

At the center of this conundrum is Jess’s mother. From her first appearance, we believe that she is a domineering woman who treats her grown daughter like a little girl. Her adherence to convention goes beyond logic and consideration for others, especially concerning Jessica. Her actions seem to demonstrate that her bereaved daughter has no right to try to create a new life for herself if

that might defy proper behavior for widows.

Are Happiness and Convention at Odds? Following one’s heart is a common theme in entertainment. In Golden Era movies, as in more modern pictures, happiness and love are depicted as more rewarding pursuits than fame, fortune, and other worldlier forms of success. However, in Code films, happiness could only be enjoyed if achieved by honest means, and love that is pure alone is glorious.

“My Reputation” follows these standards of traditional morality, putting motherly responsibility above the romantic notion of doing what makes one feel good. When Jess learns that Scott is being deployed to New York and then overseas to fight in World War II, she decides to accompany him to New York so that they can be together as long as possible. Although Jess and Scott would never have an immoral relationship, their going together would give the appearance of one.

When Jess has finished packing, she realizes that her sons, who heard gossip about their mother at a party that night, have run



Theatrical release poster for the 1933 film “Baby Face.”



A 1939 publicity photo of Barbara Stanwyck.

“My Reputation” presents an inspiringly feminine and traditional heroine.

away. She follows them to her mother’s house, where she explains to them that her love for Maj. Landis doesn’t lessen her love for their father. Meanwhile, they make her realize that her impending trip is wrong: It confirms all the vicious rumors they’ve heard, and would do so for everyone else as well.

At this point, we realize that Jessica’s mother has had good intentions all along. She sympathetically congratulates her daughter for doing the right thing, saying, “It’s hard to do what is right sometimes.” Mrs. Kimball wisely sums up why convention and traditions are so important, even if following them is painful: “Young people resent conventions, but as you grow older, you’ll realize that conventions were established because there was need for them.”

This movie shows that the Motion Picture Production Code was very much like conventions. Its rules were similarly established because there was need for them. As a result, it presents an inspiringly feminine and traditional heroine, who is decent, considerate, and generous, putting her motherly duty first. She is a female character I find truly empowering.



George Brent in a 1939 publicity shot.

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.

Virtue of the Brush in a Time of Chaos

“When things are chaotic to the extreme, order must be restored.”
- “The four books” by Zhu Xi

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LITERATURE

Where the Wild Things Are

Literature, boys, and manhood

Continued from Page 1

One of those books, read by generations of boys, is "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

Some Classics

In this prequel to "Huckleberry Finn," Tom Sawyer undergoes a series of trials and troubles. He falls in love with a new girl in town, Becky Thatcher, who spurns him after learning that he has previously kissed another girl. Tom and Huck witness Indian Joe murder a doctor in a graveyard. Bored with school, Tom slips off with Huck and another friend, Joe Harper, to live like pirates on an island in the Mississippi River and soon show up at their own funerals.

Later, Tom becomes a hero when, having been lost for several days in a cave along with Becky, he finds his way out and saves the girl's life. Indian Joe dies locked up in the cave, which leads Tom and Huck to return there and find the murderer's chest of gold. As for Huck, his half of the wealth, lands him as a ragged, free-spirited into the care of the Widow Douglas, whose "servants kept him clean and neat, combed and brushed, and they bedded him nightly in unsympathetic sheets that had not one little spot or stain with which he could press to his heart and know for a friend."

Huck runs away. But at the end of the novel, the wily Tom persuades Huck to return home by telling him that he's starting a gang of high-class robbers, and to join that gang Huck will have to be "respectable."

In his "Conclusion" to "Tom Sawyer," Twain writes: "So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a boy, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man."

The bumps, bruises, and dangers of Tom's adolescence have paved the way to adulthood.

Stories have helped Tom along this path. He is a boy with a fertile imagi-

Even just 60 years ago, many adolescent boys found adventure close to home.



A drawing of Huckleberry Finn, by E.W. Kemble, from the original 1884 edition of "Huckleberry Finn."



nation—he leads his friends in playing elaborate games like pirates and Robin Hood—and that engine of the mind is fueled by the books he's read. In Tom, we see the enormous influence of adventurous tales on the male spirit.

Making Men of Iron

G.A. Henty and Howard Pyle were contemporaries of Mark Twain who also made their mark writing about boys seeking adventure and facing danger. Henty, an English war correspondent as well as a novelist, wrote a bookcase of historical adventures aimed mostly at boys. Though his protagonists are generally English, two of his titles—"In the Heart of the Rockies" and "With Lee in Virginia"—are set in the United States. Both stories feature teenagers transformed into adults by the challenges they face.

In his day, Henty's books were wildly popular and remain so even now with some readers, especially homeschooling students.

Howard Pyle's "Men of Iron" tells the story of Myles Falworth, a young squire training to become a knight and hoping to restore the good name of his dead father, who was falsely accused of treason. Again, we have a teenage protagonist who by his courage and his sense of honor battles his way into adulthood. This novel made such an impression on me that I can remember returning it to my school library with a mingled sense of joy at the dreams it inspired in me and sadness that the story had ended.

The Great Outdoors

Robert Ruark's "The Old Man and the Boy" and "The Old Man's Boy Grows Older" are little read by teenagers today, which is unfortunate. Ruark, who came of age in Eastern North Carolina and who later won a reputation as a novelist and outdoor sports writer, recounts in these two auto-

biographies the boyhood he spent hunting and fishing with the Old Man, his grandfather, and the stories and wisdom he gained from this friendship. Like his grandfather, Ruark also possessed a romantic streak, as can be seen from this passage of the boy walking along a beach:

"There's something pretty wonderful about a beach in the nighttime, with nobody around to make a lot of noises, and the gulls crying quiet, and the waves lapping soft and contented on the shore. I walked along looking for turtle tracks, and I got to thinking sort of like the Old Man. When God made water and mountains, I thought, He sure knew what He was doing."

Ruark's tales of the days spent with his grandfather might well inspire younger readers to connect with nature and to seek outdoor pleasures. Certainly, these young readers would gain from the wisdom the Old Man passed on to the young Ruark.

Gone West

Like Ruark, Ralph Moody describes a childhood of living in the Great Outdoors, only this time in Colorado rather than in North Carolina. In the first volume of his "Little Britches" series, which some have proclaimed the "Little House on the Prairie" books for boys, it's 1906, and we follow the 8-year-old Ralph from New Hampshire to Colorado, where he works from dawn to dusk for several weeks helping his sickly father repair a cabin for his family, faces bullies at school, and eventually learns to become a "cow poke."

Ralph's father, a man admired by his neighbors and beloved by his family, dies three years later. The last paragraph of this much-read autobiography reads this way:

"Father had always said grace before meals; always the same twenty-five

words, and the ritual was always the same. Mother would look around the table to see that everything was in readiness; then she would nod to father. That night she nodded to me, and I became a man."

The Yarns Continue

Boys today still yearn for adventures in the books they read. This longing, for example, can be found in Gary Paulsen's bestselling novel "Hatchet," where we meet Brian Robeson, who survives an airplane crash in the Canadian wilderness and who then manages to survive his ordeal with the help of a hatchet given to him by his mother, and later by means of the survival pack he discovers on the downed aircraft.

"Hatchet" offers a portrait of a boy

who overcomes his fears and uses his wits and courage to survive in desperate circumstances. Brian realizes "the most important rule of survival, which was that feeling sorry for yourself didn't work. It wasn't just that it was wrong to do, or that it was considered incorrect. It was more than that—it didn't work."

In "The Rembrandt Conspiracy" by Deron Hicks, young readers learn some art history while following 12-year-old Art Hamilton, son of a well-known art conservation scientist, as he attempts to thwart a massive heist of artworks in Washington, D.C. He is assisted by his best friend, Camille. Art's intelligence, his technology skills, and his bravery make him a version of the Hardy Boys, but for contemporary readers.

Let's Go Exploring!

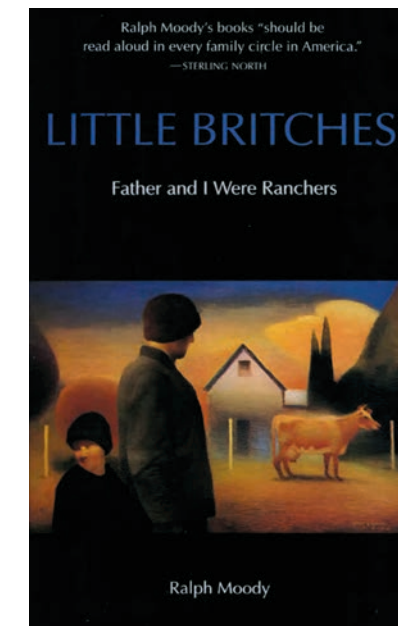
Many readers are familiar with Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons. Here, the mischievous Calvin—that adjective is an understatement—often finds himself in trouble in large part because of his overactive imagination. In the blink of an eye, he can transform himself into a Tyrannosaurus rex, Spaceman Spiff, the hardboiled detective Tracer Bullet, or the superhero Stupendous Man.

Like so many adolescents, Calvin lives in his imagination and is always up for an adventure. We can safely guess that reading books about superheroes and dinosaurs are the sparks that fire up Calvin's passions and imagination, just as reading coming-of-age books can help our own adolescent males navigate the

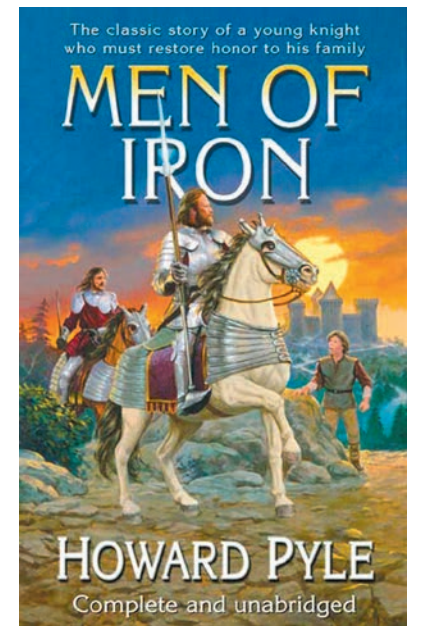
joys and dangers of life.

In the final "Calvin and Hobbes" strip published by Watterson (available in "The Complete Calvin and Hobbes"), Calvin and his tiger buddy Hobbes prepare to plummet down a snowy hill on a sled. "It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol' buddy," Calvin cries. "Let's go exploring!"

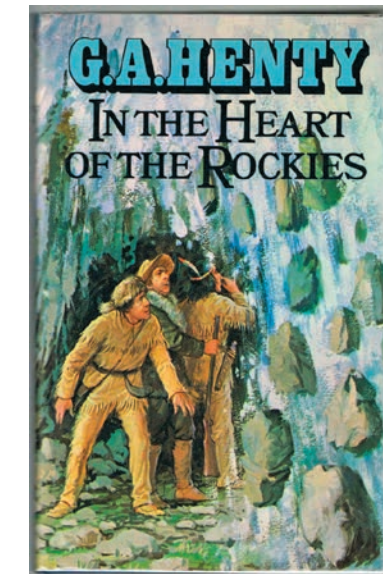
Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin in seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



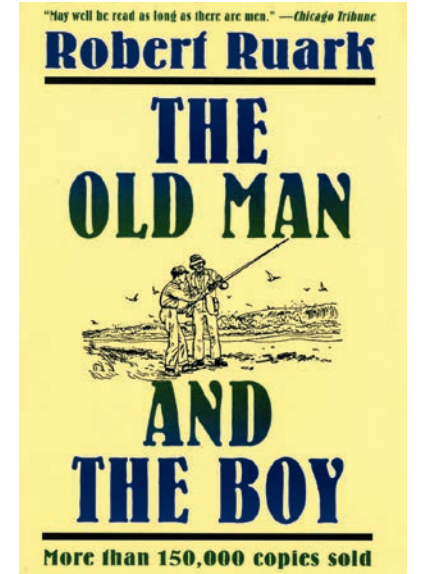
The "Little Britches" series by Ralph Moody follows the life of 8-year-old Ralph in a time of family trouble.



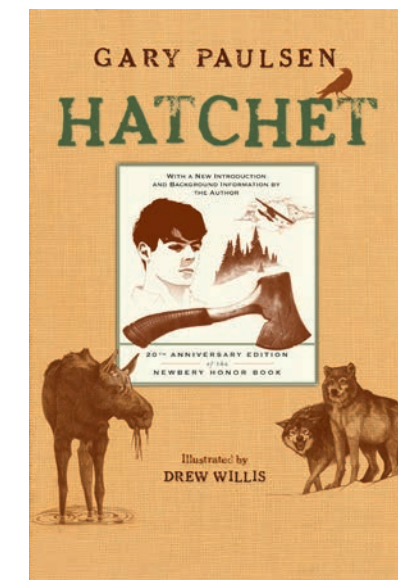
The children's classic "Men of Iron" was written in 1891.



G.A. Henty set two of his boy adventures in the United States. "In the Heart of the Rockies" is one of them.



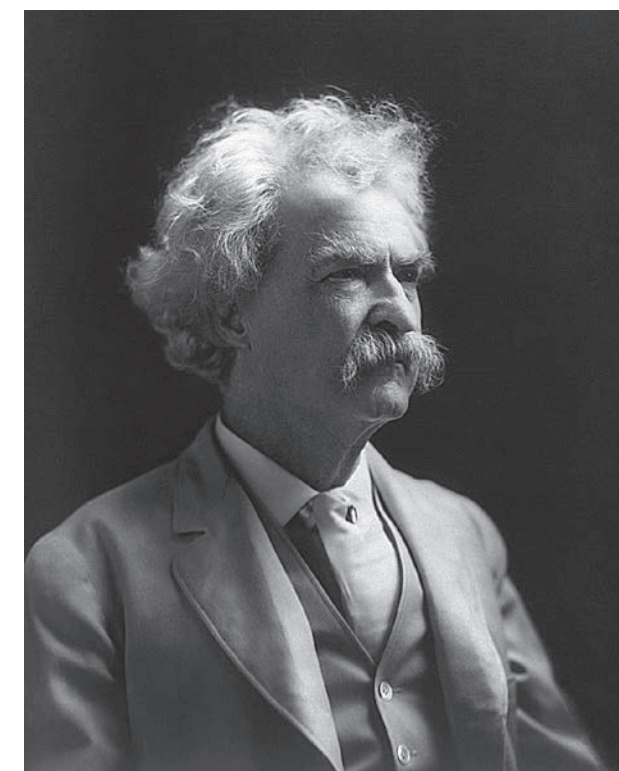
Robert Ruark wrote two autobiographies that describe his youth spent hunting and fishing.



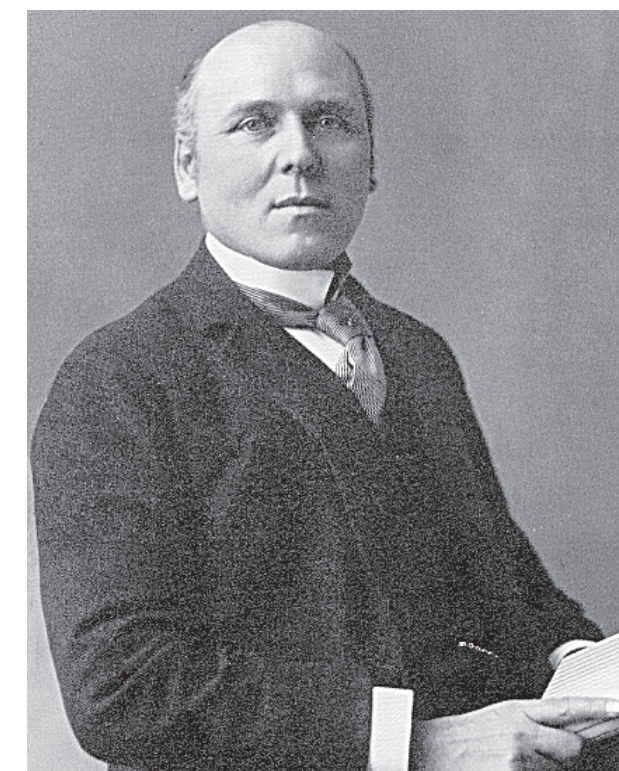
Gary Paulsen's "Hatchet" tells the story of a boy stranded in the wilderness.



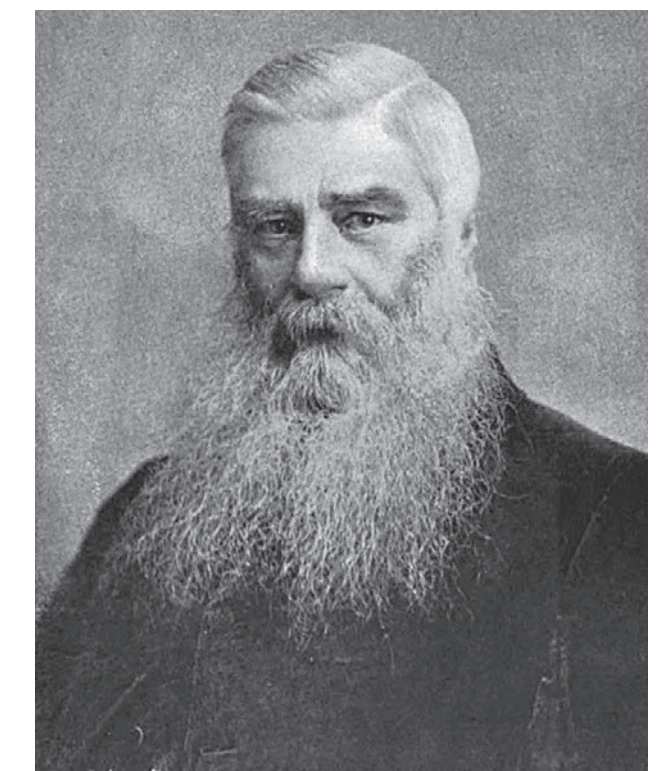
The hero in "The Rembrandt Conspiracy" can be considered a modern-day Hardy boy.



Samuel Clemens (1835–1910), better known by his pen name, Mark Twain. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



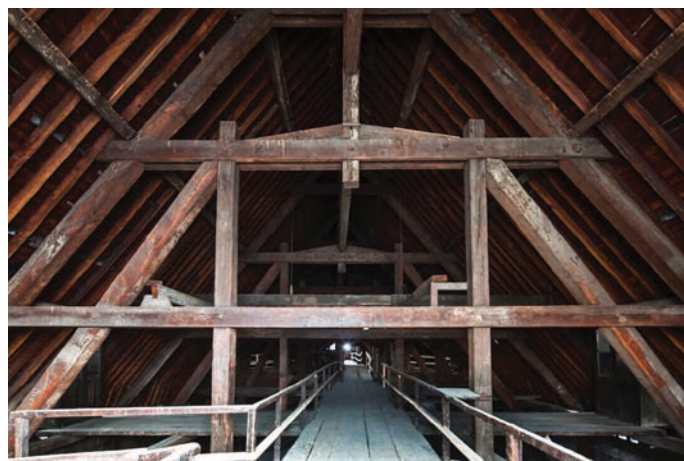
American illustrator Howard Pyle (1853–1911). University of Pittsburgh Digital Library.



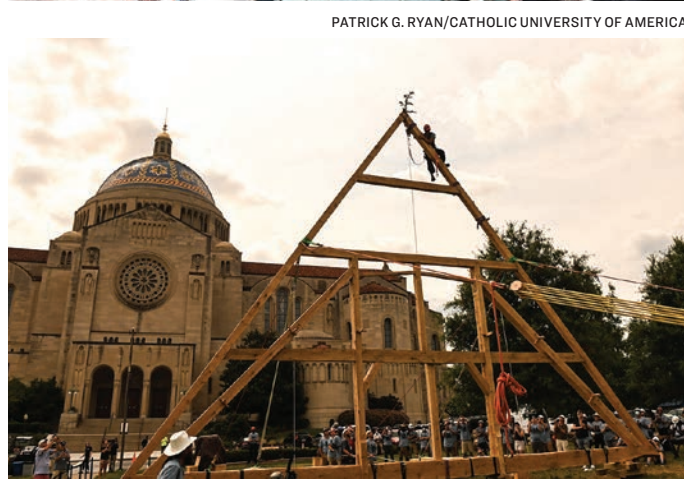
A photo portrait of G.A. Henty (1832–1911) by Elliott & Fry.



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NOTRE DAME DE PARIS/MAURICE DE SULLY ASSOCIATION



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HANDSHOUSE STUDIO



1.

(Above left) Smoke and flames rise during a fire at the landmark Notre Dame Cathedral in central Paris on April 15, 2019. (Top right) Before the fire: The Notre Dame Cathedral roof, known as “La Forêt” (“the Forest”), was constructed with 1,300 oak trees, some 300 to 400 years old. (Above right) Raising the Notre Dame Cathedral roof truss replica in front of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 3, 2021. (1–4) Woodworkers make the replica roof truss by hand, using traditional techniques. (L–R) A pit saw is used to cut timber; notches are cut in a process called “joggling,” then the timber is squared with an ax, called “hewing”; and the wood is split by “cleaving” it, whereby a groove is carved into the wood and then a wooden wedge is hit with an ax or hammer until the wood splits.

HANDSHOUSE STUDIO



2.

HANDSHOUSE STUDIO



3.

HANDSHOUSE STUDIO



4.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

American Carpenters’ ‘Gift’ to Notre Dame Cathedral

Traditional woodworking skills may preserve a French Gothic masterpiece

LORRAINE FERRIER

On April 15, 2019, the world was aghast. People gazed in horror at their screens, and Parisians took to the streets to see for themselves as Notre Dame Cathedral burned out of control. As the fire raged on, French President Emmanuel Macron told AFP, “We will rebuild this cathedral.”

More than two years later, the world watches in anticipation of the rebuilding and restoration of France’s great Gothic monument. In the years since the fire, there were suggestions that the 19th-century spire, which was completely destroyed, would be rebuilt with a new design using modern materials such as glass and steel. But that idea was scrapped. Instead, the spire will be rebuilt to the exact design as conceived by 19th-century French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

According to the American-based Friends of Notre Dame de Paris website, the restoration of Notre Dame will be to return the Gothic masterpiece to its “complete, coherent, and known” state prior to the fire.

Victor Hugo’s Notre Dame

Interestingly, in the 19th century, Notre Dame Cathedral was in a state of disrepair. When Victor Hugo wrote his masterpiece “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” he questioned Notre Dame Cathedral’s modern restoration efforts. He too wanted to preserve the Gothic beauty of the sacred monument.

“The church of Notre Dame de Paris is still no doubt, a majestic and sublime edifice. But, beautiful as it has been preserved in growing old, it is difficult not to sigh, not to wax indignant, before the numberless degradations and mutilations which time and men have both caused the venerable monument to suffer, without respect for Charlemagne, who laid its first stone, or for Philip Augustus, who laid the last,” Hugo wrote in the third book of “The Hunchback of Notre Dame.”

“He was against the movement of the time that advocated leaving behind the classical constructions and opting for more modern elements,” Sylvie Robin, head heritage curator in the department of archeology at the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, told Euronews.

Just as Hugo did centuries ago, heritage building experts and enthusiasts today have stepped forward to help Notre Dame Cathedral’s restoration—this time from the ashes. It seems that people want Notre Dame to be returned to how they remember it. And traditional carpenters—both in France and America—have been helping the effort to stay true to Notre Dame’s medieval heritage.

As Hugo wrote in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” “The greatest products of architecture are less the works of individuals than of society; rather the offspring of a nation’s effort, than the inspired flash of a man of genius. ...”

Carpenters Without Borders

As most of the cathedral roof was destroyed in the 2019 fire, the French organization Carpenters Without Borders, along with members of the British organization The Carpenters Fellowship, took a week in July 2020 to re-create one of the roof trusses that once supported the roof of Notre Dame Cathedral. A truss is a structure formed by a series of triangles.

The carpenters chose to replicate roof truss No. 7, which was once located between the cathedral spire and the belfries.

The replica roof truss was successfully made and raised by hand on the grounds of the park at the historic monument Château de Mesnil Geoffroy, in northern France. For each part of the process, the woodworkers used only hand tools and stayed true to the techniques used by their medieval forefathers. For instance, the woodworkers hand-felled the 20 trees needed for the truss—using historic documents that detailed the optimum conditions to cut the trees.

As part of the European Heritage Days celebrations, on Sept. 20 and 21, Carpen-

ters Without Borders erected truss No. 7 in front of Notre Dame Cathedral. One of the carpenters on site, Florian, said in an interview with the forestry organization France Bois Forêt, that they wanted to reconstruct the truss to prove that the materials and expertise still existed, and to rebuild the structure using traditional woodworking methods as per the original design. The woodworkers hoped that the architects charged with restoring the cathedral would utilize their efforts.

Since then, Carpenters Without Borders has re-created truss No. 7 multiple times. A recent replica is now on display at the Château Crèvecœur in northwest France.

Heritage building experts and enthusiasts have stepped forward to help Notre Dame Cathedral’s restoration.

Re-creating Roof Truss No. 6

Just over a year after Carpenters Without Borders replicated truss No. 7, a group of passionate American woodworkers re-created roof truss No. 6, that once stood over the cathedral’s choir. The project was led by the nonprofit educational organization Handshouse Studio with the support of Carpenters Without Borders. The Handshouse Studio woodworking team that made the truss included faculty and students from The Catholic University of America’s Architecture and Planning School and members of the the Timber Framers Guild, National Park Service, Preservation Maryland, and North Bennet Street School.

French lead architects Rémi Fromont and Cédric Trentesaux lent Handshouse Studio the official drawings to reconstruct the truss.

Besides the building team, many hands

were involved in creating truss No. 6. Landowners in Lexington, Virginia, donated white oak trees. Rare Suffolk Punch draft horses from the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation hauled the hand-felled trees. Blacksmiths at La Maison Luquet, in Munster, eastern France, created and donated custom-made traditional French tools necessary for the woodworkers to authentically create the truss according to medieval protocols.

The truss was built over 10 days at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., using only hand tools and medieval woodworking techniques. First, the bark was removed from the lumber, which was then measured and marked for cutting into beams. Woodworkers then stood on the logs, and aided by gravity, they cut notches into the timber using their axes in a process called “joggling.” A log was then shaped into a beam via a process called “hewing,” whereby woodworkers used an ax to flatten and remove the rounded sides of the log.

Woodworkers then used two traditional methods to split the timber. In “cleaving,” they carved a groove where the timber was to be split. Then they used axes and hammers to hit a small wedge of wood that was inserted along the natural woodgrain, until the timber split.

The other method they used to split the wood was with a pit saw. Traditionally, a woodworking trestle would be set up in a pit, and the person who worked above the log controlled the pit saw while the other woodworker in the pit below guided the saw. No pits were dug for this project, but the log was set on a trestle above ground for the pit saw to be put into action.

Once the roof truss was assembled, it was raised on Aug. 3 in front of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and then on Aug. 5 at the National Mall, before being installed on Aug. 6 in the National Building Museum, where it is now on display.

Carpenters Without Borders and Handshouse Studio both hope that their traditionally made replica trusses—and the knowledge and expertise they gained from making them—will be useful to Notre Dame’s restoration efforts. That is their gift as traditional craftsmen.

“We wish to share our Truss #6 reconstruction as a ‘gift’ to France and the collective effort to rebuild Notre Dame de Paris,” said Handshouse Studio in a press release.

The Handshouse Studio replica of Notre Dame Cathedral’s truss No. 6 is on display at the National Building Museum through Sept. 16. To find out more, visit NBM.org

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.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Dads, Don’t Use Your Kids to Show Off!

ALL PHOTOS BY PARAMOUNT PICTURES

MARK JACKSON

“Searching for Bobby Fischer” (1993) is based on the true story of 7-year-old chess prodigy Josh Waitzkin, who’s played by 8-year-old Max Pomeranc—a prodigy in his own right. Waitzkin won the U.S. Junior Chess Championship in 1993 and 1994.

Written and directed by Steven Zaillian (who also scripted “Schindler’s List”), this is the semi-fictionalized adaptation of Fred Waitzkin’s book about his son, but the casting of chess-savvy Pomeranc was key. It helps having an actual chess genius playing a chess genius. This movie features top-notch child-actor movie performances. Intertwoven throughout is black-and-white footage of Bobby Fischer, the Brooklyn, New York-bred (Chicago-born) chess master and recluse who disappeared from public life after beating Soviet rival Boris Spassky in a 1972 USSR–USA Cold War chess showdown. Fischer’s savant-like weirdness is good reason that parents should ask whether prodigies should be encouraged to immerse themselves completely in the world of their talent to the exclusion of all else.

“Searching for Bobby Fischer” is, in part, a cautionary tale warning parents—especially dads—about trying to touch fame and glory vicariously through their talented offspring, a misplaced ambition that can ruin lives.

The final game is lots of fun, with Josh thoroughly enjoying himself and utilizing tactics advocated by both teachers.

Street Smarts

At the film’s outset, Josh’s mom, Bonnie (Joan Allen), is constantly supervising Josh—requested visits to Greenwich Village’s Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Josh has become enthralled with watching the speed-chess games.

At one point, she pays an old codger to humor her boy and play him. Josh loses, but not before the eagle-eyed chess hustler Vinnie (Laurence Fishburne) picks up on the fact that the boy is using advanced techniques, straight out of the starting gate, with no clue about how rare that is.

Later that evening, Bonnie tells husband Fred (Joe Mantegna), a sportswriter, about what happened at the park. Fred wants to see for himself and asks Josh to play, saying, “Go easy on me, it’s been a while.” Dad wins, but mom, with her classically more-dialed-in mom superpowers, points out that Josh let him win because he didn’t want to embarrass his dad.

Fred at first can’t believe that his son has such a staggering talent. “He’s better at this than I’ve ever been at anything in my life,”

he heatedly explains to Josh’s class teacher who’s made the grave mistake of referring to Josh’s uncanny gift as “this chess thing.” Fred immediately pulls Josh from public school and puts him in a posh, Upper East Side private school: Dalton.

Fred begins nurturing and promoting his son’s gift, for Josh’s sake, but then develops a taste for how having sired a megatalent makes him feel. When his 7-year-old starts bringing home numerous trophies, Fred is quick to display them on the living room mantle for all to see.

Teacher Upgrade

Although Vinnie had started cluing Josh in on his brand of streetwise hustle-chess, Fred eventually hires Bruce Pandolfini (Ben Kingsley), who is an almost-monastic chess scholar with a purist, scientific approach. Pandolfini also promotes a winner mindset—a tournament-dominating, killer-instinct-utilizing approach.

Bruce Pandolfini (Ben Kingsley) is a chess coach who’s come out of retirement to teach a possible new Bobby Fischer, in “Searching for Bobby Fischer.” (Paramount Pictures)

In an attempt to warn Fred about what he’s getting his kid (and himself) into, Bruce takes him to see his first professional chess tournament: a dingy room filled with mostly silent men, bent over their boards in apparent supplication, with one particularly frazzled, haunted inhabitant (Austin Pendleton) remaining when all have departed, still agonizing in the throes of a virtulnet chess addiction. Does Fred want this dark, obsessive-compulsive world for Josh?

Given the go-ahead, Bruce tries to instill that killer instinct in Josh, which is, he admits, an approach that must be born of hate. He maintains that this is the key component of the ability to win.

But when Josh tells his mom that he suspects Vinnie might be homeless and asks whether they could maybe let him sleep on Josh’s top bunk—Bonnie perceives Josh’s good heart. She is adamant about guarding the purity of that kindness and will not tolerate any attempt to dim its light.

Where’s the Fun?

Is chess so important that it should hoard every waking moment of a young prodigy’s fleeting youth? What about well-roundedness and development across a wide spectrum of life experience? What about being a normal little boy? What about going fishing?

The key question of the film is whether young talent should be allowed to develop in an unfettered manner, or whether it should be brought under the sway of discipline and honed. The film’s unwavering opinion is that in one so young, if the element of fun goes missing, that’s a tragedy and a crime against childhood.

The difference in strategy between the two teachers, Vinnie and Bruce, boils down, essence-wise, to whether you should bring your queen out early in the game. Vinnie

‘Searching for Bobby Fischer’

Director
Steven Zaillian

Starring
Max Pomeranc, Joe Mantegna,
Ben Kingsley, Laurence Fishburne,
Joan Allen, William H. Macy,
Laura Linney, Michael Nirenberg

MPAA Rating

PG

Running Time
1 hour, 49 minutes

Release Date
Aug. 11, 1993

Rated

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



(Top) Fred Waitzkin (Joe Mantegna, L) and Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc), father and son, in “Searching for Bobby Fischer.”

(Above) Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc, middle L) and Vinnie, a chess hustler (Laurence Fishburne), play in the park.

thinks it’s a bold scare tactic that’ll psyche your opponent out; Bruce thinks it’s the epitome of amateur hour. Vinnie stresses the psychological approach—“playing the man”—whereas Bruce is like Ice man in “Top Gun”: Be methodical and perfect until your opponent makes a mistake and then pounce and eviscerate ruthlessly. Bruce insists that Josh stop taking lessons from Vinnie.

This is reminiscent of “Platoon.” And one wonders whether the real Josh Waitzkin relates strongly to Charlie Sheen’s line therein, referring to the influences of two diametrically opposed sergeants: “There are times since, I’ve felt like the child born of those two fathers.”

Finding Himself

After losing a critical match, Josh hits a slump for the first time. He knows he doesn’t have that much-vaunted killer instinct, and realizes that chess is simply not as high on his list of priorities as it is on his dad’s. Showing a preternatural self-possessedness and the ability to stick up for what he knows to be true, in the end Josh refuses to subjugate his natural compassion; he refuses to hate his opponents.

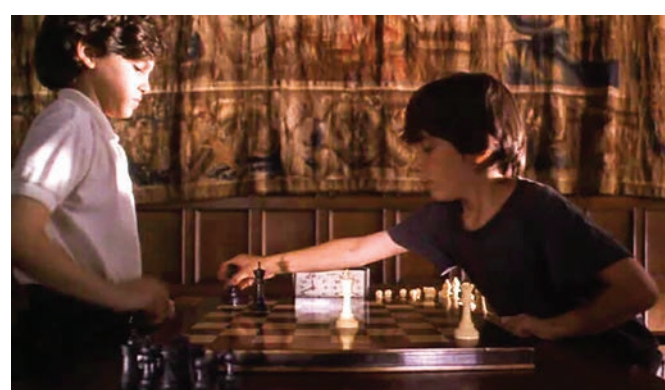
By the time he hits the national chess championship in Chicago, he has found his true North. He goes into battle with the support of both teachers (who bicker hilariously on the sidelines) and a father who’s finally seen the light and moved all the trophies off the mantelpiece and into Josh’s bedroom.

The final game is lots of fun, with Josh thoroughly enjoying himself and utilizing tactics advocated by both teachers, causing them both to have convulsions in the peanut gallery. At one point, Josh calls on a technique taught by Bruce, where he challenged Josh to look away from the board, uncloud his mind, allow his talent the space to look 15 to 20 moves into the future via pure visualization, and not to move until he sees the outcome. The scene serves to underline the jaw-dropping level of such a talent.

By the end of “Searching for Bobby Fischer,” we’ve learned something about tournament chess, a lot about human nature, and the fact that child prodigies (who tend to populate specifically the fields of chess, math, and music) should be guided with the utmost of care to nurture both the genius and the precious, short span of childhood.

The fourth category that produces prodigies is acting, and luckily for us, the young Max Pomeranc (pronounced “Pomerantz”) can check two boxes. “Searching for Bobby Fischer” ends on a delightful note, with a 7-year-old consoling a 6-year-old by saying, “You’re a much stronger player than I was at your age.”

Highly recommended for all, but especially for parents with weve, budding chess champs.



Jonathan Poe (Michael Nirenberg, L) and Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc) go head-to-head in the final competition showdown.



Morgan (Hal Scardino) and Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc) play two small boys carrying the heavy burden of their fathers’ expectations.

DANCE

Through Classical Chinese Dance, a Grander Vision of the World



For the competition, he's preparing a story telling dance about one of the greatest warriors of China—but not during a moment of triumph.

Michael Hu was captivated by the gravity-defying leaps and depth of storytelling at a Shen Yun Performing Arts performance. It initially sparked his dream of becoming a dancer.

CATHERINE YANG

The first time Michael Hu saw Shen Yun Performing Arts, he was filled with excitement and struck with the idea that he was going to be a dancer. If a picture told a thousand words, then Shen Yun was a series of pictures that added up to a performance capable of conveying 5,000 years of divinely inspired culture, he said. It was exciting, grand, and profound—Hu said he wanted to tell stories with that sort of depth too.

Supportive of Hu's newfound dream, his parents sent him to a week-long summer camp to learn classical Chinese dance, the ancient art form that New York-based Shen Yun has popularized worldwide.

Reality didn't match his dream. "It was mostly stretching," Hu said. "I didn't really like it."

"The gravity-defying leaps, flips, and tumbling techniques of classical Chinese dance require a limber and flexible dancer, and it takes a natural affinity or great amount of work to achieve that foundation. So Hu's dream was put to bed. "Then in 2016, that's when it all changed," Hu said. He was about to attend an arts academy to study the trumpet, but at the last minute, his parents asked, why not try classical Chinese dance? He could study it for a year, or a few months, and if he still didn't like it, he could switch back to music.

It turned out the first year was full of stretching, and sometimes painful stretching at that. But once he had the fundamentals, the dancing began, and from then on, Hu was committed. Every painful moment he endured, every repetitive exercise he stuck with, was all worth it, as his dream of becoming a dancer became ever clearer—until it was right in front of his eyes and he achieved that dream of touring with Shen Yun Performing Arts, the world's premier classical Chinese dance company. Hu said that every time he sees the audience's faces during curtain call, he's filled with gratitude and fulfillment.

Recently, Hu has been preparing to go

Hu has been preparing to go on stage solo at the NTD International Classical Chinese Dance competition.

on stage solo—the NTD International Classical Chinese Dance competition preliminaries have been taking place all summer, and the semifinals will be on Sept. 4, and the finals and awards ceremony on Sept. 5.

"I want to gain more stage experience," Hu said. For him, it's not about competing with others, but a chance to take to the stage alone and see if he can really shine.

For the competition, he's preparing a storytelling dance about one of the greatest warriors of China—but not during a moment of triumph. Near the end of the war, Xiang Yu is surrounded during the Battle of Gaixia and has a moment of near-defeat. The story turns introspective as he thinks about the series of events that led him to the present, and regrets not killing the opposing general back when he had the chance.

"Here, he makes his last stand," Hu said. The great warrior comes to the realization that no matter his brilliance, skill, or prowess on the battlefield, if the heavens don't will that he claims the throne for the emperor, such fate is out of his control.

"There's always something higher above you that plays a role in your life," Hu said. Stories like this in the first Shen Yun performance he saw were what drew him in, he said—there isn't just good and evil facing off, but higher powers that speak to the meaning and purpose of humanity.

"Because I was raised in America ... I don't get to understand all of the Chinese culture, all the 5,000 years of it," he said. Yet Shen Yun was able to clearly convey the essence of the culture to him, as well as to audience members from different cultural backgrounds and walks of life. "It's beautiful in a way where people can simultaneously understand it," he said. "And they realize it's much more beautiful than what they imagine."

This is Hu's first time entering a dance competition, and this particular one has Shen Yun artists and alumni on the judge's panel. Though classical Chinese dance is an art form that has been passed down for thousands of years, it

was virtually unknown in the West until Shen Yun put it on the map. The New York-based arts company has not only brought the dance to the world's stage, but taken it to new heights.

In classical Chinese dance, there's a method of using the body to lead the arms and the waist to lead the legs; many dance schools and dance companies talk about it, but Shen Yun and its feeder school Fei Tian Academy of the Arts are the only ones that teach it.

It's a method in which the force of every movement begins at the body's center, leading to a grander effect on stage with bigger gestures and higher jumps; it's simple, but not easy.

"It's basically using your heart to dance," Hu said.

The competition finals can be streamed on NTD.com on Sept. 5 from 1 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. (Eastern time), and the awards ceremony will begin at 7 p.m.

Dancer Michael Hu portrays Xiang Yu, a great Chinese warrior, in this performance.



TRUTH TELLERS

Tchaikovsky and His Reaching Toward Sublimity

RAYMOND BEEGLE

A young student, having just met the elder Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, made a remark suggesting that composers wrote initially by inspiration. Tchaikovsky, he recalled, "made an impatient gesture with his hand and said with annoyance: 'Ah, young man, don't be trite! You can't await inspiration,' according to musicology professor David Brown in "Tchaikovsky Remembered."

"What is needed is work, work, and work. Inspiration is born only of work, and during work. Every morning I sit down to work. If from this nothing comes today, I'll sit down tomorrow at the very same work. Thus, I write for one day, for two, for ten days, not despairing if nothing comes, for on the eleventh day, you will see, something will come."

Inspiration is one of the great mysteries. The word derives from both Greek and Latin, and means literally the breathing in of either air or spirit. Certainly, Tchaikovsky was not talking about air when he was talking about inspiration. It was the entrance of the spirit—sometimes called God's Spirit, sometimes called the Holy Spirit—into his mind and his heart. It usually came, as Tchaikovsky told the student, after much labor, but it sometimes appeared unbidden, an uninvited guest, driving him to the point of madness just as it drove Handel when he wrote the "Messiah," and Beethoven when he wrote "Missa Solemnis."

It first approached Tchaikovsky when he was very young. Brown writes that Tchaikovsky's governess, Fanny Dürbach, recalled discovering him in the nursery one night, his eyes glistening. "When asked what was the matter, he replied: 'O, the music!' But there was no music to be heard at that moment. 'Get rid of it for me! It's here, here,' said the boy, weeping and pointing to his head. 'It won't give me any peace!'"

It never gave Tchaikovsky any peace, but his struggles with it produced a wealth of inspired music, music of the spirit. It is infectious. It is an assurance far greater than reason can provide: That what is beautiful, what is good, what is truthful are the final realities, the rock for us to stand on. It is the message of the ages told by prophets and poets, painters and composers, of every time and every culture.

A few of his pieces seem to me especially inspired. Oddly enough, they are not among the most celebrated compositions, but they have filled this listener with wonder and sustained him in difficult times for more than half a century. Setting academics aside, I share them with the reader adding a few personal observations.

Russian Laborers

When Tchaikovsky was 31, he heard a peasant singing at his work. He sang a plaintive folksong, born of the soil, reflecting the ancient brooding soul of the Russian people.

It can be heard in the slow movement of Tchaikovsky's first string quartet. A violin plays the melancholy phrases, simply harmonized and modestly developed. It is the song of Russia's common laborers, whose spiritual depth, kindness, and piety the composer knew well. It tells us what the psalmist tells us: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

At a concert of his music, Tchaikovsky, who was sitting next to the venerable Leo Tolstoy, saw that Russia's greatest writer wept during this passage. "It was the highest honor of my life," he wrote in his diary. And what a marvel it must have been for the composer to see the power of his music realized in the tears of the man he most admired.

Others were moved as well. The Moscow Gazette wrote that "after the music had ended the listeners sat silent, afraid to disturb its spell."

Looking for Peace

When Tchaikovsky was 38, he suffered much inner turmoil because of a failed marriage, difficulties in business, and difficulties of conscience. He abdicated Moscow for the country, its beauty and its simple ways.

The opening scene in his opera "Eugene Onegin," written at this troubled time, seems to have been born of a desire to describe a happy, peaceful way of living, close to the healing influences of nature and the kindness of simple people. Harvesting has come to an end at a small estate, and following tradition, peasants bring a decorated sheaf of wheat to their mistress. A feast has been prepared for them, and they sing their harvest songs, radiant with sheer joy over the abundant fruits of their labor.

Inspiration is one of the great mysteries. The word derives from both Greek and Latin, and means literally the breathing in of either air or spirit.



An 1893 photo of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.



Tchaikovsky was inspired by Jules Massenet's oratorio "Marie-Magdeleine." The photo is from "Musical Memories" by Camille Saint-Saëns, published in 1919.



Tchaikovsky greatly admired the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. An 1873 portrait of Tolstoy by Ivan Kramskoi.



At Midlife When Tchaikovsky was 40 years old, religion had begun to play a more profound, more significant role in his thoughts. He was deeply moved by Massenet's oratorio "Marie-Magdeleine."

"I was so impressed by the way Massenet knew how to express the eternal purity of Christ, that I shed floods of tears. Wonderful tears! Hail the Frenchman who knew how to make them flow," he wrote to his younger brother Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky, a dramatist. "Under its influence I have composed a song to the words of Alexei Tolstoy. The tune is inspired by Massenet."

Tchaikovsky's "tune," the entire work, is indeed inspired. "I Bless You Forest" shows rapture entering the heart of a humble pilgrim. Forest, valleys, rivers, the great blue heavens—all God's own handiwork—galvanizes his spirit and his love for humankind. "Oh, if only I could hold, you, brothers, friends, enemies, all of nature, in my embrace!"

Just as Tchaikovsky was inspired by Massenet, the great baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky was inspired by Tchaikovsky. When the composer was 41, he wrote to Modest about an awakening love of Russian liturgical music. "I was deeply impressed, indeed shaken by the beauty of the service which cannot be compared with anything else."

He wrote to his friend and patron, Nadezhda von Meck, as translated by Galina von Meck in "To My Best Friend": "I dearly love the vesper service. To stand in the half-darkness searching for an answer to the eternal questions ... to be roused from rever-

eries when the choir begins to sing—oh! I love it all tremendously."

The opening movement of his Vesper Service, Op. 52 begins with Psalm 104: "Bless the Lord, oh my soul." Tchaikovsky, in his setting of the text, uses the traditional Greek chant known to him from childhood, removing, however, its Byzantine austerity by gently smoothing the melodic contours, and harmonizing it in a warm, characteristically Russian manner. "It is in accord with the style of Russian church architecture and icon painting," he wrote, again, to Modest.

The result is sublime. When the psalm has ended, the choir sings "Glory to the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit." Surely, it is the same spirit that entered Tchaikovsky as a child and gave him no peace. It is passed on to us; it is impossible to describe, or explain, or prove. We each must find it for ourselves.

Raymond BeeGLE has performed as a collaborative pianist in the major concert halls of the United States, Europe, and South America, has written for The Opera Quarterly, Classical Voice, Fanfare Magazine, Classic Record Collector (UK), and the New York Observer, and has served on the faculty of The State University of New York—Stony Brook, the Music Academy of the West, and the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. He has taught in the chamber music division of The Manhattan School of Music for the past 28 years.

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When Tchaikovsky was 40 years old, religion had begun to play a more profound, more significant role in his thoughts. He was deeply moved by Massenet's oratorio "Marie-Magdeleine."

An illustration by Samokish-Sudakovskaya from the 1908 edition of Russian author Alexander Pushkin's novel "Eugene Onegin." Tchaikovsky's opera based on the novel reveals a desire to return to a life close to nature.

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

Was 'Simone' a Harbinger for the Movie Industry?

MICHAEL CLARK

During one of the "making of" segments on the DVD release of "Simone" (frequently stylized as "S1m0ne"), a few of the performers in the 2002 movie comment on the possibility of its premise becoming reality and they appear somewhat troubled. Could computer programs replace actual flesh-and-blood actors?

In his 1997 filmmaking debut "Gattaca" and his 1998 screenplay for director Peter Weir's "The Truman Show," Andrew Niccol demonstrated a keen knack for presenting artifice as reality with equal measures of satire, fascination, suspicion, and dread. Just because we have the ability to conjure fake existences doesn't mean that we should, and the fallout resulting from such omnipotent delusions could and would likely backfire. Both films were lauded by critics, and although "Gattaca" was a commercial flop, "The Truman Show" crushed it at the box office, essentially giving Niccol carte blanche for his next project.

With "Simone," Niccol upped the ante on the illusion and delusion scale while simultaneously calling out Hollywood for its laziness and tendency to reward commerce over art. It was a bold, creative gamble, and in the end Niccol lost the bet. The movie took in only \$19 million, and two of his superb later features ("Lord of War" and "Good Kill") fared even worse. His most recent effort ("Anon" from 2018) was panned by the press and died a beyond-quick death at the box office. Niccol is now a once-promising has-been.

Pacino's Viktor Becomes a Victim of Simone's Success

The casting of Al Pacino as struggling film director Viktor Taransky was Niccol's coup de maître. Taransky is, in effect, Francis Ford Coppola trying to convince Paramount that Pacino was the only guy he would consider to play Michael Corleone in "The Godfather." Here, Taransky has to succumb to the out-

landish whims of the studio-backed Nicola Anders (Winona Ryder), a peevis and demanding actress he doesn't like or respect, who is more concerned with her off-screen perks than the complexities of her character in an artsy and tragic romance. Although he doesn't know it yet, Viktor will get the final word on the matter.

Anders's abrupt departure from the shoot raises the already simmering ire of studio chief (and Taransky's ex-wife), Elaine (Catherine Keener). She cancels the production and sends Viktor packing. On his way off the studio lot, Viktor is approached by Hank (Elias Koteas), a terminally ill hanger-on of sorts who wills Viktor a software program. Hank guarantees the program will cure all of Viktor's creative woes. Initially writing Hank off, Viktor checks out his ingenious invention and sees a way to resuscitate his down-in-flames career.

A quick learner, Viktor creates the virtual Simone (Niccol's off-screen wife, Rachel Roberts), an impossibly beautiful "actress" with the ability to convey any emotion and nuance with hints of Greta Garbo and Meryl Streep. He then digitally removes Anders from the film and replaces her with Simone. The movie is an overwhelming critical and commercial success. This leaves Viktor with the challenge of creating an equally successful follow-up—which he does, frequently at his own peril.

What Viktor didn't count on—and this is the main point of "Simone"—was his creation overwhelming and dwarfing his artistic vision. He made Simone, but he is now a victim of her success. Unless you're in front of a camera—no matter what your level of talent—you don't matter in the big picture. In this film, the days of the director as the auteur are over. Adding to Viktor's woes are two tabloid reporters (Pruitt Taylor Vince and Jason Schwartzman) who relentlessly hound him and continually pressure him to produce Simone in the flesh. Viktor faces his biggest hurdles in the third act, where he "summons" Simone in public and finds his way out of the creative hole he's dug for himself.

No Longer Far-Fetched

When COVID-19 struck in March of 2020, few industries were hit harder than the movies and brick and mortar theaters. Not only did production on live-action projects cease, but the majority of A-list and tent-pole films were postponed (some for years) or indefinitely shelved. In the time since productions



ALL PHOTOS BY NEW LINE CINEMA

Niccol isn't the first filmmaker to offer commentary on celebrity obsession.



Rachel Roberts plays the simulated actress in "Simone."

'Simone'

Director
Andrew Niccol

Starring
Al Pacino, Catherine Keener, Rachel Roberts, Evan Rachel Wood, Jay Mohr, Winona Ryder

Running Time
One hour, 57 minutes

MPAA Rating
PG-13

Release Date
Aug. 23, 2002

★★★★★

rebooted, Tom Cruise went on a rant on the set of "Mission: Impossible 7" where masking and social distancing requirements were not being met, and recently, Sharon Stone stated that she wouldn't work on any film unless every member of the cast and crew was fully vaccinated. Considering "Casino" (released over 25 years ago) was the last live-action feature Stone starred in that made serious money, her demand seems especially out-of-touch.

All the evidence one needs to prove that audiences care far more for characters than those portraying said characters can be found in the Batman franchise. Since the first Batman feature film in 1943, a dozen actors have portrayed Bruce Wayne/Batman, and it hasn't had any negative effect on the bottom line.

Niccol isn't the first filmmaker to offer commentary on celebrity obsession, and he likely won't be the last. Twenty years ago, the premise of "Simone" seemed far-fetched; but with the meteoric advancements in computer technology, it could prove to be the harbinger of things to come. The patience of studios and filmmakers (and paying audiences) has limits regarding the whims and demands of performers. It might be time for the on-camera talent to realize that everyone can indeed be replaced, and never more so than now.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has written for over 30 local and national film industry media outlets and is ranked in the top 10 of the Atlanta media marketplace. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a regular contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles.

▲ Movie director Viktor Taransky (Al Pacino) fiddling with his simulated "actress" in "Simone."



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