

# THE EPOCH TIMES

# ARTS & CULTURE

ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES



In the mid-20th century, the encyclopedia was becoming standard in American households, as married actors Dick Powell and June Allyson, circa 1947, with a new set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, suggest.

LITERATURE

## Diminished Joys

Encyclopedias, anthologies, and a barking dog (me)

JEFF MINICK

On Dec. 1, 2021, an article I wrote about the “Childcraft” books appeared in *The Epoch Times*. Several days later, a reader notified me that his grandfather and his father had both worked in executive positions for World Book, which published the “Childcraft” set as well as the World Book Encyclopedia.

His kind note brought back many pleasurable memories of that encyclopedia. My parents purchased a set for our family when I was around 11 years old. And for the rest of the years I remained at home, I often spent time on the sofa in the living room, browsing the pages, skipping from the Egyptians—I can still recollect the il-

**World Book, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and other such sets, have gone the way of the dinosaurs.**

lustrations of their dress—to Napoleon, to whatever other topic struck my fancy. Yes, those volumes were educational and certainly helped with high school research projects, but mostly I read them for the sheer fun of it.

After hearing from my World Book reader, I investigated the two libraries in my town and found that these massive storehouses of knowledge—World Book, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and other such sets—have gone the way of the dinosaurs. In my public library, for example, the computer lists page after page of “encyclopedias,” but these are one-volume compilations generally aimed at a single topic: space exploration for younger readers, woodworking, and even an ebook encyclopedia on embalming. Those large sets so familiar to me in my

boyhood have vanished, gone the way of the pterodactyl and the stegosaurus.

### A Question

This disappearance of print encyclopedias and other reference material, especially anthologies, caused me to wonder: Are we losing something valuable in this exchange of paper and ink for electronics?

The internet has put the world at our fingertips, and I would be the first to agree that this is a good thing. If I wish to find a synonym for “observation,” I hit a few keys, and a dozen sites offer me help. If I wish to find a passage from Anne Morrow Lindbergh or Henry David Thoreau, I type in my search words and begin my investigation.

*Continued on Page 5*

## 2022 NTD 8<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CHINESE VOCAL COMPETITION



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## What Our Readers Say (#31, part 1)



I subscribed to The Epoch Times from an ad I had seen on YouTube. In the ad I saw the slogan "Truth and Tradition." That really caught my eye as those two elements are often missing from the mainstream news media.

Truth - A journalist's opinion is often considered the truth nowadays and that should never be the case. There are those journalists who believe that they do not need to mention the source from where they get their information. While reading The Epoch Times I notice that their journalists extensively list references throughout their articles. This is helpful as I can go to their direct source to verify the information and receive even more insight on the article.

Tradition - I am proud to be an American and, on a daily basis, I am grateful for the opportunities this country provides to me. I am very traditional. I am NOT progressive. Our founding fathers fought for independence through the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The American Revolution established that every American then, now and in the future have

three unalienable rights: the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Progressives believe that they need to radically change our Constitution. I don't. The words written in our Constitution are just as strong today as they were when originally written. I enjoy reading The Epoch Times because this paper understands American tradition and the value of every American. I especially enjoy reading the Life & Tradition section as it provides great biographical and many other informative articles that are helpful to me.

I am very pleased with The Epoch Times' no holds barred coverage on the CCP. I am now better informed on the CCP's communist influence here in America and around the world. I enjoy reading all the very well done infographics. Some of my favorites include: The CCP's Virus Propaganda War, The CCP's Influence Over International Groups and China's Secret War Against America. **The Epoch Times has made me a much better informed American. I am very pleased with my subscription.**

JAMIE MANUELS

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**THE EPOCH TIMES**  
TRUTH AND TRADITION



HENRY BE/UNSPLASH

The novel examines life's choices and consequences.

### BOOK REVIEW

## A Suicidal Woman Gets to See Other Life Choices

ANITA L. SHERMAN

A sad and depressed young woman contemplates taking her life.

She is full of regret and has chosen to be more self-critical than self-congratulatory. She's lost people close to her. Her cat has died. Her work is unfulfilling. Her relationships are crumbling.

Matt Haig's "The Midnight Library" starts out on a dreary and depressing note as readers are introduced to Nora Seed, who has decided to retreat from her unhappy world by committing suicide. As the hours and minutes tick closer to midnight, Nora writes a note to whom-ever, reiterating her hopelessness and inability to offer anything of value to anyone and that she makes life worse for people.

Nora falls into unconsciousness. Readers may think the deed done.

But then she awakens and, as the mist clears around her, she finds herself in front of a large building, a library. Inside is Mrs. Elm, an older woman whom she recognizes as the school librarian of her youth.

If this is death, it is a strange reality. Nora figures that she isn't even able to be good at that. Living was incomplete, and perhaps dying is incomplete as well.

Mrs. Elm, like some kind of fairy godmother or guardian, offers some assistance:

"Between life and death there is a library," she said. "And within that library, the shelves go on forever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be different if you had made other choices ... Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regrets?"

In this place, this library with endless shelves of books, Nora finds herself faced with many more decisions about life and death. Every decision, large or small, will have its consequences. The books offer her glimpses, insights into what might have been or perhaps is yet to come.

Haig, the author of "Reasons to Stay Alive" and "How to Stop Time," may be dabbling in parallel universe theory (a great discussion for all the book clubs around the country) as Nora begins pulling out various volumes with lots of "what if" scenarios.

Up to this point, Nora's choices, for her, have always led to the dark side. She is riddled with regret, guilt, and longing and has opted for falling into a black hole of her own making.

Perhaps she should have married her fiancé. Or maybe she should have stuck with her brother and their friend Ravi with their budding band rather than bailing. Certainly, she could have been a better cat owner or been decent to her parents. She had entertained being a competitive swimmer, and a dear friend wanted her to visit Australia.

In one of the books, Nora finds herself a glaciologist (a career that she had thought might be possible for her) until she comes face to face with a polar bear. The bear bears no malice toward her; she is just food.

In this in-between place, she realizes that she does not want to die but she's in this scenario. How to get back to the

safety of the library?

Haig writes of her angst: "And that was the problem. In the face of death, life seemed more attractive, and as life seemed more attractive, how could she get back to the Midnight Library? She had to be disappointed in a life, not just scared of it, in order to try again with another book."

Author Matt Haig is good at digging into the human heart.



'The Midnight Library'

Author

Matt Haig

Publisher

Viking, September 2020

Pages

304

Haig's chapters are tight and short. They read quickly as Nora dabbles in her other lives—the what ifs: the opportunities to erase regret, the opportunities to seize the moment, the opportunities to find a life that she wants to live.

While Nora is on this journey of discovery—some books lasting minutes, others hours, and others even several years—she encounters another character who appears to be on the same journey as herself.

In the Midnight Library with Mrs. Elm, who often comes to the rescue to pull her back or urge her onward, Nora lives many hundreds of different lives.

She's given the gift of perspective over and over again in a multitude of different settings, timeframes, and with different casts of characters.

Along with lots of metaphors and symbolism, Haig throws in several philosophers throughout the book, such as Bertrand Russell, Henry David Thoreau, Lao Tzu, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others. He weaves their respective philosophies into her mindset.

Haig is good at digging into the human heart. He has empathy for the human condition: the joys and the sorrows, the light and the dark.

Time starts to run out for Nora and her book browsing. This in-between place is not a sustainable reality.

"The Midnight Library" was published in 2020. It has remained on many bestseller lists for more than a year. There's good reason for this when you get to the last chapters and discover Nora's final choice.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist with 20 years' experience as a writer/editor for several Virginia publications. A bibliophile, film noir fan, and Blackwing pencils devotee, she loves the stuff of stories. Reach her at [anitajustwrite@gmail.com](mailto:anitajustwrite@gmail.com)

# A Son's Powerful, Beautiful Holocaust Memoir About His Father

DUSTIN BASS

Jason Sommer is an American poet. He has written five collections of poetry. His father is a Holocaust survivor. Many of his family members experienced the Holocaust; many of them did not survive. His "Shmuel's Bridge" is a memoir of that very subject.

Even in prose, one can tell that Sommer is a poet. His words, sentences, and paragraphs flow smoothly, often elegantly, with imagery and detail that strike the reader in ways that prose typically cannot. The reader is left remembering not just the story but also how it is written.

### Poetry in Prose

No, the memoir is not written in stanzas. It is written with traditional sentence structure, filling up chapters. But in many ways, it is still poetry.

It is a book about grief and at times fear, as it should be, considering the subject. But it is also about forgiveness and understanding between a father and a son—or at least the attempt to attain forgiveness and understanding.

Sommer's poetry has been based on the Holocaust stories that he has heard over the years from his father and other family members. His book reflects deeply on those stories. And he also uses excerpts from his poetry to begin every chapter, adding his own experiences of how the Holocaust has affected him personally—though he was not born until well after World War II.

Those experiences are reflections of his childhood and the task of being the child of a survivor. He reflects on the nightmares, discipline, humility, modesty, brilliance, protection, and anger of his father. These reflections are not merely for the sake of telling the reader what happened, but to explain how the author felt or still feels about those moments.

Sommer begins the book with him showing his father video clips from a trip they took to Auschwitz. He and his father had taken this journey 20 years prior, in search

of a specific bridge near the well-known concentration camp. His father now suffers from dementia and enjoys the video clips anew each time. It is this trip that is the basis of the book.

### A Journey Through Tragedy

The author brings the reader on the journey of not just the trip but also the planning of it. It is not the first time that his father revisited Auschwitz, but this trip is different. Sommer's uncle, Shmuel, his father's youngest brother, was killed on the way to the concentration camp. He was shot by Nazi soldiers after he jumped off the train into a river. It was a bridge that had provided Shmuel the opportunity to nearly escape but, tragically, not to succeed. The focus of the quest is to find the bridge where Shmuel died.

As the two travel and meet various people, including the memorable Russian Volodya, who serves as a guide for much of the trip, Sommer is constantly hounded by thoughts of uncertainty (about how he feels and how he thinks his father feels), doubt (about his role in the trip, and at times his preparation for the journey), and of disconnection from his father. Despite such an intimate journey with his father and such intimate moments shared, there are times, Sommer acknowledges, when he feels separated from his father, as if he still does not quite know his father and that his father still does not quite know him.

Shmuel's bridge is pivotal to, if not the crux of, the story. But as the book comes to its close, you realize that the bridge they have been looking for is also the one that will connect them.

### Deeper Meanings

The memoir is a reflection of the author's experience reflecting on his father's experience. Sometimes we connect with the father, but mostly our sole connection is with the son, who feels disconnected from his father even at the moment they locate the bridge.

Numerous times, the author confides to

**The memoir is a reflection of the author's experience reflecting on his father's experience.**

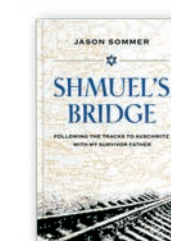
the reader that he would hide behind the camera in certain situations in order to find comfort or, at times, anonymity. Even after the book concludes, the reader is left with a sense of longing, as if that which is resolved still needs resolving.

This by no means is saying that the memoir leaves anything to be desired. It is a powerful, utterly honest, and beautifully written book. The subject, writing style, and imagery draw the readers in and holds them.

The book is a reminder of the height of mankind's cruelty and barbarity. It is also a reminder that those who survived that barbarity still bare visible and invisible scars. And while the children of those survivors may try, despite the impossibility, to understand their parents, who can truly conceive of such evil and the ability to survive it?

The book is also, and possibly more poignantly, a reminder that reliving something doesn't necessarily mean moving past it or finding closure. It is simply a reminder that it's not always about crossing the bridge, but preparing for the fulfillment or lack thereof once you do.

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



'Shmuel's Bridge: Following the Tracks to Auschwitz With My Survivor Father'



Poet Jason Sommer.  
JASONSOMMER.COM

Author  
Jason Sommer

Publisher  
Imagine, March 15, 2022

Pages  
224



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Maltese weaver Alda Bugeja with some of her cotton and sheep's wool creations.



Weaver Alda Bugeja at work in her atelier in Malta.



Self-taught bellfounder Robert Sliz at work in Slovakia.

# A Guardian for European Fine Craftsmanship

How the Homo Faber Guide highlights some traditional gems

LORRAINE FERRIER

One of the greatest joys of travel is happenstance, and for several years now the pandemic has robbed us of such foreign joys. Many artisans reliant on tourists and in-person visits have suffered financially because of endless lockdowns.

For instance, the UK-based Heritage Crafts Association found that the stress of running a business during a pandemic has meant that some skilled craftspeople have decided to take early retirement. Of the artisans still in business, many have had to create new sources of revenue due to the lockdowns and the loss of traditional sources of income, and so online marketing (such as the number of online tutorials showing crafts) has increased.

Now that lockdown restrictions are easing throughout the world, long-haul travel may be back in our schedules or future plans, with many people eager to experience fine European arts and craftsmanship in-person once again.

There's much available. "In Europe, the accent, the wine, and the food changes every 30 to 40 miles. And so do the skills and techniques in craftsmanship," said Milan gallerist Jean Blanchart, curator of the "Best of Europe" exhibition at the inaugural 2018 Homo Faber event, in a press release.

## The Homo Faber Guide

For those wanting to support, appreciate, and purchase European fine craftsmanship from afar, there's the Homo Faber Guide, an online directory run by the Michelangelo Foundation.

The Michelangelo Foundation is a Geneva-based, international, nonprofit organization set up to celebrate and preserve master craftsmanship around the world. Initially focusing its work on Europe, the organization aims to reinforce fine workmanship's connection with design.

The Homo Faber Guide is fairly self-explanatory. For example, when you click on

**Crafts like these connect us to our heritage.**



"Brussels Lace No. 2," 2018, by Julien Feller. Boxwood; 16 1/2 inches by 11 3/4 inches by 1 1/8 inches. Belgian woodcarver Julien Feller imitates delicate lace designs in his intricate woodcarvings.

the "Visit" tab, the search box subject greets you with "Visit fine collections." Any search item you enter here takes you to a selection of shops, galleries, and museums.

A useful and somewhat unique tool for tourists and locals alike is the guide's "Ambassadors" tab, where leading curators, designers, and gallerists handpick their favorite local artisans and tell you why they're great.

The guide's "Itineraries" tab suggests exemplary artisans in specific areas. For example, the guide highlights nine artisans on Bornholm, an island near Denmark and Germany, renowned for its crafts.

In the Arts and Culture section of The Epoch Times, we focus on fine craftsmanship that stays true to tradition, and particularly on artisans who use hand tools and skills.

Many of the artisans listed in the Homo Faber Guide create modern art and craftworks, but there are some traditional gems to be found. For instance, type the keyword "Malta," "Slovakia," or "Belgium" in the "Discover" section of the guide, and you will find a Maltese weaver carrying on the family tradition, a Slovakian bellfounder who taught himself how to cast bells, and a Belgian woodcarver who, inspired by past masters, carves wood into "lace."

## Weaving Cloth in Malta

For thousands of years, weaving with cotton and sheep's wool has been a necessity for many on the Mediterranean island of Malta. Nearly every Maltese family once owned a loom to weave clothing and bedding. Many relied on the tradition to survive. The men planted and harvested the cotton, the children helped wash it, and the women transformed the raw cotton into cloth.

Alda Bugeja is one of the few weavers on the island who still practices Malta's ancient weaving tradition. Walk into her workshop and she might be hand-spinning sheep's wool, preparing her wooden loom for weaving, or working at her loom, just as her mother and older sisters did before her.

Today, Bugeja continues to make traditional rugs, bedding, and Malta's national costume, and she has also diversified by creating homewares such as curtains, lampshades, and wall hangings. In addition, she's skilled in macramé (textiles made by a series of knots) and kumihimo (rope made by interlacing fibers).

## Casting Bells in Slovakia

Typically, bell founding—the casting of bells for clocks, churches, and public buildings—is a craft passed from father to son. Robert Sliz, having no bellfounder in his family, decided to teach himself.

Sliz's grandfather maintained the bells in his local municipality, and Sliz's love of bells grew from seeing a church belfry when he was just 12 years old. At age 15, he set about making his first bell. His father helped him build a small workshop where he set about



A bell cast by Slovakian bellfounder Robert Sliz, who uses medieval techniques to make each bell—a process that takes months.

making molds as his medieval ancestors once had, from a mixture of clay and other natural materials such as straw and horse manure. It took him three years of experimenting with the mixture to ensure that the molds wouldn't crack.

Since then, he's studied with a master bellfounder in Spain. Now, he continues to use only medieval techniques to cast new bells (weighing up to 1,540 pounds) and to restore and repair historic bells. Using these centuries-old techniques, he takes months to create a bell.

## Carving 'Lace' in Belgium

Wood and lace couldn't be more different: Wood being hard and solid, and lace being soft and delicate. Yet Belgian woodcarver Julien Feller successfully carves wood into "lace."

The young artisan is inspired by past artists, particularly 17th-century woodcarver Grinling Gibbons, who stretched the imagination of how wood could be carved by making intricate, wafer-thin woodcuts. Gibbons's carving of a lace cravat epitomizes his approach, and many of Feller's works mirror that.

Besides woodcarvers, Feller is inspired by Italian Renaissance artists, and he endeavors to apply their disciplined approach to his own work.

Naturally, he's also inspired by contemporary lacemakers. His 2018 masterpiece is based on Brussels lace, but recent works include a fantastical piece of lacework embellished with gold and silver leaf.

Crafts like these connect us to our heritage. Many traditional crafts have survived for centuries because they were once vital to our ancestors' survival. Artisans were valued; they made everything by hand, from clothes to bedding to furniture and houses. Mechanization has largely converted crafts from utility products to luxury items. Heritage crafts can continue only because of our guardianship.

An online craft guide is, of course, a poor second to an in-person workshop visit, but it's often a lifeline for lone or small artisans whose rich offerings we might never otherwise happen upon.

Discover more European artisans in the Homo Faber Guide by visiting [HomoFaber.com](http://HomoFaber.com)

## LITERATURE

# Diminished Joys

Encyclopedias, anthologies, and a barking dog (me)

*Continued from Page 1*

If I wish to find a quote about encyclopedias, I enter the word and up pops a boatload of citations.

Surely, most of us would consider our electronic connection to this massive library of information an enormous gift. We can search for whatever we want—the poetry of Rupert Brooke, the causes of the American Civil War, the best way to cook a quiche Lorraine—and within seconds our quest is over.

But are we missing something?

## Explorations

As I write these words, at my elbow are sitting "The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia," published in 1983, and two anthologies, "A Treasury of the Familiar" and "Treasures of Love & Inspiration." The first volume clocks in at 943 pages; the anthologies are slightly slimmer. Stacked one on top of the other, they stand over five inches tall. As I contemplate this tiny mountain of print, the line from a Mark Twain novel comes to mind: "There's gold in them thar hills."

About three months ago or so, I purchased the Columbia volume from the small used bookstore in my public library. This cut-and-dried encyclopedia may not bring the pleasures of the World Book of my youth, but it's still magical to open the book to any page and find a squadron of familiar and unfamiliar topics.

For example, I just now randomly opened the book to a page headed "Foster, Stephen Collins." This 19th-century songwriter was familiar to me as the creator of "Oh! Susanna" and "Camptown Races," and I know where Fort Knox and Fort Worth are. But I'd never heard of the Italian writer Ugo Foscolo or the American composer Lukas Foss. I was also surprised to find how so many American cities were named after forts.

Had I simply entered "Stephen Foster" into my computer, that predetermined search would have caused me to miss these adventures.

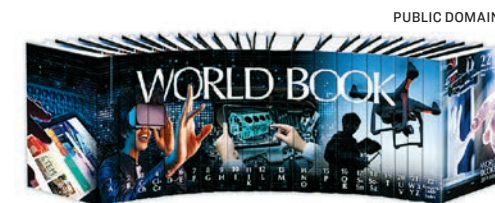
## A Collection of Gemstones

In my home library, much diminished over the last 15 years by various moves from one apartment or house to another, are several anthologies. One particularly treasured compilation is "A Treasury of the Familiar," poems and prose excerpts originally assembled and edited by Ralph L. Woods. My old, worn 1945 copy of the book bears this penned inscription in the front: "Randy has enjoyed browsing thru this from time to time and we thought you might too. Love, Ellen."

Well, I've enjoyed browsing through it too. Many of the selections included in these pages truly are familiar: Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," passages from Scripture, and Scott's "Lochinvar." Reading these and the other authors Woods assembles is like attending a reunion with old friends.

Were I to be banished to some island, "A Treasury of the Familiar" is one book I'd definitely want to pack in my bag.

In his Foreword to "Treasury," author and mid-20th century media personality John Kiernan explains how Woods, an inveterate reader from childhood, filled scrapbook after scrapbook with excerpts from literature he loved and then organized those pieces into his book. Kiernan ends his remarks with praise that always



Today, World Book offers the only new hard copy encyclopedia still available to buyers.



brings me a smile: "A final warning. When not in use, this volume should be kept in a cool dry place, well away from draperies, loose papers, and other inflammable material. It is apparent that the contents are an exciting mixture, possibly explosive."

## Beauties More Rare

"Treasures of Love & Inspiration," the anthology compiled by Marjorie Barrows over 70 years ago, offers fewer familiar passages and authors, which makes it equally interesting and valuable in its own right. Works by Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and Edna St. Vincent Millay all appear here, but also taking a bow are writers unknown to most of us, making this book a gold mine of inspirational ideas for the would-be songwriter or poet. Here are works we might discover online only by the accidents of chance and circumstance, or for that matter, might not find at all.

An example is a paragraph taken from Mary Beth Jorgensen's brief essay "American Hero" about the nameless soldier buried in Arlington Cemetery who is "known but to God":

"He is a symbol of heroic qualities, of the vision of Washington, of the humanity of Lincoln, of the courage of MacArthur, of the faith of Rickenbacker, of the sacrifice of Kelly. He is, moreover, a symbol of the common man who dies daily in order that freedom may not perish from the earth."

Then there's the beauty of this short poem, "Symbol," by David Morton:

My faith is all a doubtful thing,  
Wove on a doubtful loom,—  
Until there comes, each showery spring,  
A cherry tree in bloom;  
And Christ who died upon a tree  
That death had stricken bare,  
Comes beautifully back to me,  
In blossoms, everywhere.

The Jorgensen piece is nowhere online, at least that I can detect, and though Morton's poem appears on several sites, I doubt I would have ever stumbled across it outside of the Barrows collection.

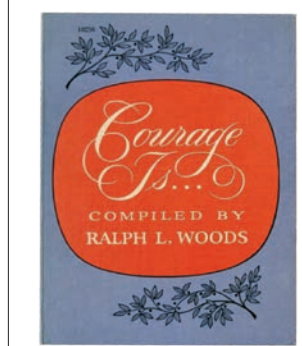
## Fact Checks

In addition to such adventures in browsing, these collections, particularly the encyclopedias, provided readers another service often missing in online references: accuracy. The men and women who wrote articles for encyclopedias were experts in their fields, and their work was peer-reviewed for accuracy.

Moreover, the editors of such reference works were interested in appealing to a broad audience. That desire surely reduced any inclination to taint the material with one's political beliefs.

On the other hand, when we look up information online, we must check and

**Encyclopedias provided readers another service often missing in online references: accuracy.**



Reading authors that Ralph L. Woods assembled is like attending a reunion with old friends.

The last set of Encyclopaedia Britannica to be printed was in 2010.



double-check much of what we find for accuracy. An example: Whenever I seek out a quotation for an article, I have learned to verify its authenticity. All too often I find the quote falsely constructed or attributed to the wrong author.

## A Fond Farewell

Today, World Book offers the only new hard copy encyclopedia still available to buyers. Online reviews of the 2020 edition are overwhelmingly positive, tempting me to reach for my wallet and order a set for some of my grandchildren. We'll see.

Nearly a decade ago, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which had existed in print for 244 years, went to a totally digital format. Britannica's website offers lots of articles and videos, but it left me a little cold. Too many memories, I guess, of shuffling pages and finding surprises.

Though I lament the passing of the encyclopedia in print form and the demise of certain anthologies I consider valuable, I get it. The price for the 2022 World Book Encyclopedia is \$999. Books like "A Treasury of the Familiar" are perhaps out-of-fashion these days, with their emphasis on virtue and the beauty of language.

So, I understand. Technology and market forces come into play, and we change the way we do things. That word "change," by the way, is derived from the Latin "cambiare," meaning to exchange or barter, and in this case we have exchanged the old for the new.

As the old Arabic saying goes of change, "The dogs may bark, but the caravan moves on."

Woof! Woof!

OK. I'm done barking.

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

Have we lost the pleasures of sifting through knowledge in print?

## FILMS

## Top 10 Guy-Friendly Romantic Comedies

ANTONODIAZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

## MICHAEL CLARK

Frequently derided by many critics and “serious” movie fans, the “romantic comedy” subgenre has, is, and will forever be a cash cow for the studios. They’re relatively inexpensive to produce and are easy to recycle. The plotlines vary little, and all too often one production is indistinguishable from the next.

It wouldn’t be going out on a limb to state that the majority of people who love rom-coms are adult females and that most men view them unwillingly or by default. Rarely will you find men gathering in packs asking the question “So what do you think, dudes, will it be ‘You’ve Got Mail’ or ‘Love Actually’ tonight?”

With February dedicated to romance, the chances of married men (or those currently in romantic relationships with a lady) watching a rom-com is high, but it doesn’t have to be painful. There are a few of these flicks that are not only tolerable for guy consumption, but some are also downright enjoyable.

Presented in chronological order by release date, here are a couple handfuls of old and older titles that will likely please and tickle both you and yours.

**‘City Lights’ (1931)**

For a good long stretch, Charlie Chaplin was not only the world’s most popular performer, but he was also the movie industry’s most lucrative filmmaker. Written, directed, produced, scored by, edited, and starring Chaplin (as his iconic “Tramp” character), “City Lights” is considered by most to be his creative high-water mark. Taking over an unheard-of-at-the-time 21 months to shoot, it is Chaplin’s most moving and heartfelt work and perfectly encapsulates the notion that love is indeed blind.

**‘It Happened One Night’ (1934)**

The first of only three movies (“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and “The Silence of the Lambs” being the others) to win all “Big 5” Oscars (Picture, Director, Screenplay, Actor, Actress), Frank Capra’s brilliant and seminal screwball comedy is nearly perfect. Clark Gable plays Peter, an unemployed reporter who crosses paths with the headstrong heiress Ellie (Claudette Colbert), and the blueprint for every other “across the tracks” love story that followed was established.

**‘The Philadelphia Story’ (1940)**

After a string of flops, Katharine Hepburn bought the film rights to the play of the same name by Philip Barry and it proved to be her professional salvation. Tracy Lord (Hepburn) has a problem that many women would envy. Divorced from the suave Dexter (Cary Grant), she soon becomes the strong obsession of writer “Mike” (James Stewart) while engaged to rebound beau George (John Howard). With a complicated plot by 1940s standards, it has aged incredibly well.

**‘Roman Holiday’ (1953)**

Winning her only Oscar for her performance, Audrey Hepburn lights up the screen as Ann (and Anya), the princess of an unnamed European country who, tired of her royal duties during a visit to Rome, decides to explore the city on her own. She soon crosses paths with Joe (Gregory Peck), an opportunistic American journalist who initially tries to get a “scoop” on her, which backfires. After her handlers attempt to rein her in, Joe saves her and



Looking for a movie that will please both of you on date night?

himself by coming to her rescue.

**‘Groundhog Day’ (1993)**

So well-received and influential that its title became buzz words to describe other films, “Groundhog Day” doesn’t start out as a romance. Bill Murray stars as Phil, a TV weatherman who dreads covering the annual Pennsylvania festival, a situation that only worsens when he finds himself in a time loop repeating Feb. 2. Eventually using it to his advantage, Phil ends up becoming a better man while winning the heart of his amiable but leery producer (Andie MacDowell).

**‘Kate & Leopold’ (2001)**

This sleeper gem from director James Mangold stars Meg Ryan and Hugh Jackman as the oil and water time characters. She’s in advertising, and he’s a century-old nobleman brought to the present day by his scientist great-great-grandson Stuart (Liev Schreiber) who is also Kate’s ex-boyfriend. Mangold and co-writer Steven Rogers often get close to farce yet toss in copious amounts of wrinkles and twists, making it as much of a thriller as it is a surprisingly fresh and original comedy.

**‘Hitch’ (2005)**

Will Smith stars as the title character, a New York-based “date doctor” who is hired by romantically challenged men wanting to snare the women of their dreams. Hitch’s newest client is Albert (Kevin James), an accountant whose firm represents heiress and socialite Allegra (Amber Valetta), a woman far more down-to-earth than expected. When not working with Albert, Hitch starts falling for Sara (Eva Mendes), a tenacious and hard-bitten tabloid reporter looking for anything but love.

**‘Wedding Crashers’ (2005)**

This rollicking production starts out as a raunchy “guy-bonding” affair where two divorce lawyers (Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson) crash the weddings of wealthy Washingtonians, not for free food and drink

**‘These flicks are not only tolerable for guy consumption, but some are also downright enjoyable.’**



Will Smith stars as Hitch, a date doctor.

but to seduce tipsy female guests. Their latest event is being hosted by presidential cabinet member William Cleary (Christopher Walken), whose two still unmarried daughters (Isla Fisher and Rachel McAdams) become the men’s next marks. The tables get turned while gender roles are reversed and nothing goes nearly as planned.

**‘Definitely, Maybe’ (2008)**

After a string of misfires and supporting roles in mostly forgettable movies, future “Deadpool” star Ryan Reynolds finally pay dirt with this low-budget, unconventional, offbeat romance that doubles as an excellent father-daughter outing. In an effort to lessen the blow of his impending divorce, ad agent Will (Reynolds) recounts his romantic history with his preteen girl Maya (Abigail Breslin). It’s also a mystery fronting as a comedy: Maya’s mother could be one of three characters portrayed by Elizabeth Banks, Isla Fisher, and Rachel Weisz.

**‘Crazy, Stupid, Love’ (2011)**

Echoing “Hitch,” “Crazy, Stupid, Love” stars Steve Carell as Cal, who, when the movie opens, is being asked for a divorce by his wife, Emily (Julianne Moore). Flummoxed yet not totally defeated, Cal starts hitting the singles bars but continually strikes out due to a dated wardrobe, stale pickup lines, and pure fear. Seasoned lounge lizard Jacob (Ryan Gosling) takes pity on Cal and slowly turns him into a confident smooth operator. At the same time, Jacob’s proven tactics somewhat fail him during his attempt to woo the hard-to-pin-down Hannah (Emma Stone).

*Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has provided film content to over 30 print and online media outlets. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a weekly contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles. He favors dark comedy, thrillers, and documentaries.*

UNIVERSAL PICTURES



Ryan Reynolds before he became famous as Deadpool.

MIRAMAX FILMS



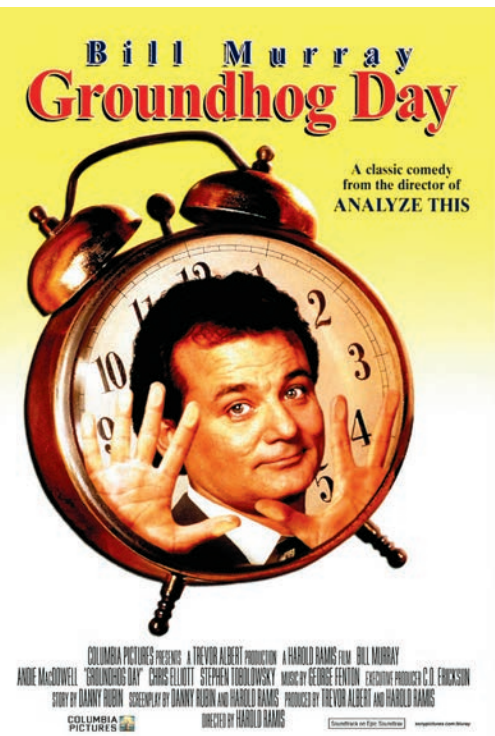
The film is as much a thriller as a romantic comedy.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



“It Happened One Night” is one of three movies to have won the “Big 5” Oscars.

COLUMBIA PICTURES



Phil Connors (Bill Murray) goes from being self-centered to admirable on Feb. 2.



An unmasked Spider-Man (Tom Holland) doing the now-classic superhero landing, in “Spider-Man: No Way Home.”



**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.

## Marvel’s Multiverse Reveals Cosmic Secrets

## MARK JACKSON

“Spider-Man: No Way Home” starts off where the previous Spider-Man movie, “Spider-Man: Far From Home,” concluded: The baddie, Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal) had broadcast Spider-Man’s secret identity to the world, thereby putting Peter Parker’s buddy Ned, his girlfriend MJ, and his Aunt May in danger.

Let’s cut to the chase: Is this new “Spider-Man: No Way Home” any good? Like all sequels (or in this case, since it’s part of a massive nine-quel), it suffers from the usual fact that one can only really experience the world-building once; it’s only completely pristine, new, exciting, and mind-blowing—one time. The rest is rehash. And, as I stated of the recent release “Ghostbusters: Afterlife” in my review, “Spider-Man: No Way Home” is a perfectly good rehash.

## Spoiler Alert

Warning: I’m going to talk about what would normally be considered a major spoiler, because I think not mentioning the main hook of this movie is to simultaneously neglect giving audiences incentive to go see it. However, anyone wanting to see the movie with a completely clean slate, anticipating getting hit out of nowhere, in the face, with surprises, is not going to be happy hearing some of these things. So proceed with caution.

So this time around, Peter “Spider-Man” Parker (Tom Holland) has just had his secret identity revealed by the perennially shouting online conspiracy theorist J. Jonah Jameson (J.K. Simmons). It should be noted that Simmons is not actually reprising his character from “Spider-Man” (2002) and its sequels.

This results in a media firestorm: helicopters hovering outside Peter’s apartment, getting stoned (by actual stones), and his high school principal (J.B. Smoove) and front office staff becoming cartoonishly star-struck and sycophantic with their new celebrity student.

The worst part of this unwanted megafame, though, is that the press-instigated (and continually fueled) controversy regarding ethical and legal issues surrounding Peter’s actions as Spider-Man gets him and his friends—girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) and friend Ned (Jacob Batalon)—rejected from all the I.N.T.S.T.s of higher learning they’ve applied to.

The one they all really wanted to get into (so they could remain united as friends), M.I.T., even specified that the rejection was in regard to all the Spider-Man brouhaha. Which is nonsense—M.I.T. would welcome Spider-Man in a heartbeat on full scholarship (in exchange for allowing its professors to lab-test his spider abilities).

Who do they think they’re fooling?

## Strange Happenings

Peter goes to see Dr. Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), that caped, arm-waving magician who opens portals to other dimensions and time-spaces by using a sort of large (but invisible) sparks-generating can opener. Peter wants to know if it’s possible to go back in time and get a do-over—that is, hide his identity from the world again. Dr. Strange declares that that particular request is not possible, but what he can do is make everyone alive forget that Peter Parker is Spider-Man. Peter thinks that’s perfect.

The spell-casting commences, and then suddenly Peter realizes this memory erasure will include all his close friends and relatives. His realization kicks off a few stop-start situations: Peter keeps remembering more people he’d rather not have included on that list, which ends up distracting and annoying Dr. Strange so much that the spell is eventually rendered useless.

And not only that, but an altogether different outcome ensues, whereby the spell-gone-wrong rends the very fabric of time-space. And you know what that means—spoiler-alert!—Spider-Men from parallel universes (old “Spider-Man” movies) may show up in this movie.

Where would they come from? Well, from the 2002-2007 “Spider-Man” trilogy directed by Sam Raimi, and the 2012-2014 “The Amazing Spider-Man” (two-parts) directed by Marc Webb, naturally. (I’m trying to talk about this without talking about it but you know what I’m talking about and that’s all I’m going to say about it.)

The result of this is that those separate realities deliver to the time-space of “No Way Home” all the dastardly Spider-Man villains of those other films. That would include: Doc Ock (Alfred Molina, “Spider-Man 2”), Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe, “Spider-Man”), Lizard (Rhys Ifans, “The Amazing Spider-Man”), Sandman (Thomas Haden Church, “Spider-Man 3”), and Electro (Jamie Foxx, “The Amazing Spider-Man 2”)—a veritable cornucopia of Spider-Man evil villains.

Since that’s probably too many Spidey villains for a singular Spidey to deal with, they arrive with (OK, I lied) the Spider-Men of their particular dimension in tow—that would be Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield. There, I said it. Their interaction is far and away the best part of the movie: the bickering, the shoptalk, the gear comparisons, the fulfilled longing for brothers, the warm sense of tribal belonging after years of feeling like solitary freaks, and a brief one-on-one Spi-



(L-R) Peter Parker (Tom Holland), MJ (Zendaya), and Ned (Jacob Batalon).



Peter Parker (Tom Holland) watches as Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) opens a portal to another dimension.

**‘No Way Home’ is a live action version of the two-dimensional ‘Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.’**

**‘Spider-Man: No Way Home’**

**Director:** Jon Watts

**Starring:** Tom Holland, Zendaya, Benedict Cumberbatch, Jacob Batalon, Jon Favreau

**Running Length:** 2 hours, 28 minutes

**MPAA Rating:** PG-13

**Release Date:** Dec. 17, 2021

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

dey skirmish where the more experienced Spidey pulls a particularly fabulous Spider-Man move that a different Spidey didn’t see coming—never even thought of—and is in immediate admiration of.

So in a nutshell, what “No Way Home” is, is a live-action version of something the same studio already did three years ago, with the two-dimensional “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.” Does live action add anything? Not really. Except for maybe the part where Tobey Maguire’s Spidey is asked what he’s been up to lately, and he answers, “Trying to do better.” Maguire was all but blacklisted in showbiz a few years ago after having been outed as a cold-blooded, vengeful Hollywood card shark in the film “Molly’s Game” (by actor Michael Cera doing a dead-on Maguire impression), and labeled a bad person. One imagines that atonement is taking place.

But for me personally, the film is interesting in that it is through cartoons and cartoon movies that some of the most vast and heretofore obscured secrets of the cosmos are being revealed. Spider-verses and Multiverses indeed. What if the cosmos was like a massive Russian doll, with each dimension containing a smaller, exact replica of itself within it? And that smaller dimension contained a smaller one? And on down to infinity? And on the vast end, there’s a Spider-Man so large that Earth would appear as a tiny blue speck underneath the red Spider-boot? And a Spider-Man so tiny that he operates in the realm of quarks and neutrinos? And they all do the same stuff? And if the tiny one cast some web it would take a nanosecond, but if that giant one did it, it would take ten million years? I enjoy that these cartoon movies have gigantic philosophical concepts hiding in plain sight.



Villains return: (L-R) Electro (Jamie Foxx), Sandman (Thomas Haden Church), and Lizard (Rhys Ifans).



Spider-Man (Tom Holland) running from a car-sliding Doc Ock (Alfred Molina).



Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) ejects Spider-Man’s (Tom Holland) soul from his physical body.



Spider-Man (Tom Holland) base-jumps without a parachute to get his girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) out of danger.

## FINE ART

# Ivan Choultse: Painter of Light and Snow

YVONNE MARCOTTE

Landscape artists paint the physical beauty around them. Some who live in northern regions have adapted to harsher environments, and this is the setting that suits them to do their art.

Russian artists reveal the wonders of nature in every season, especially winter. Although early Russian landscape painters imitated Italian painters, they soon explored and refined their own style. Landscape artists such as Alexei Venetsianov (1780–1847), Nikifor Krylov (1802–31), and Grigory Soroka (1823–64) paved the way for a talented landscape artist who excelled in painting snowscapes: Ivan Fedorovich Choultse (1874–1939).

Choultse, whose family lived in St. Petersburg for several generations, was educated as an engineer. He worked on projects in Finland for several years and found himself fascinated by how electricity generated light.

Yet he was drawn to painting. Around the age of 30, Choultse took classes with landscape great Konstantin Yakovlevich Kryzhitsky, a member of the prestigious Imperial Academy of Arts that was founded by Peter the Great. In 1910, Kryzhitsky took his student to paint in the Arctic island of Spitsbergen. He trained and mentored Choultse in traditional academic principles of painting.

The Dutch popularized landscape (“landschap”) painting, which was officially recognized as a minor genre at the end of the 15th century. In the 17th century, Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin perfected a compositional structure for landscape painting, called “coulisse.” Natural objects, such as trees, frame the painting like a stage curtain. The coulisse serves as a foil to the lighter, distant background. Choultse used this compositional technique in his paintings.

## Landscape artists from northern climes remind us of the beauty of winter.

### Political Upheaval

His landscapes were in demand and appreciated by the Fabergé family and Romanov royals. But soon, political turmoil would change his career forever—the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. His art was not in the social realism style expected by the new political leaders, and he was faced with a hard decision.

Artists were recruited to sell the Bolsheviks’ propaganda to the Russian people. While this was carried out mostly by poster artists, all artists were expected to conform to the new government’s thinking. Choultse did not accept this and left in 1919 to work in France. He returned in 1921 as he held out hope that he could do his art under the new regime as part of the Society of Individualist Artists.

He soon emigrated for good. For many years, Choultse painted in the mountains of France and Switzerland, which reminded him of his homeland. He completed many works in the Engadine region of Switzerland. His paintings were exhibited in 1923 at the Paris Spring Salon and quickly sold out.

### Light, Shadow, and Snow

The most common environmental factor in painting landscapes in the north is snow, which allows artists an opportunity to study the unique light, colors, and shadows that only snow cover provides. Painting snow presents many challenges, especially the intense light reflected by the snow, which makes the sunlit areas too bright and the shadows not able to be seen.

Artists painting in the winter have discovered that depending on snow have different colors depending on the time of day. They could be gray at one time and blue at another. Depending on the sun’s



PUBLIC DOMAIN



“Silver Frost,” circa 1923, by Ivan Choultse.



“Wheatfields,” circa 1921, by Ivan Choultse.



“Winter Morning in Engadine” by Ivan Choultse.



“Winter Morning,” circa 1923, by Ivan Choultse.

position, the palette could be cooler or warmer. Amazingly, while most landscapes present the ground as darker than the sky, a snowy landscape could actually be lighter than the sky above.

Choultse painted many scenes where the ocean or lakeshores and waterways played off well with the snow-filled terrain. His winter sunsets are drenched in warm oranges, yellows, and deep reds, while his morning settings show cool pinks.

He didn’t paint only snowscapes. Choultse’s painting “Wheatfields” shows the influence of John Constable, landscape painter of the English countryside, in the careful depiction of billowing clouds and composition of coulisse.

His landscape painting of Engadine, Switzerland, presents an early morning scene with bright blue shadows with dashes of pink and spikes of frost that glisten on the trees. Water flows in the center of a small stream, which could indicate a heavy snow at the beginning of winter or a late ice storm that covers trees with sparkling ice crystals. The shimmering trees seem to bring a message of hope that things will warm up soon.

His painting of bare trees near a pond appears to be set in the early morning, with its blue shadows and warm tones on the trees. Compositionally, the trees present a vertical balance to the horizontal shore of the pond that is reflecting the trees. Bumps and mounds of snow along the shore, with bare bushes peeking out from under snow, show higher snow areas with pink shadows. The solid blue sky in the background is merely the canvas for the lighter scene below. A layer of trees on the horizon line forms a line that separates earth from sky.

### Meditation on Nature

Landscape artists from northern climes remind us of the beauty of winter. Their art allows us to enjoy our own memories: snow angels, snow sculptures, or cross-country skiing in the cold, quiet air. They give us nature in the coldest season.

G. Blair Laing wrote about Choultse in “Memoirs of an Art Dealer”: “He painted spectacular snow scenes in which the light seems to come from behind the canvas and glow.”

Choultse’s work is shown in many museums, including Montreal’s Museum of Fine Arts, the St. Petersburg Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic, and the Museum of Art in Indianapolis.

“Winter Sunset,” circa 1920, by Ivan Choultse.

## MUSIC

# Musician Nadia Boulanger and Her Boulangerie

KENNETH LAFAVE

To be yourself, limit yourself.  
To limit yourself, be yourself.

This saying is a “double dicho,” an aphorism that says the same thing in two directions. (The concept was introduced to American culture by Ernest Hemingway in “The Old Man and The Sea.”) This particular double dicho could have served as the watchword of a teacher whose influence helped make possible a raft of 20th-century composers with styles so wildly different from each other that it challenges credulity: Aaron Copland, composer of “Appalachian Spring”; Elliott Carter, spearhead of the American avant-garde; Argentine tango composer Astor Piazzolla; popular song composers Burt Bacharach and Michel Legrand; minimalist icon Philip Glass; jazz musician (and Michael Jackson’s producer) Quincy Jones, and literally hundreds of others.

The teacher was Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), a Parisian musician whose family was steeped in music. Known simply as “Mademoiselle” to her legions of students, Boulanger brought focus to generations of composers, including—thanks to France’s establishment of an American conservatory at Fontainebleau in 1921—dozens of Americans.

### A Family of Students

While the list of her famous students is long (it also includes American symphonists Roy Harris and David Diamond, France’s Jean Françaix, and Switzerland’s Darius Milhaud), the roll of her obscure students is larger by orders of magnitude. American composer Ned Rorem (who was not a Boulanger student) long ago said, “Myth credits every American town with two things: a 10-cent store and a Boulanger student.” Ten cents have become a dollar, and the Boulanger influence in America continues through such students-of-her-students as Leonard Bernstein and Dave Brubeck, and their students. Today, Boulanger doubtlessly has musical great-great, and even great-great-great-grandchildren across the USA.

Prior to Boulanger, there is no record of a woman composition teacher of any significance. What prompted the woman born Juliette Nadia Boulanger (she dropped the first name) to become one?

### Sisters in Music

Her father was Ernest Boulanger (1815–1900), composer and professor of voice at the Paris Conservatoire. He came round to the business of fathering very late in life, but when he did the results were spectacular, producing two daughters: Nadia (b. 1887) and Lili (b. 1893), both of whom achieved musical fame beyond his. Both girls aspired to be composers, but it was the frail Lili who won the coveted Prix de Rome, the first woman to do so.

Nadia’s projects, including an unproduced opera, came to naught, and when Lili died of intestinal tuberculosis at age 24, Nadia said goodbye to composition, deciding it was her fate to birth the talents of others.

It is necessary to stop and note Lili’s extraordinary talent, which for reasons that escape common sense has yet to be fully recognized. One might think that feminism’s complaint would bring her into the mainstream of composers. It hasn’t, and one can only speculate that the image of sickly Lili dying young has overshadowed her works. Through them runs the dual themes of outrage at her condition and the quest for spiritual beauty. Look up her setting of Psalm 129 for chorus and orchestra and the orchestral version of “D’un Soir Triste” for powerful complaints against fate, coupled with the love of creation.

Nadia Boulanger denied that her sister’s death was the reason for her decision to quit composing. Even so, it surely served as catalyst. Nadia had already begun to doubt her own gifts when little sister won the Prix de Rome, a prize she had failed to win years prior.

With father and sister both gone—and with them their music—Nadia looked to the future and saw the potential in young people, especially Americans. Her very first American student was a young man from New York, Aaron Copland. Copland was reluctant to study with Boulanger because her teaching focus was on harmony.

### The Centrality of Harmony

“I wasn’t interested in harmony. I thought, ‘I’ve had three years of harmony, I’m done with it,’” Copland said in a YouTube video called “Mademoiselle: A Portrait of Nadia Boulanger.” But the “warm way” in which Boulanger taught the subject made harmony “seem the very basis of what music is all about.”

Word got out about this amazing teacher, and soon other composers from across the pond were clamoring to study with her. With the inevitability of all good humor, Copland called this new American school of composition the “Boulangerie.”

In addition to harmony, Boulanger trained her students in counterpoint, fugue, and score reading. One couldn’t get away with writing just anything. Cultivating an individual voice was not a matter of ignoring tradition, but of mastering (and then going beyond) its legacy. Quincy Jones summed up what he learned from Boulanger in a YouTube video called “Quincy Jones and Nadia Boulanger”:

“You don’t have freedom in music until you have restrictions. When you restrict yourself and establish the periphery then you have freedom. If you can play anything you want, you play nothing.”

### Become Who You Are

This strict limitation through mastery of



French music teacher and composer Nadia Boulanger in 1925.

## In addition to harmony, Boulanger trained her students in counterpoint, fugue, and score reading.

technique was coupled with an insistence of finding the student’s unique voice. The most famous story concerning this comes from Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992) in his autobiography. The young tango musician had spent a decade composing scores in emulation of Stravinsky, Bartok, Hindemith, and other 20th-century masters, when he finally went to Boulanger for help:

“She (Nadia Boulanger) kept asking: ‘You say that you are not pianist. What instrument do you play, then?’ And I didn’t want to tell her that I was a bandoneón player, because I thought, ‘Then she will throw me from the fourth floor.’ Finally, I confessed and she asked me to play some bars of a tango of my own. She suddenly opened her eyes, took my hand and told me: ‘You idiot, that’s Piazzolla!’ And I took all the music I composed, ten years of my life, and sent it to hell in two seconds.”

Some of Nadia Boulanger’s compositions are available online. They reveal a savvy musician with a mastery of technique, but without much to say. She might have gone on to be a serviceable composer with a respectable canon. She chose instead to teach, and to become arguably the single most influential person in 20th-century classical music.

*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).*



Lili Boulanger. U.S. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Quincy Jones in 1989.



Argentine composer and musician Astor Piazzolla, in March 1985.

20TH CENTURY FOX



James Mason, Arlene Dahl, Pat Boone, and Peter Ronson in "Journey to the Center of the Earth."

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

# An Implausible but Delightful Old-Fashioned Adventure

IAN KANE

This week, I'm continuing my mission to revisit family-friendly adventure films from a bygone era—when cinema was much more wholesome. In these increasingly cynical times, big-budget blockbuster movies, which are purportedly targeted for family viewing, are apparently being produced by sadistic technophiles. Hence, in the absence of good storytelling, they rely on flashy CGI and lots of wanton violence that is definitely unsuitable for kids.

Back when Walt Disney made some excellent family-friendly films, the company inadvertently struck cinematic gold with its 1955 production of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." In 1959, Twentieth Century Fox adapted yet another literary work of French adventure novelist Jules Verne and filmed "Journey to the Center of the Earth," directed by Henry Levin.

**Seeking Knowledge**

The story begins in the beautiful capital city of Scotland, Edinburgh, in the year 1880.

The highly esteemed professor Sir Oliver S. Lindenbrook (James Mason) is proudly receiving his knighthood. Right after the celebration, his young protégé Alec McEwan (Pat Boone) approaches him with a curious object—a strange volcanic rock that's a little too heavy for its size.

The two men quickly run some tests on the solidified lava and make a rather (ahem) explosive discovery within it: a 300-year-old tool—a plumb bob—incribed with cryptic messages that are just begging to be deciphered. After some hilariously slapdash analyses, they quickly deduce that the rock was originally found near a volcano in Iceland.

They also learn that an Icelandic adventurer-scientist named Arne Saknussemm disappeared after he'd embarked on a journey to the center of the Earth. Since the inscriptions were apparently scribed by Saknussemm and entail encouraging news of his various subterranean discoveries, Lindenbrook becomes obsessed with taking his own expedition to Earth's core, with his loyal assistant McEwan.

**It's the perfect type of movie to enjoy on a lazy weekend afternoon.**

**'Journey to the Center of the Earth'**

**Director:** Henry Levin

**Starring:** James Mason, Pat Boone, Arlene Dahl

**Not Rated**

**Running Time:** 2 hours, 9 minutes

**Release Date:** Dec. 16, 1959

★★★★☆

When Lindenbrook and McEwan reach Iceland, they soon experience every intrepid scientist's ultimate fear: that other scientists are competing with them. Racing to get to the center of the Earth first are Swedish professor Peter Göteborg (Ivan Triesault) and Count Saknussemm (Thayer David). And the latter's last name isn't merely a coincidence; he's a descendant of the original scientist who attempted the epic trek 300 years before and, hence, believes he's naturally entitled to make the monumental discovery before anyone else.

After some devious happenings, the Swede's beautiful wife Carla (Arlene Dahl) joins Lindenbrook, McEwan, and a towering local Iclander named Hans Belker (Peter Ronson). Oh, and in typical Disney fashion, Hans has a cute little pet duck, Gertrude, which also gets to accompany the band of adventurers on their quest.

**Pseudoscience**

Right off the bat, I must say that this film is filled with all kinds of implausible pseudoscience (such as a lack of extreme temperatures and pressure near the Earth's core, as well as a curious abundance of breathable air), which is explained away in half-hearted gibberish, some of which sounds as if it were made up on the spot. But then again, this is a film based on a 19th-century literary work.

The actors' performances are fun and straightforward—perfect for this type of genre film. What I also enjoyed is that we're drawn into the storyline gradually—the whole setup to Lindenbrook's expedition isn't glossed over as is usually the case in contemporary fare. This, in turn, gives us time to get to know the characters better and more naturally.

"Journey to the Center of the Earth" is an entertaining adventurous romp that is fantastical in nature. What it lacks in plausibility, it more than makes up for in nailing the grand sense of adventure from Verne's vast imagination. It's the perfect type of movie to enjoy on a lazy weekend afternoon with one's family.

*Ian Kane is an U.S. Army veteran, author, filmmaker, and actor. He is dedicated to the development and production of innovative, thought-provoking, character-driven films and books of the highest quality. You can check out his health blog at [IanKaneHealthNut.com](http://IanKaneHealthNut.com)*

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