

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

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CRAFTSMANSHIP

How a Master Carver's God-Given Talent Saved Him

Alexander A. Grabovetskiy's journey from Soviet repression to America's freedom

LORRAINE FERRIER

For as far back as he can remember, Russian Alexander A. Grabovetskiy has found woodcarving fascinating. Around the age of 5, he marveled over the handmade wooden toys—carved bears and other small animals—in his local gift shop. He remembers asking himself, “How in the world is it possible to make them?”

Little did he realize then that woodcarving would become his world and that a simple woodcarving knife would become his savior in the Soviet Union and in the United States.



Master woodcarver Alexander A. Grabovetskiy.

The Little Apprentice

Grabovetskiy had seen far grander wooden creations than those delightful toys. His grandfather was a furniture maker. Before the Russian Revolution, his maternal great-great grandfather was a famous redwooder (a woodworker who uses only dark woods such as Indian mahogany), who worked for the royal family in St. Petersburg, creating exquisite furniture on par with Chippendale's. Grabovetskiy's great-great grandfather died before he was born, and his surname was eradicated after the revolution. The Soviet regime didn't like anybody who was connected to the royal family, he said in a telephone interview.

Traces of his famous relative may have been wiped out, but Grabovetskiy inherited the family's woodcarving talent. When he was just 6 years old, he stole a chisel from his grandfather and created his first carving in a stone brick: a human face. He thought it was a really nice project and proudly showed it to his grandfather, but he wasn't happy. In the Soviet Union, woodworking tools were really expensive, so his grandfather wasn't impressed, Grabovetskiy explained.

But Grabovetskiy's enterprising spirit paid off. From then on, his grandfather set about showing him how to hold a chisel, how to choose the right materials, and other skills of the trade.

Craftsmen like his grandfather knew that an apprentice had to start early in life to learn to master carving. So, at the age of 6, Grabovetskiy began an apprenticeship of sorts.

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Alexander A. Grabovetskiy uses ancient geometry and traditional woodcarving techniques to create all of his intricate woodcarvings. In this 2014 woodcarving “War and Peace,” he applied the golden ratio, splitting the top half of the composition by 62 percent and the lower half by 38 percent.



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POETRY

Short and Sharp: The Power and Pleasure of Haiku

JEFF MINICK

The piercing chill I feel:
my dead wife's comb, in our bedroom,
under my heel...

Anyone who has lost a loved one, particularly a parent, spouse, or a child with whom they lived, will immediately connect with the poem of Yosa Buson (whose original family name was Tani-guchi) "The Piercing Chill I Feel." In the days and even years following that person's death, some object—a book in which the deceased jotted some notes, a necklace left in a drawer, a loving card given us long ago for a birthday—can shock us backward in time. Stunned for a moment by this abrupt encounter with the past, memories flood over us, and we remember—sometimes with a smile, sometimes with tears—the one so dear to us.

Buson's poem demonstrates the enormous power of haiku, that Japanese verse form in which 17 syllables are typically arranged in three lines, usually in a pattern of five, seven, and five syllables.

Sometimes called "one-breath poetry" because it can be recited between one breath and another, haiku is set most often in the present, focused on the outer world rather than on a direct approach to feelings and emotions, and designed to capture a particular moment. These compressed verses can act as tiny explosions in our minds, stimulating our thoughts or as tools for meditation.



Haiku master Matsuo Basho, late 18th century, by Katsushika Hokusai.

haiku, often included insects and other small creatures in his poems, including this humorous one:

Mosquito at my ear—
does he think
I'm deaf?

And here Masaoka Shiki also writes of insects, though in this case with regret:

After killing
a spider, how lonely I feel
in the cold of night!

Haiku Crosses the Pacific
For more than a century, English and American poets have tried their hand at haiku. Here, for example, is R.M. Hansard's verse, which won a haiku contest in 1899:

The west wind whispered,
And touched the eyelids of spring:
Her eyes, Primroses.

In the 20th century, many more poets in the English-speaking world found themselves intrigued by haiku, this form of verse with few words but often with the magic to set the reader thinking in a dozen different ways. Sometimes the poets obey the rules of the form, and on other occasions they shape the form to fit their purpose.

Here is a haiku, Richard Wilbur's "Sleepless at Crown Point," which is obedient to tradition and which makes a bullfight out of weather and terrain:

All night, this headland
Lunges into the rumpling
Capework of the wind.

At the Haiku Society of America website, we find this award-winning piece by Amy Losak, who here composes senryu, which is a branch of haiku but with an ironic point of view:

brooding
over world events
cicadas.

This one brought a smile, as here in Virginia we had a summer of cicadas on



A drawing of the Japanese poet Yosa Buson by Matsumura Goshun.

On the one-ton temple bell
a moonmoth, folded into sleep,
sits still.

Some solitary souls—I am one of you—
may find this poem by Buson particularly meaningful:

With nothing to do,
And all alone by myself—
I'll make friends with the moon.

Kobayashi Issa, who wrote over 20,000



The haiku may not be easily mastered, but it's fun trying.

top of all our other problems and plagues. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's textbook "Literature" includes "In a Station of the Metro," Ezra Pound's poem that he shortened from 30 lines to two:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Does it qualify as haiku? Not technically. Not in terms of the poem's linear arrangement and syllabic count. But in its brevity, its mention of nature, and the wonderful punch it delivers, some might consider it, if not haiku, a least a sibling.

A Special Thanks
The inspiration behind this article was Maria Dios, a poet and lover of haiku who wrote to The Epoch Times encouraging someone to write an article about "how fun it is to create a poem 5/7/5!" Raised in Maplewood, New Jersey—she credits her high school English teachers with encouraging her to write—Maria saw some of her work published in The New York Times before that paper discontinued publishing poetry. She composed many of these haiku while



A portrait of Kobayashi Issa drawn by Muramatsu Shunpo. Issa Memorial Hall, Shinano, Nagano, Japan.

driving through the New Jersey countryside on her way to work, passing woodlands, fields, and gardens. She is the author of "Would You Like a Poem?" and, now retired, hopes to teach workshops on poetry once the pandemic passes.

Here are a few of my favorite haikus she sent to me:

A Dark Red Tulip
A dark red tulip,
like a glass of burgundy
that is always full.

Acupuncture
So many needles
talking silently among
themselves, as I rest.

Deep Stuff
Can't write about love,
it's too intense, yet I can't
stop remembering.

Near the end of her email, Maria wrote, "From nature, to every day, to love: I especially love haiku as it is so simple and fun, and can be composed on the spot and even done as a game with others."

Give It a Try
Why not follow Maria's suggestion and write haiku yourself?
In "Literature," Kennedy and Gioia offer some tips for composing these short poems. "Make every word matter. Include few adjectives, shun needless conjunctions. Set your poem in the present," they tell us, reminding us that Basho advised, "Haiku is simply what is happening in this place at the moment." They also remind us that haiku concerns itself with "what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched," but it must also "make the reader feel something."
In her Introduction for "Would You Like a Poem?" Maria notes: "Poetry is a mystical experience, a deep pleasure, a stress reliever, a discovery, all of these things for me. I can fall in love with a random unknown poem as easily as a famous one."

Following My Own Suggestion
For three years, I wrote poetry, many sonnets but other forms as well. Several of these found a home in different magazines, but in general I was writing for me. Maria is absolutely spot-on about poetry being mystical, pleasurable, and offering discovery. Eventually, I stopped writing poetry—I'm not sure why—but I still remember how glorious it felt carrying a poem not just in my pocket but in my head, tinkering with it, wanting to sculpt the lines to perfection, chipping away and adding back to the poem.
Inspired by Maria's enthusiasm and following the advice of Kennedy and Gioia, I composed this haiku in a matter of minutes as I finished this article:

Cool Virginia night
And here I sit at my desk
Drinking poetry.

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

Virtue of the Brush in a Time of Chaos

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order must be restored."
- "The four books" by Zhu Xi

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CRAFTSMANSHIP

How a Master Carver’s God-Given Talent Saved Him

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He fondly recalled sitting outside carving small projects, and his grandmother, the grandchild of the family’s famous woodcarver, teaching him whittling techniques.

“We did not have any machinery. We didn’t even have any table saws. ... Everything was done by handsaws, chisels, and mallets. That was the only way, the only approach,” he said.

A Master Apprenticeship

He said, chuckling, “By the age of 16, I thought I already knew everything.” Then he met Vladimir Tokarev, a master woodcarver and fine artist. Tokarev saw Grabovetskiy’s talent and invited him to become his apprentice, suggesting that if he taught the young man everything he knew, then maybe Grabovetskiy could surpass him.

Tokarev took Grabovetskiy under his wing, teaching him the fundamentals of woodcarving. He started with the design approach using ancient geometry laws such as the golden ratio, an ancient geometric calculation that replicates nature and results in the most harmonious compositions; and the Fibonacci sequence, a numerical sequence that when drawn results in a spiral said to be close to the golden ratio.

“He gave me only one knife, ... and he said, ‘Until you master a knife, I can’t give you any gouge [a chisel with a curved blade especially used for woodcarving].’ For over a year, Grabovetskiy perfected his woodcarving technique using only

one knife. For centuries past, woodcarvers only used the knife, no gouges.

Once Tokarev was satisfied that Grabovetskiy had mastered the knife, he gave him one gouge to practice and perfect his carving with. Grabovetskiy laughed. On some of his projects now, he’ll use 100 gouges for just one project. Tokarev trained his apprentices to use as few tools as possible to achieve great carvings. Training in that way meant that Grabovetskiy could take two months to complete one project.

Imprisoned for Preaching

Two years into his seven-year apprenticeship, Grabovetskiy’s life changed dramatically. At nearly 19 years old, he was arrested for preaching and put in prison. “The [regime] didn’t like the idea that somebody could influence people’s opinions,” he said.

Grabovetskiy’s imprisonment was during the last years of the Soviet Union. “People didn’t have any food, even outside of the prison. But inside it was worse. There was absolutely no food. We would eat only once a day,” he said. Prisoners were given what they called “balanda”—bowls of murky, almost black liquid with solids floating in it, which often caused diarrhea, and sometimes death.

Looking back at his imprisonment, Grabovetskiy is grateful for his apprenticeship with Tokarev, being taught to master one knife. He couldn’t get any woodcarving tools in prison, but he was able to make a small knife. The blade was less than half an inch (10 millime-

ters) long. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to have. “That one knife was actually a lifesaver for me,” he said.

Grabovetskiy survived by carving small jewelry boxes and the prison staff allowed him to have a small potato to eat each day, which he shared with three other prisoners.

Later, he used the knife to embellish furniture by creating carvings and marquetry. Prison staff then sold his creations to the mafia because during the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regime didn’t pay prison staff.

Grabovetskiy spent nearly two years in prison. He was released as part of a prison amnesty when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Finding Freedom

In March 1996, when he was 23 years old, Grabovetskiy, his wife, and their 10-month-old son left Russia for good. All they brought with them was a suitcase, and most of that space was taken up with a pillow. In retrospect, he would have packed differently: “We were brainwashed. We thought that in the United States, everything was just artificial, no pillows, not the traditional way.” They first settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “We arrived on Saturday. Sunday we went to church, and by Monday

1. Master woodcarver Alexander A. Grabovetskiy creates intricate ornamental woodcarvings in his Florida workshop.

2. Grabovetskiy was awarded the Woodworkers Institute’s International Woodcarver of the Year 2012 award for this ornamental carving.

3. Remarkably, most of the wood carvings are created from one piece of wood.

A gouge (woodworking chisel) alongside one of Grabovetskiy’s creations.



I was already employed by house framers,” he said. The job didn’t last long because of the language barrier, but Grabovetskiy quickly picked up another job and learned English.

Settling in America had its joys and challenges. “Because some people openheartedly invited us to their homes, and so on—it was a blessing for them to meet people from Russia. But some people looked at us as enemies, and that’s still going on. ... The problem is between governments, not people-to-people. And normal people, they just worry about work and dinner time with the family, and so on,” he said.

After a year, Grabovetskiy and his family moved to Indiana, where he established a carpentry business covering all manner of woodworking jobs from installing doors to making flooring and made-to-order kitchen cabinetry. Later, his business expanded to building luxury homes.

He employed expats from the former Soviet Bloc, many of whom had been persecuted for their Christian faith, like he had.

These highly skilled woodworkers had the same challenges that Grabovetskiy once had. Without being proficient in English, they couldn’t find any good jobs, but they still had families to feed. Together, they conquered the local market and became the best at what they did.

Grabovetskiy’s Design Approach

Most of the time, Grabovetskiy designs first and then finds the right piece of wood. But sometimes the wood dictates the design. For instance, when he taught a class on 18th-century furniture making, he was struck by the grain in a couple of pieces of walnut wood, and a design based on the movements of the woodgrain came to his mind.

Each of Grabovetskiy’s woodcarvings begins life as a drawing—on paper, the timber itself, or a computer if he’s work-

ing on a large-scale project. Although each carving looks gloriously dynamic, every element has been meticulously planned using geometry and mathematics—right down to how many flowers and how many petals each bloom has. It’s an ancient approach that he happily teaches his students in person or online.

For instance, using a piece he made in 2014, Grabovetskiy explained how he applied the golden ratio, splitting the upper half of the vertical composition by 62 percent, leaving the lower part of the carving with 38 percent. The result: a harmonious composition with the upper part of the carving being abundant with blooms, berries, and a trellis-like structure, as opposed to the lower part which is sparse in comparison.

Viewing the complex piece, the eye is immediately drawn to the peony, which is located in the “golden spot.” This is where, Grabovetskiy explained, the flowers surrounding the peony enhance its position of importance. The composition is also set on diagonals. For example, a volute (a spiral) is carved diagonally down to the left of the peony.

Most of Grabovetskiy’s pieces are carved from one piece of wood, although it’s also common to glue pieces of wood together before starting big projects, just because wood is becoming less readily available. For his 2014 piece, titled “War and Peace,” Grabovetskiy added and glued on a few extra carvings to finish the piece, just as preeminent 18th-century woodcarver Grinling Gibbons would have done.

When Grabovetskiy carves, there’s no sanding; it’s a traditional approach. He likens the result to fine art, where the artist’s every brushstroke is unique. Each time he carves, the mark he makes is called a pull mark. “Every pull mark on a piece of timber makes them really unique, just like a diamond has different sides and when you catch the light, it casts a shadow,” he said.

4. The design of each sculptural motif is meticulously planned. For instance, even the number of petals for each bloom is calculated.

5. and 6. The gift for woodcarving runs in Grabovetskiy’s family: his grandfather was a furniture maker, and his great-great grandfather created furniture for the Russian royal family.

7. The woodcarving commissions range from majestic lions to elegant architectural accents, to flourishes of flowers, berries, and volutes (spirals).

8. Alexander A. Grabovetskiy carving a pair of lions.

Every element has been meticulously planned using geometry and mathematics.

A Gift From God

Now, Grabovetskiy lives in Florida, a move he made to establish a church and to set up his woodcarving workshop and school.

Woodcarving is Grabovetskiy’s passion, not just a job. It’s a talent that he believes God bestowed on him, and he sees it as his responsibility to perfect and pass on that gift.

Part of Grabovetskiy’s responsibility is to pass on his skills to other woodcarvers. His weeklong classes are sold out within minutes, and students come back year after year. He realizes that it’s because he teaches traditional woodcarving and art history; neither are usually taught in college curricula.

An Old Testament story made him see his talent clearly. The Book of Exodus tells how God asked Moses to make sure the slave Bezalel built the tabernacle. God said: I appointed him. It meant that God placed particular talents in Bezalel, Grabovetskiy explained.

Grabovetskiy ardently believes that his God-given talent is woodcarving. It’s a talent that has saved his life many times: in prison and when he started his woodcarving business.

Grabovetskiy continues to perfect his skills by hand carving sumptuous ornamental wooden sculptures using centuries-old traditional techniques. As a testament to his talent, Grabovetskiy is world-renowned, having won the Woodworkers Institute’s International Woodcarver of the Year 2012 award and teaching often-sold-out courses to woodcarvers around the country and online.

“Every profession, not only woodcarving, ... if you have a talent in some area, ... God gave you that talent and you really have to polish it,” he said.

To find out more about woodcarver Alexander Grabovetskiy, visit Grabovetskiy.com

MUSIC

A Heightened Experience of Romanticism

The symphonies of Howard Hanson

KENNETH LAFAVE

He wrote one of the most widely performed symphonies of the early 20th century but is virtually forgotten today. American composer Howard Hanson (1896–1981) was a self-professed Romantic whose works richly deserve to be revived and restored to global musical consciousness.

By “self-professed,” I refer to the title Hanson gave his Symphony No. 2, “Romantic,” which he composed on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra for its 50th anniversary. During the years he wrote it, from 1928 to 1930, Hanson was in the early years of a lifelong project: the directorship of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.

Hanson took the position in 1924, at age 28, after the inventor of Kodak photography, George Eastman, heard the Swedish-descended native of Wahoo, Nebraska, conduct his Symphony No. 1, “Nordic.” Eastman immediately knew this was the man to head his newly founded conservatory. While the prestigious position allowed Hanson to build one of the best music schools in the country, it also restricted his time to compose. Hanson’s catalog is strong, but it might have been larger.

A Melody Lives On

Despite the heavy administrative demands of kick-starting a school, Hanson somehow managed to compose the ambitious Symphony No. 2, a work in which melodies bloom naturally from initial harmonic gestures.

One of these melodies, introduced in the symphony’s first movement and cycled in some form throughout its two remaining movements, became, with repeated performances by dozens of orchestras worldwide, an icon of American Romanticism. Even if you don’t know it, you’ve likely heard it, thanks to director Ridley Scott incorporating it into the closing credits of his film “Alien.”

Ironically, by the year of “Alien’s” release in 1979, Hanson was old hat, ignored by an American classical music establishment that had passed him by for Modernism. Yet here was his 50-year-old melody heard by a new generation blissfully ignorant of Modernism. The piece gained new listeners and new life.

A Romantic Manifesto?

Writing in classical.net, Steven Schwartz says Hanson considered the “Romantic”



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Hanson’s symphonies broadened the definition of ‘Romantic,’ but never abandoned its core principle.

American composer, conductor, educator, and music theorist Howard Hanson.

Symphony “a manifesto of sorts.” That very well could be the case, as each subsequent Hanson symphony broadened the definition of “Romantic,” but never abandoned its core principle of increased expressivity through heightened values. Hanson’s procedure was classical—motifs and themes emerge out of harmonic structure—but his aim was intensely emotional.

The values heightened in a Hanson symphony are those of consonance and dissonance, textural complexity and release, and instrumental colors blended and contrasted. The emotional experiences include those of epic struggle in Symphony No. 3 (1938) and Symphony No. 6 (1967); the myriad facets of grief in his Pulitzer Prize-winning Symphony No. 4, “Requiem” (1943);

the mystery of faith in Symphony No. 5, the single-movement “Sinfonia Sacra” (1954); and the oceanic majesty in his choral symphony on texts by Whitman, No. 7, “The Sea Symphony” (1977).

Except for a revival on compact disc by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra under conductor Gerard Schwarz in the early 1990s, Hanson’s symphonies have been almost entirely ignored since his death. The hegemony of Modernism has kept them out of the repertoire.

Modernism is the idea that all values are flat and interchangeable. Hierarchies must be minimized or eliminated altogether. In music, this means that consonance and dissonance, along with all other contrasting elements, collapse into mere sound for its own sake.

No Expression Allowed

Igor Stravinsky lays out the Modernist creed in his autobiography: “Music by its very nature is incapable of expressing anything.”

This means that the dirge you heard at the funeral of a loved one didn’t express sadness, and that the lilting waltz you danced to at your wedding didn’t indicate happiness. More than that, since music expresses nothing, all pieces are interchangeable. It should be possible to play the lilting waltz at the funeral or the funeral march at a wedding.

Stanley Kubrick did precisely the latter in his film “Barry Lyndon,” using a Schubert funeral march for the wedding of the doomed hero, for the very reason that Stravinsky denies: When we hear the wedding music, we sense subconsciously that something is wrong, because the music expresses the opposite of joy.

Hanson, on the other hand, would have none of that. His early influences, Dvorak and Sibelius, exemplified for him what music was all about. He knew the fire he was playing with every time he sat down to compose. Music not only expresses, it cannot by its very nature escape expression.

The portrayal of emotional experience in music is a big responsibility, for as Hanson once said: “Music can be soothing or invigorating, ennobling or vulgarizing, philosophical or orgiastic. It has powers of evil as well as for good.”

Former music critic for the Arizona Republic and The Kansas City Star, Kenneth LaFave recently earned a doctorate in philosophy, art, and critical thought from the European Graduate School. He’s the author of three books, including “Experiencing Film Music” (2017, Rowman & Littlefield).

WHAT IS GOOD POETRY?

A Definitive Work: Shakespeare’s ‘The Seven Ages of Man’

SEAN FITZPATRICK

The whole point in human beings’ reading, writing, and memorizing poetry is to become more human.

As the beating heart of the humanities, poetry measures the meters of existence, bringing us into closer contact with who we are as humans—as knowers and lovers. And the more we know about the human experience, the more in tune and in love with our humanity we become.

This is one of the poems worth knowing.

There is one poem in particular that achieves this, presenting, as no other poem ever has or ever will, the seven stages that constitute the human drama.

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well sav’d, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

From William Shakespeare’s “As You Like It,” this famous of famous passages spoken by melancholy Jaques deals with the shifting stages of life, as proceeding from infancy to the schoolchild, to the adolescent, to the

youth, to the middle-aged, to the aged, and finally to dotage and dusty death. In these are captured, in just a couple of deftly penned lines each, a character that captures an age—a stage of life on the stage of the world—who comes and goes with entrances and exits in a vast, sweeping spectacle of temporal and eternal moment.

And the realities it reviews are familiar even as they are fantastic. In this poem, every man, woman, and child will see themselves and all whom they know, flashing like faces in a mirror. It proceeds from the familiar to fresh delights in the procession of Shakespeare’s world stage. And while one of the poem’s arresting points is its jabs—puking and whining and sighing to quarreling and swelling and shriveling—the comic-tragic role of man is on full display here, as he is in Shakespeare’s other immortal theater-to-life analogy, from “Macbeth”:

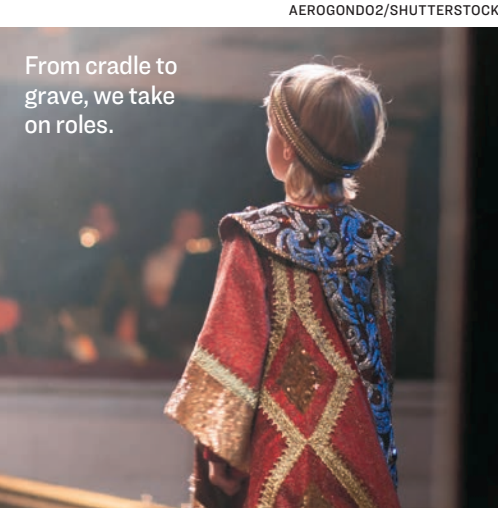
“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

“The Seven Ages of Man” stands as an instance of the truth that few things in life, brief as it is, are really worth knowing. In fact, few books in the mountains upon mountains of pulp are actually worth reading. And few passages of poetry in the sea of trash are worth carrying in your heart. The world may be a stage, but it is a cluttered one, choked with garbage and drivel, and we all have our work cut out for us in crossing its boards.

This is one of the poems worth knowing, one that got something done for all the ages, articulating for once and for all the seven stages of human existence. It is definitive, surpassing the finite nature of its maker and becoming an eternal standard set in the cosmos of human creation. It is worthy of encountering again and again for whatever time may be left for the world and its revolving players—until all things are sans everything.

Until that time, all stages of life can be stages of delight finding expression in the art that gets at the essence of everything: poetry.

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.



AERODOND02/SHUTTERSTOCK



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

A Must-See Lesson in Integrity for High School Boys

MARK JACKSON

“Scent of a Woman” is an inspiring high school movie about a boy becoming a man by showing his integrity and character when the chips are down, and a bitter old man becoming a boy again when hope springs eternal and destiny brings him a lovely female companion. This is the story of how the boy and the man become mutual catalysts who facilitate these profound changes in each other’s life.

Prep School

Much like “Dead Poets Society,” “Scent of a Woman” opens with shots of high school boys in blazers, chinos, and docksiders animatedly migrating between classes at the prestigious all-boys prep school Baird, in New Hampshire.

Charlie Simms (Chris O’Donnell), a 17-year-old Oregonian on scholarship, checks the hallway bulletin board for a Thanksgiving weekend job, hoping to make enough money to be able to fly home for Christmas. Meanwhile, his well-to-do classmates prepare for a swanky Vermont ski adventure at Sugarbush resort.

Harry Havemeyer (Nicholas Sadler), a particularly supercilious “have” (as opposed to Charlie’s “have-not”) invites Charlie along. When Harry’s pal George Willis Jr. (Philip Seymour Hoffman) later says, “You know he’s on aid,” Harry Have replies, “Traditionally during the holidays the lord of the manor offers drippings to the poor.” It’s that kind of milieu.

Charlie Meets the Colonel

Charlie finds a weekend assignment. A local family hires him to look after their uncle, a testy, cigar-chewing alcoholic and rageaholic, retired Lt. Col. Frank Slade (Al Pacino) for the next few days.

This is no walk in the park, because not only does the persnickety, demanding, bullying colonel spew nonstop insults—he’s also blind as bat (a fact that his family conveniently neglects to mention).

And the colonel demands a lot from his aides. “Don’t call him sir, don’t ask him too many questions,” his niece explains. Slade also likes his aides to be presentable, with good skin. No pimples!



George Willis Jr. (Philip Seymour Hoffman, L) and Charlie Simms (Chris O’Donnell) are prep school classmates.



Mr. Trask (James Rebhorn), the Baird prep school headmaster, experiences humiliation on a grand scale.

Lt. Col. Frank Slade delivers a scorched-earth monologue that ranks among the best movie monologues ever.



Lt. Col. Frank Slade (Al Pacino) dances the tango with a fetching young woman (Gabrielle Anwar) whose delicious soap-and-water fragrance he detected from across the room, in “Scent of a Woman.”

However, before Thanksgiving break commences, a few of Charlie’s “friends” play a practical and highly embarrassing joke on Headmaster Trask (James Rebhorn). They paint-bomb him and his newly acquired, board-of-trustees-bequeathed dark green Jaguar, all while running snide commentary about the well-attended spectacle over the school’s loudspeaker system.

To Snitch or Not to Snitch

All of which puts Charlie at risk because Trask strongly suspects that Charlie and George Willis Jr. both know who pulled the prank. Trask sweetens the pot for Charlie to rat on his buddies: He dangles a personal recommendation, by him, for Charlie to Harvard University’s admissions board.

So young Charlie Simms’s got the weekend to decide whether or not he really wants to sacrifice a shot at Harvard by stonewalling Trask to protect the paint-perpetrators, whom he knows look down on his peasant status.

The stress of this moral dilemma is further compounded by his new charge Slade, who’s got a grand “when the cat’s away, the colonel will play” scheme, and drags the protesting Charlie via jet plane to New York City, grandiosely exclaiming: “This is just the start of your education, son.”

The colonel’s saved his money to afford the best hotel, the best meals, the best cigars, the best whisky, and a high-end prostitute. Why? It soon becomes apparent that Frank’s nonstop tirades and wise insights cover immense pain and regret about the choices that led from being an aide to LBJ to living in a ramshackle hut behind his niece’s house. And so, after indulging himself in the luxuries listed above, he will give himself a proper military sendoff, dressed in uniform, with his Colt 1911. That’s the plan.

He didn’t count on his normally easily cowed young boy of a handler to suddenly grow a backbone, call his bluff, and demand that he come down, and stand down, from his ledge of misery.

Pacino

Along the way is a tour de force of Al Pacino theatrics. Pacino, throughout his career, has never not been bombastic, and “Scent of a Woman” is Pacino at his utmost bomb-

bastic. It’s a spectacular bombast, featuring the 60-something colonel charming a random, 20-something beauty (Gabrielle Anwar), asking her to tango, and pulling off an utterly believable virtuoso (because the character’s blind) ballroom tango.

And then there’s delightful unfolding of the meaning of the movie’s title: The colonel has, basically, blindness-compensatory supernatural olfactory sensory neurons and an ability to rhino-locate women by the smell of their perfumes and soaps. All the names and labels of which he can quote, much to the ladies’ collective bedazzlement.

Pacino’s creation, Army Lt. Col. Frank Slade, is an idiosyncratic, thespian creation to be savored. He’s got the poetic flair for cursing and insulting that the American military is legendary for, he’s got jokes, he’s got deep insights and literary nuggets, and he’s got the above-mentioned uncanny knowledge of soaps, psychological X-ray vision, and sage advice—all punctuated with Army “Hooah!” battle cries and “Ha!”s—all of which hit the believability mark every time.

Although O’Donnell matches Pacino’s ironclad Army vet manliness with a just-as-deeply felt, untested boyish faltering and anguish, “Scent of a Woman” was obviously only ever going to be a one-man show; it’s like a Pacino comet.

Charlie’s Predicament

When a resolution for Charlie’s school conundrum finally arrives, Lt. Col. Frank Slade delivers a scorched-earth monologue that ranks among the best movie monologues ever. It’s highly apropos of today’s moral chaos, and cuts through Baird prep school’s loss of vision as to how to forge powerful, moral individuals. There’s nothing as convincing as a military veteran talking to privileged prep school boys about boys in battle getting arms and legs blown off; about integrity, true manhood, and how, when the bullets fly downrange, some boys run and some stand their ground. And while George Willis Jr. hides safely in his father’s pocket, fatherless Charlie faces danger and shows character.

Every high schooler needs to see it. Sometimes, Hollywood does the right thing and tells the right story.



The colonel (Al Pacino) contemplates ending his life.



Frank Slade (Al Pacino, L) gives Baird prep school faculty and students a thunderous, galvanizing, shaming tongue-lashing while Charlie Simms (Chris O’Donnell) looks on in awe.



George Willis Jr. (Philip Seymour Hoffman, L) and George Willis Sr. (Baxter Harris) are flabbergasted when their expectations of exoneraton are dashed.

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“Savonarola Preaching Against Prodigality,” 1879, by Ludwig von Langenmantel. St. Bonaventure University.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Confronting Our Vanities

‘Savonarola Preaching Against Prodigality’

ERIC BESS

With the advent of mass media, more and more of us feel like we need material possessions in order to feel worthy. Others put their self-worth into their politics, and others into their religion. Quite often, however, many of us use these things to condemn others who don’t have what we have or think like we think.



In this detail, Savonarola is preaching to all who will listen.

Ludwig von Langenmantel’s painting “Savonarola Preaching Against Prodigality” presents a time in history during which people were encouraged to confront their “vanities.”

Savonarola
Ghirolamo Savonarola was a 15th-century Italian preacher and religious reformer. He was believed to have prophetic visions, and he preached against the corruption of the clergy. His growing popularity made him a political threat to the papacy, which sought to censure his public sermons.
Savonarola’s extensive education and way with words made his sermons popular and convincing. He told the citizens of Florence that the apocalypse was imminent, and that self-restraint and sacrifice are the way to salvation.
The impassioned citizens of Florence were convinced to burn all the objects in their possession that distracted them from their religious duties. They sacrificed their possessions in a large fire now referred to as the “bonfire of the vanities.” They burned books, clothing, artwork, and anything else that was considered a distraction. Some citizens

even decided to burn down the Medici bank, which was a center of power in Florence.
It wasn’t long, however, before Savonarola was silenced by his enemies. He was ultimately hanged and burned by the church. Ultimately, he would be considered a martyr and was celebrated for centuries after his death.

Langenmantel’s Painting
Ludwig von Langenmantel was a 19th-century genre and history painter. His painting “Savonarola Preaching Against Prodigality” provides a visual representation of the bonfire of the vanities.
The painting’s focal point is Savonarola, who is positioned left of center. Dressed in a white robe and black hood, he stands on an ornately covered platform. He holds a rosary and skull in one hand and gestures above with the other. With his upper face shrouded by the shadow of his hood, he looks intently toward the heavens.
The bonfire items are placed at the left of the platform. Two women lean on the heap of items. The one closest to us clasps her hands in prayer, and the other looks up toward Savonarola. Though their bodies are leaning on the items, their attention is captured by something else.
Several wealthy women congregate at Savonarola’s feet with items to contribute. One of the women presents her crown, suggesting that she is renouncing her royal stature, while another woman kisses Savonarola’s robe.
Behind the cluster of wealthy women, there are two common people: an older woman and a young girl. They have nothing to contribute to the bonfire.

Instead, they have come to hear the apocalyptic sermon.
There are many citizens of Florence depicted around Savonarola. The rich, the poor, men, women, clergy, and laypersons all come to hear his sermons and participate in the bonfire. A young boy prepares the flame at the far left of the composition.

Sacrificing Our Vanity
So what wisdom might we gather from this painting and the bonfire of vanities?
Symbols tell us what kind of painting this is: The golden items prepared for the bonfire, the boy preparing the flame, and the skull in Savonarola’s hand show us that this is a “vanitas” painting.

Today, we seem to have a culture built around ‘vanities.’

According to the Tate website, vanitas are “artworks that remind the viewer of the shortness and fragility of life ... and include symbols such as skulls and extinguished candles ... to remind us explicitly of the vanity (in the sense of worthlessness) of worldly pleasure and goods.”
Savonarola holds the skull because he is the reminder of the apocalypse; he is the reminder of the coming end and the worthlessness of material possessions.
I was not able to find an extinguished candle in this painting, as in other vanitas paintings. The extinguished candle often symbolizes the ephemerality of life



and asks the viewer to not waste time on material pursuits. Yet, the bonfire itself is the candle in this painting. We are made to anticipate that the items of the bonfire will burn and that the fire will die out.
In fact, the idea that we see a single flame before it lights the fire suggests something important. Langenmantel’s vanitas painting reminds us of what comes before the fire, of the beginning that must occur if we wish to go beyond our pursuits for material comfort. In other words, we must first be willing. We must be willing to burn away our desire for material comforts if we wish to experience what is beyond this material world.
Langenmantel makes another point. All, irrespective of their walks of life, gather for the bonfire. Unlike ideologies that create conflict based on class, gender, race, and so on, here, people of every class and age gather for a singular purpose: to go beyond their material possessions. It is the willingness to change their character that brings them to this event.

Self-Restraint
None of this can be said seriously, however, without mentioning some concerns revealed by Savonarola’s bonfire. It must be stated that the “bonfire of the vanities” was not an exercise of religious censorship against the public but the encouragement of self-restraint.
In other words, Savonarola was not behaving like a totalitarian ruler. He was not encouraging people to burn items that would interfere with his own ascent to power because he was not interested

in gaining political power. Instead, he was encouraging those inclined to elevate themselves beyond the material world to stop attaching their self-worth to the things of this world.
However, some of his followers took his message to the extreme and burned down the Medici bank in Florence. It should be noted that there is a difference between looking within to improve ourselves morally and forcing our moral understanding on others. In the latter case, it’s an act of taking our limited moral understanding as an absolute.
Today, we seem to have a culture built around “vanities.” We constantly want to possess more, or we want to condemn others for not thinking like us. We’re politically angry and spiritually frustrated.
How can we stimulate a response to look within and offer our material idols up for sacrifice? How might we have self-restraint be a staple in our culture?

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

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



“Lafayette and Washington at Mount Vernon, 1784,” 1859, by Thomas Prichard Rossiter and Louis Rémy Mignot. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BOOK REVIEW

‘Hero of Two Worlds: The Marquis de Lafayette in the Age of Revolution’

DUSTIN BASS

Mike Duncan launched his first history podcast, “The History of Rome,” in 2007 when podcasting was relatively new but surging as a new medium. It is now a pillar in the history podcasting community. In 2013, he started his second podcast, “Revolutions”—undeniably a second pillar.
His in-depth research, required for creating such successful podcasts, has lent him the ability to successfully enter into another, much older, medium: books. Duncan’s second book, “Hero of Two Worlds: The Marquis de Lafayette in the Age of Revolution,” is a fine addition to the massive collection of American Revolution scholarship. In my opinion, it is a necessary addition.

The Marquis de Lafayette is a recognizable figure for Americans. He was the French nobleman and military officer who came to aid the colonists in their fight against Britain during the American Revolution. Aside from his arrival, bravery in battle, and his close relationship to George Washington, most know Lafayette on a very surface level. Even the previously mentioned points are vaguely known.

Duncan provides a detailed work into Lafayette’s arrival as a 19-year-old (disobeying the French monarch to do so, which made him a fugitive), his bravery in battle (chock full of brilliant maneuvers, even when in retreat), and his relationship with Washington (which turned from a misunderstanding of Washington’s “welcome to the family” statement into a full-fledged surrogate father and adopted son relationship).

‘Hero of Two Worlds’
Duncan’s title “Hero of Two Worlds” was a moniker bestowed upon Lafayette in France during the French Revolution. Fittingly, Duncan follows suit by splitting the book into two worlds: America and France. Though he assumed different roles in each revolution, there is no question that each role was significant.

Lafayette may have been an adventure seeker, but he also (which Duncan makes clear) was a believer in certain ideals. These ideals—like equality, liberty, and republicanism—were very much the products of the Enlightenment.
Duncan takes the reader through Lafayette’s growth as a man during revolutionary times. Some may view Lafayette as conflicted or confused in his evolving ideals, but that would be a mistake. We simply get to see him mature and firmly root those beliefs through discussions with military officers and political thinkers, as well as experiences through battles both military and political.

Those ideals, presented as mere hopes and ideas during the American Revolution, were met with success at the throwing off of the British monarchy. Then firmly planted, those ideals became the driving force for his desire to see a constitutional monarchy in France.
Moreover, Lafayette encountered an incredible cast of heroes, like Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson; detractors, like Lord Charles Cornwallis, Marie Antoinette, and Napoleon Bonaparte; and villains, like General Benedict Arnold, Georges Danton, and Maximillian Robespierre.
The life of Lafayette was a tireless one. After reading the book, one wonders how he could have had the energy to do so much, almost always

for the right reasons, though not always with the desired outcomes. Truly, this is how one should define a hero.

A Superb Read
There is no denying Duncan’s ability for research, as his podcasts have proven. He spent several years in France conducting research for and writing this book. But massive research doesn’t equate to good writing. Luckily for readers, Duncan is an exceptional writer who paints vivid imagery and mixes in humor that does not take away from the book’s focus.

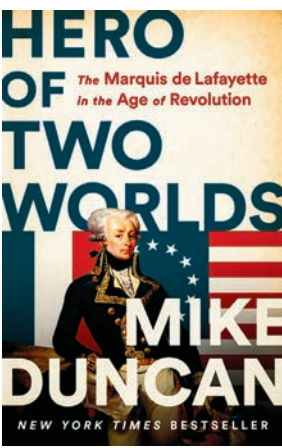
Duncan does a superb job of filling in the necessary details of Lafayette’s life—both triumphs and tragedies—and does not allow himself to get bogged down in the surrounding affairs where it does not personally impact his hero. This he does wisely when discussing the military rise of Napoleon, for example. Duncan lightly touches on this important rise, but he does not attempt to write a quasi-biography of Napoleon’s conquests, which would do a disservice to the book by steering the reader away from the central figure.

Lafayette lived through three of the most iconic and significant moments of the early modern period: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. Of the many figures from this era who have received their just due in biographical form, Duncan has proven unsparingly that Lafayette deserves to be among them.

The author does a fine job of lightly touching on various subjects when necessary. One subject, however, was written in poor taste, regarding the relationship between Hamilton and Henry Laurens. The single line, written rather flippantly and without reference, is fodder for scandal made for the tabloid, not a work of historical scholarship.

In a book of 436 pages plus bibliography, which is extensive and primarily includes, happily I might add, contemporary sources, I view the single line as merely unfortunate happenstance. Duncan has written a defining book on the great Frenchman and close friend of early America. “Hero of Two Worlds” is a book of value about a man who was of great value to America, France, and ultimately modern Western civilization.

Dustin Bass is the co-host of The Sons of History podcast and an author.



‘Hero of Two Worlds: The Marquis de Lafayette in the Age of Revolution’
Author
Mike Duncan
Publisher
PublicAffairs
Pages
512 pages, hardcover

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Director Tom McCarthy’s Low-Key Debut Masterwork

MICHAEL CLARK

After well over a decade of showing up as an extra in TV shows such as “Spin City,” “Law & Order: SVU,” “Ally McBeal,” and “Boston Public,” actor Tom McCarthy (without any prior experience doing so) was given a shot at writing and directing his first feature film.

Given the success of its art-house productions with general audiences since the early 1990s, Miramax Studios had little to lose by giving McCarthy a paltry \$500,000 to make his quaint little movie. With longtime indie darling Patricia Clarkson positioned as the principal female draw, Miramax was practically guaranteed to at least break even. This in turn permitted McCarthy the chance to cast the promising yet largely unknown actors Peter Dinklage and Bobby Cannavale as the male leads.

Finbar (“Fin”) McBride (Dinklage) is a single man with no family living in Hoboken, New Jersey, who works for his only friend, Henry (Paul Benjamin), at a model train store. While not an issue for him personally, Fin’s dwarfism makes him a curio wherever he goes. Whether it is through



Tom McCarthy wrote the screenplay and directed the film.



(L–R) Peter Dinklage, Patricia Clarkson, and Bobby Cannavale star in “The Station Agent.”

pointed insults, awkward gawking, or strangers viewing him as little more than a child, Fin has had his fill of grief long before the movie starts.

After Henry’s unexpected death, the store closes. However, Fin is willed a piece of property by his friend in nearby Newfoundland that includes an abandoned train station; Fin soon takes up residence. It’s essentially in the middle of nowhere and inordinately small—features that make it all the more appealing to Fin. He can now go from loner to hermit and never have to hear any further commentary regarding his appearance.

Isolation Interrupted

Fin’s idyllic situation doesn’t last long. Mobile snack and coffee shop operator Joe (Cannavale) parks next to the station, which is odd since there is zero foot traffic. As it turns out, Joe is only doing this as a favor for his convalescing father and would appear to want as little actual responsibility as possible. As gregarious as Fin is withdrawn, Joe is a life-of-the-party type who is oblivious to everything going on around him and can’t get the hint that Fin wishes to be left alone.

Falling somewhere in the middle personality-wise between Fin and Joe is Olivia (Clarkson), an artist of some sort battling depression in the wake of the death of her young son two years before. Adding to Olivia’s woes is a lack of professional drive and a crumbling marriage to the estranged David (John Slattery). We get the impression that Olivia desires human contact,

but she is just beginning a long healing process.

Fin soon crosses paths with two more females, each of whom largely ignores his physical stature and connects with him on personal levels. Cleo (Raven Goodwin) is an elementary school student who shares Fin’s obsession with trains and views him as something of a sagely mentor. And, had local librarian Emily (Michelle Williams) not been recently spurned by her dirtbag boyfriend, it’s unlikely that she would have much interest in Fin, but his unassuming and nonjudgmental air makes him an ideal sounding board.

Never in his life has Fin had this much social interaction, and ever so slowly, he starts to dismantle the metaphorical safeguards protecting his psyche. This attention comes from four individuals who don’t view him as a dwarf but merely one of them, and this makes his transition all the easier—at least initially.

The most striking facet of McCarthy’s movie is its untraditional treatment and approach to romance and isolation. If there is going to be any kind of sexuality thrown into the mix, it’s going to take place organically and not as part of a narrative checklist.

All five of the principals are damaged in some form or fashion, and McCarthy’s various solutions for each lies beyond the typical movie tropes. There are no easy answers to life’s hurdles, but, as he suggests, the path to personal growth becomes far more attainable through continued interaction with one’s fellow

man. It’s not a grabber in the cinematic sense, but it will strike a chord with audiences finding themselves in the same emotional boat.

From the Maker of ‘The Visitor,’ ‘Win Win,’ and ‘Spotlight’

Taking in over 15 times its budget at the box office, “The Station Agent” also won a slew of awards from high-profile festivals and regional critics’ associations (mostly for McCarthy, Dinklage, and Clarkson) and topped many critics’ year-end 2003 Top 10 lists (including mine).

After winning the BAFTA award for Best Original Screenplay, McCarthy delivered the similarly life-affirming “The Visitor” (2007) and “Win Win” (2011) on his way to capturing another BAFTA and Best Screenplay Oscar for “Spotlight” (2015), which also claimed the Academy Award for Best Picture.

If you’re in the market for a human-interest story that earns its uplifting and inspiration tags through deft, expert writing, and superb character development without beating you over the head with clichés and stereotypes, you’re not likely to find a better example than “The Station Agent.”

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.

‘The Station Agent’

Director
Tom McCarthy

Starring
Peter Dinklage, Patricia Clarkson, Bobby Cannavale, Michelle Williams, Raven Goodwin

Running Time
1 hour, 30 minutes

MPAA Rating
R

Release Date
Oct. 3, 2003

★★★★★

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–IMDB REVIEWER

**INTERVIEW
WITH THE ANTICHRIST**