THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1912, by Maxfield Parrish. Oil on canvas mounted on panel; 30 inches by 24 inches.

Creating Vivid, Imaginative, and Innocent Worlds

Illustrator Maxfield Parrish, a star of his era

JEFF PERKIN

"There seem to be magic days once in a while, with some rare quality of light that hold a body spellbound."
—Maxfield Parrish

The art of Maxfield Parrish was enjoyed by millions in his lifetime, thanks to 20th-century innovations in color printing and mass distribution. Parrish became a household name as he gained widespread success for his iconic neoclassical prints, children's book illustrations, advertisements, and covers of popular periodicals, including Life and Harper's Bazaar.

At the time, prolific illustrators and commercial artists enjoyed the status of celebrities. As a result of his work's popularity, Parrish's most well-known print, "Daybreak," sold enough reproductions to have been in one out of every five American households in 1925.

*Continued on **Page 4***

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THE EPOCH TIMES

LITERATURE

Fine Print: The Books That Make Us Better

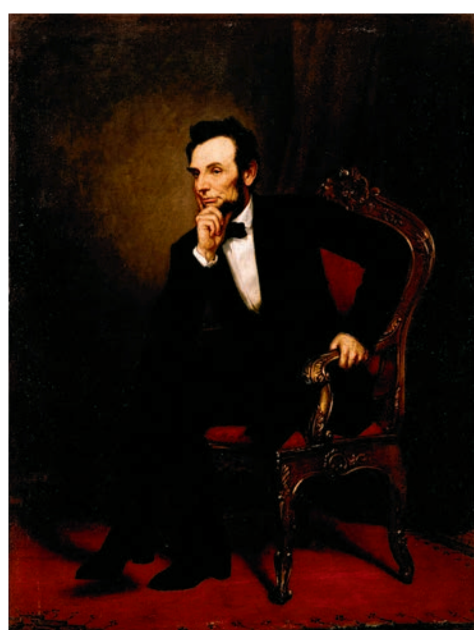
JEFF MINICK

Mentors come in many shapes, sizes, and guises. That high school football coach who pushed you through two-a-day pre-season practices in August, shouting, cajoling, and commanding until you and your buddies were puddles of perspiration, taught you toughness and perseverance. That college professor whose inexhaustible pen left a river of red ink on your essays brought you to tears in your dorm room at night, but made a writer of you. That boss in accounting who checked and rechecked your work made you miserable for months, but set you off on a successful career path.

Those of us lucky enough to have encountered such men and women often pause to remember them and count ourselves blessed.

Then there are the mentors who don't have a coach's whistle dangling from their throats or who exude the faint aroma of coffee and cigars. No—these mentors usually come wrapped as a surprise and printed on a page, speaking to us heart-to-heart on the living room sofa or in bed before we fall asleep, igniting our imaginations with words of lightning, and inspiring us in ways we never envisioned.

I'm referring, of course, to books.



"Abraham Lincoln" by George Peter Alexander Healy, 1869. Oil on canvas. White House.

The Bumpkin and His Books

Abraham Lincoln's education was as rough-and-tumble as the frontier where he grew up. His education, as he would later say, came "by littles," meaning that he received a week or a month here and there of formal schooling, all of which added up to less than a year of sitting in a classroom.

Instead, Lincoln's teachers were books, usually ones he managed to borrow from friends and neighbors. He read and reread parts of the King James Bible, committing many passages to memory. He absorbed the poetry of Shakespeare and Robert Burns, delighted in "The Arabian Nights," "Robinson Crusoe," and "Aesop's Fables," and studied a number of books on grammar and rhetoric, including such works as William Scott's "Lessons in Elocution" and Samuel Kirkham's "English Grammar."

Many of his contemporaries, North and South, and even some who knew him as president, often considered Lincoln an uneducated dolt, a country rube who lacked a basic understanding of English grammar and syntax.

They misjudged Old Abe. Because of his speeches and correspondence, which he wrote himself, Abraham Lincoln is regarded today as one of the great American writers of nonfiction prose.

And his unsung teachers were the books he devoured.

Writers

Like Lincoln, many authors have turned to books by others as their mentors. A number of American writers, for example, fell under the spell of Thomas Wolfe and his first two novels, "Look Homeward, Angel" and "Of Time and the River," in part because of their vivid descriptions, in part because the protagonist himself wanted to become a writer.

In "The Book That Changed My Life: 71 Remarkable Writers Celebrate the Books That Matter Most to Them," editors Roxanne Coady and Joy Johannessen collect stories from authors about literary works that turned their worlds upside down.

Da Chen, author of "Colors of the Mountain," grew up poor in China during the 1970s and recounts reading "The Count of Monte Cristo" and the magic it played in his life. He rented the book from a library housed in a shack in his village, which was soon burned to the ground by communist officials.

Children's author Graeme Base, best known perhaps for "Animalia," describes reading "The Lord of the Rings" when he was 13 and crying when he finished the book: "I wanted it to go on and on …because I had been utterly captivated by the romance, the fantasy, the sheer epic enormity of the thing." For the first time, he realized that a book could "sweep you away."

Abraham Lincoln's unsung teachers were the books he devoured.

Another children's author, Tomie dePaola, records that Sigrid Undset's trilogy, "Kristin Lavransdatter," which he first opened in 1957 on a snowy day in a Vermont farmhouse, is a book he has returned to again and again throughout his life, always finding something fresh in these visitations. He also writes that many other books, including some read when he was a kid, had a major impact on his development.

Guides for Improvement

Though we don't often classify self-help books as belonging to the category of classical literature, many of these have acted as wise mentors to those in difficult situations. Books about sleep and diet, exercise guides, even manuals on beautifying the home—these and other such works can steer readers in an entirely new direction as they seek to better their lives.

A good many years ago, for example, a customer in my bookshop raved about Sarah Ban Breathnach's "Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy," claiming that Breathnach's advice had changed her entire life.

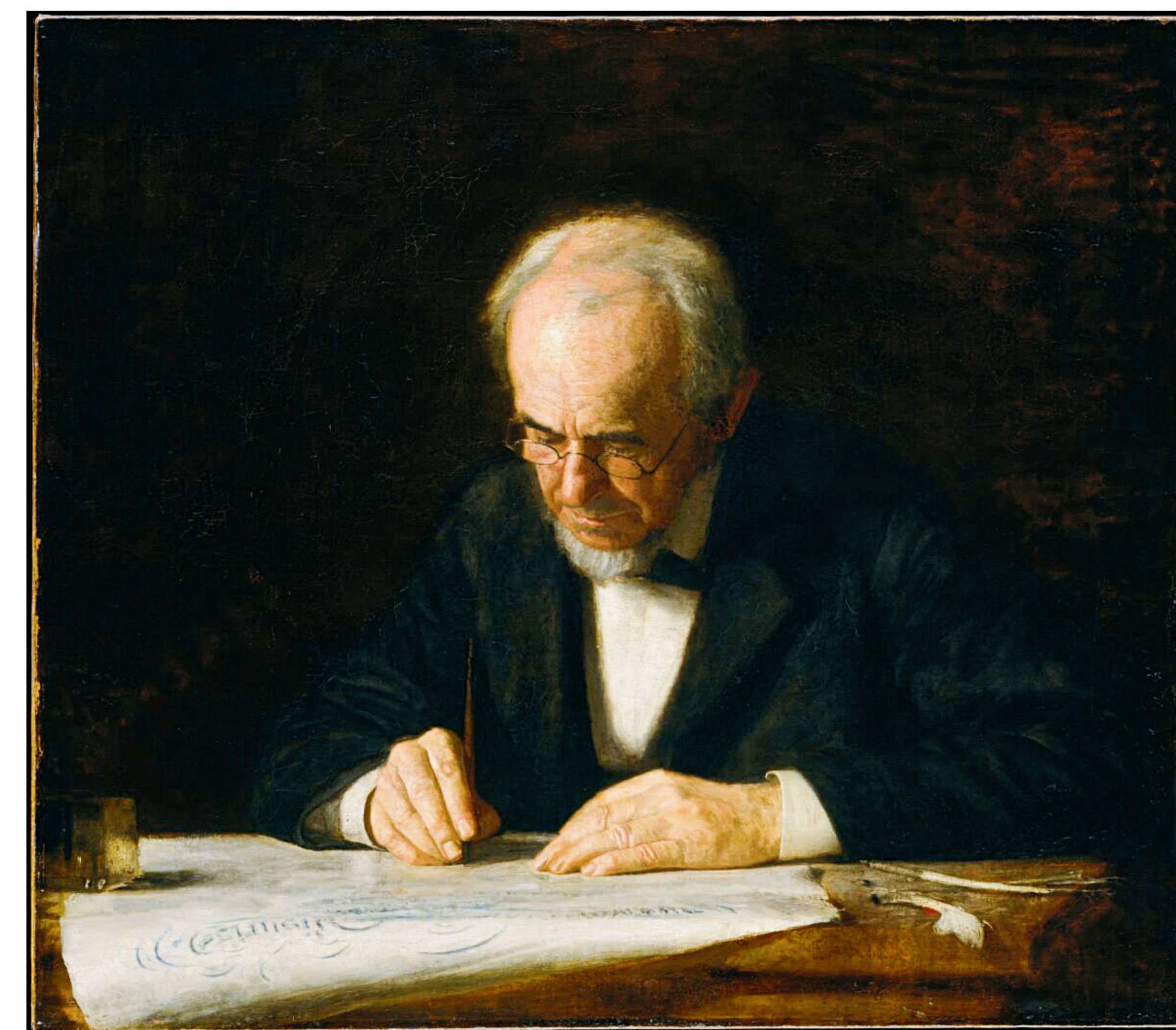
Just a couple of years ago, in a coffee shop here in town, a 20-something woman told me of the impact on her by Jordan Peterson's "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos." Though Peterson's followers are majority male, this woman, who had felt at loose ends in her career path and home life, told me that Peterson had given her a path she could follow and that she intended to do so.

A fine example of the self-help book as adviser and therapist is the Alcoholics Anonymous "Big Book," which is the heart of this organization and which has helped millions of suffering addicts to win their sobriety. Surely this thick volume deserves a gold star as one of the greatest in-print mentors of all time.

The Skin Horse explaining what love is to the Rabbit. Page 18 and 19 of "The Velveteen Rabbit," 1922, by Margery Williams.

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Reader" by Eglon van der Neer. Oil on canvas; 15 inches by 11 inches. The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



"The Writing Master," 1882, by Thomas Eakins. Oil on canvas; 30 inches by 34 1/4 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A Multitude of Mentors

Like Tomie dePaola, when I look at the books that have influenced me—and many books do so, even if it's just a gentle nudge in a certain direction—I have difficulty selecting just one as all-important. From the "Childhood of Famous Americans" I read when I was a kid to the first two paragraphs of Scott Peck's "The Road Less Traveled," from the insights about love and death I acquired from Mark Helprin's "A Soldier of the Great War" to the Bible stories I learned in Sunday school some six decades ago, these and many other books have helped shape me just as surely as did my teachers and coaches in my youth.

One final note: Whatever books have guided us to improve ourselves, whatever others may think of them, we must never be ashamed of our paper-and-ink mentors. If some bestseller by Nicholas Sparks inspired you to shift directions, proudly proclaim it as your own.

Here's just one personal example. I was an adult when I read "The Velveteen Rabbit" to my children. I'd heard of the book, but never opened it. When I got to the part where the Skin Horse explains love to the Rabbit, I choked up. "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

That was 30 years ago, or more, and I'm now loose in the joints and very shabby, and I'd probably still come close to tears reading that passage aloud. But that lesson on aging and becoming real deepened my knowledge of love.

Read, listen, learn. And if a book changes your heart for the better, or fires up your imagination regarding the future, you've found another mentor.

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 nonfiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

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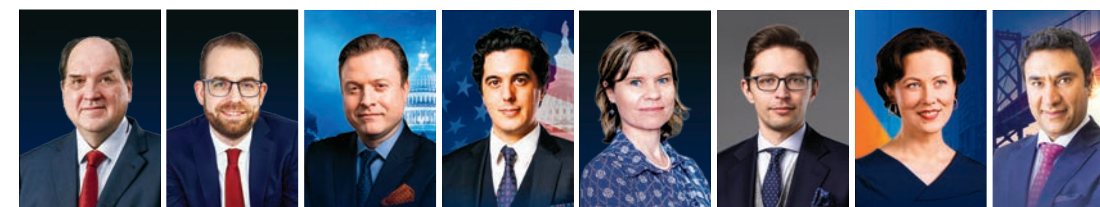

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Parrish's most well-known print, "Daybreak," sold enough reproductions to have been in one out of every five American households in 1925. "Daybreak," 1922, by Maxfield Parrish.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Creating Vivid, Imaginative, *and* Innocent Worlds

Illustrator Maxfield Parrish, a star of his era

Continued from ***Page 1***

Following this trend, "Daybreak" went on to be the most popular print of the entire 20th century. Parrish blue, a shade of cobalt blue, was named in honor of the saturated, surreal color that is a signature characteristic of many of Parrish's paintings.

The success of his artistic career enabled him to build "The Oaks" for his family—a homestead that became Parrish's personal, creative kingdom for nearly seven decades of his adult life.

Parrish produced nearly 900 works of art in his prolific career.

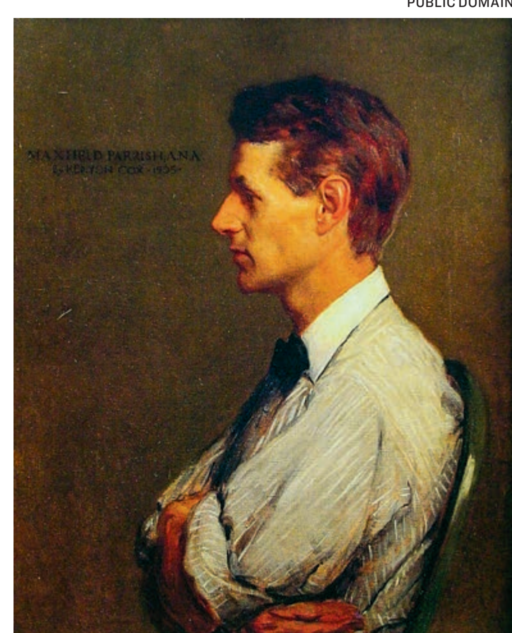
An Artistic Lineage

Maxfield Parrish was born the son of artist Stephen Parrish on July 25, 1870. At the time of Maxfield's birth, his father was already respected in Philadelphia for his etchings of local landscapes. As the son of an established artist, young Frederick (who later adopted his grandmother's maiden name, Maxfield) learned to sketch alongside his father. He was encouraged to develop his artistic talent on a lengthy family trip to Europe at age 14. There, he had the chance to view the works of the old masters in person and began his formal studies at an art school in Paris. Back in the States, Parrish studied architecture at Haverford College, followed by fine art at Pennsylvania College of the Arts.

Parrish's close relationship with his father led them to share a studio in Massachusetts after he graduated. A few years later, he followed his father to the Cornish Art Colony, located in the towns of Plainfield and Cornish in New Hampshire. Many artists, writers, and performers lived and gathered in the area.

Parrish bought land and built a small house across the river from his father on a property he named "The Oaks." Magnificent oak trees stood on the property, including some of the largest in New Hampshire at that time.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



"Maxfield Parrish," 1905, by Kenyon Cox. Oil on canvas; 30 inches by 25 inches. National Academy of Design, New York.

Having studied architecture, Parrish designed the house and built it with the help of carpenter George S. Ruggles, a nearby neighbor. The house began modestly with two bedrooms in 1898, and it expanded over the years to include 15 rooms and five bathrooms. Parrish went on to have four children with his wife, art instructor Lydia Austin. Finding it hard to focus in the main house, he built a studio, which grew to house eight more rooms, including a photographic darkroom and a well-equipped machine shop.

The 'Mechanic Who Paints'

Parrish produced nearly 900 works of art in his prolific career. From his home studio in New Hampshire, he created paintings that transported both children and adults to a mystical, neoclassical world. From "Poems of Childhood" to "The Arabian Nights," his imaginative paintings helped make works of fiction more real for readers. He created images bursting with saturated colors, contrasting areas of warm and cool to add dimension to his larger-than-life world of spirited characters.

In true storybook fashion, Parrish's characters ranged from the young and beautiful to the weathered and grotesque, all created with an endearing quality and executed with skilled originality. However, he was catapulted to stardom primarily by images that featured figures of youthful innocence surrounded by dramatically beautiful scenery.

Parrish was particularly sought after for his portraits of women perched in epic natural settings. In 1931, 61-year-old Parrish announced to the Associated Press: "I'm done with girls on rocks! I've painted them for thirteen years and I could paint them and sell them for thirteen more. That's the peril of the commercial art game. It tempts a man to repeat himself. It's an awful thing to get to be a rubber stamp. I'm quitting my rut now while I'm still able." He decided to focus largely on landscapes from that point on.

Parrish used a painting process that he described as "very simple, very ancient, and very laborious" to create his vividly colorful and ethereal works. Starting with a monochrome underpainting, he would then layer transparent glazes of color with varnish between each color layer. Each layer would dry for 10 to 14 days before the next layer would be applied. Through this process, he felt he achieved the luminously brilliant color that he argued wouldn't have been possible through traditional mixing of colors.

Due to the lengthy drying process of this painting method, Parrish would work on multiple art projects simultaneously. Unsatisfied with painting alone, this self-professed "mechanic who paints" also needed time to spend on his other creative endeavors, which included making models, furniture, vases, and more.

(Above) "The Lantern Bearers," 1908, created for Collier's magazine, shows Parrish's use of glazes and saturated color in an evocative night scene. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

(Below) "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" from "Poems of Childhood," circa 1902, by Maxfield Parrish. Oil on paper; 21 inches by 14 3/4 inches. Private Collection.

A modern Renaissance man, Parrish used his machine shop to build models that he would light and photograph as reference for his paintings. He photographed local models, including his own children as well as their nanny (and his muse) Susan Lewin.

Parrish also employed the technique of using a projector to transfer his photographic negatives onto tracing paper. This allowed him to adjust the image size to get accurate dimensions and create geometric relationships in accordance with theories he followed about symmetry and the golden ratio. Many of Parrish's works are framed by columns and other neoclassical architectural features that assist in building these proportional relationships.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Dream Garden

In 1914, Parrish was asked to design a monumental, 15-by-49-foot mural for the lobby of the Curtis Publishing Company Building in Philadelphia. At the time, he was already years into a separate commission by publisher Cyrus Curtis for 18 tall panels to be exhibited in the same building. "The Dream Garden" was a much larger entrance centerpiece that was to be a first—and only—collaboration between Parrish and Louis Comfort Tiffany.

From Parrish's design, Tiffany constructed the mural using over 100,000 pieces of iridescent Favrile glass that altogether weighed over four tons. The glass fragments are a composition of over 260 different color tones, which together form a surreal and immensely beautiful scene from nature. The mural is surrounded by white marble and has a small fountain pool in front, adding to the illusion of a neoclassical structure opening onto a vast natural scene.

The mural was first displayed at Tiffany Studios in New York, where it was very well received by critics. It was then dismantled and took six months to install at the Curtis Building in Philadelphia. While the two perfectionist artists were not especially happy with each other's execution of the work, it became a highly sought-after piece for the remainder of the 20th century until the city of Philadelphia designated it a "historic object" that could not be removed.

The designation occurred after the mural was temporarily sold to casino owner Steve Wynn in 1998. The plan to move the famous mosaic to Las Vegas was protested by art historians and activists. The Pew Charitable Trusts provided $3.5 million to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to purchase the work and maintain its installation in the historic Curtis Building's lobby.

Maxfield Parrish lived at "The Oaks" for the rest of his life. He painted well into his late 80s until his arthritis prevented him. He passed away at age 95 on March 30, 1966, at a time when his work was again experiencing an influential resurgence in America.

Jeff Perkin is a graphic artist and integrative nutrition health coach. He can be reached at WholySelf.com

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"The Dream Garden," 1916, by Tiffany Studios in collaboration with Maxfield Parrish. Glass mosaic. Curtis Publishing Company Building, Philadelphia.

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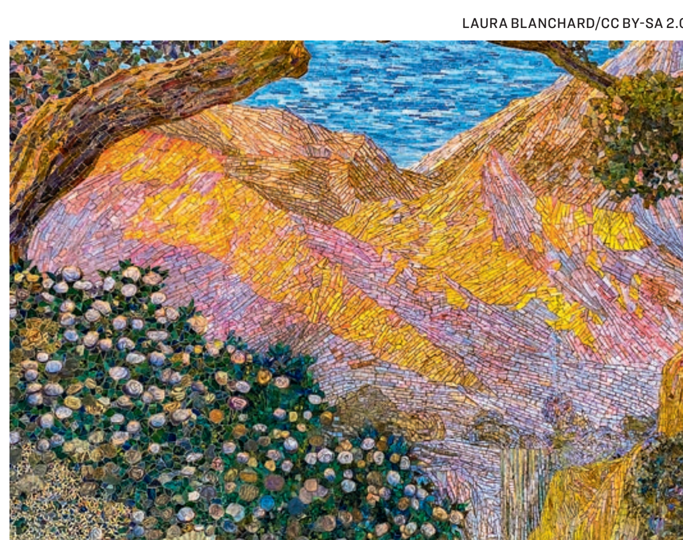

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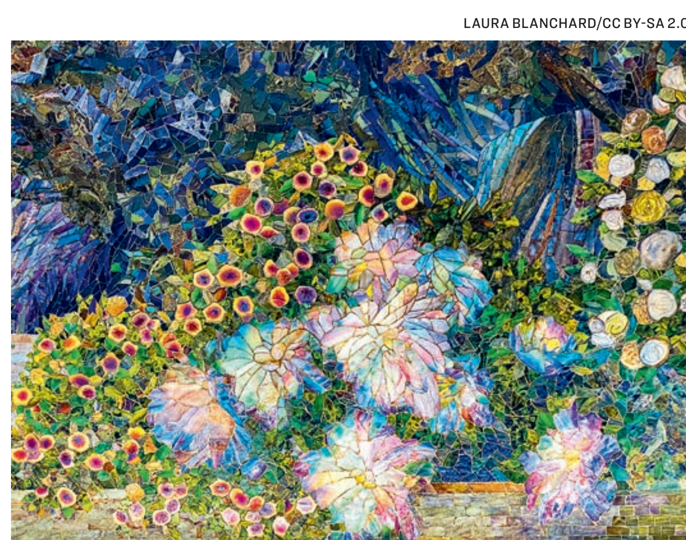


Slightly edited photos of details of the mosaic from "The Dream Garden" at the Curtis Building in Philadelphia.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Play Scene in Hamlet, Act III, Scene II," 1897, by Edwin Austin Abbey. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, Edwin Austin Abbey Memorial Collection.

LITERATURE

Hamlet's 'To Be or Not to Be,' Really

What that great speech means

GIDEON RAPPAPORT

The "To be or not to be" speech from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is, unfortunately, the most famous speech in all Shakespeare's works. I say "unfortunately" because it has become famous for several wrong reasons.

People have thought of the speech as a passionate expression of intense emotion. It's not. People have thought of it as indicating Hamlet's suicidal tendencies. It doesn't. People have treated it as the most important speech in the play. It isn't.

It is a great speech, true, but its greatness has been obscured by these wrong assumptions arising from reading the speech outside of its context and ignoring its role in the unfolding drama of the play's plot.

Some Groundwork

Hamlet is melancholy not because he is by nature depressed and suicidal but because his picture of the world has been overthrown. Hamlet's admired father, the king, has died suddenly. Hamlet's supposedly virtuous mother, within less than two months, has married the king's unlikable brother, who has now become king. Hamlet has seen the ghost of his father, who has appeared to say that his own brother has murdered him in lust for Hamlet's mother and in ambition for the crown. And the ghost has given Hamlet the task of avenging that murder.

Hamlet would at first like to rush off and kill the king. But he doesn't—not because he's a coward or thinks too much or is compassionate. The reason, he tells us, is that when he thinks about it, he realizes that the ghost might just as well be a demon tempting him to evil as the spirit of his father charging him to do justice. Hamlet knows that vengeance belongs to God, not to men. He also knows that when someone dies, his soul goes to be judged by God for heaven or for hell.

So Hamlet is in a quandary. He wants to fulfill the ghost's charge, but he doesn't want to be damned for doing so.

It is a great speech, true, but its greatness has been obscured by wrong assumptions.

To get out of that quandary, the first thing Hamlet has to do is to find out whether the ghost was telling the truth. Is the present king really guilty of his brother's death or not? Hamlet decides to find out by putting on a play depicting a murder like that described by the ghost and watching to see how the king reacts. As he calmly explains to us at the end of a long soliloquy that is passionately emotional,

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil, and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps, . . .
> Abuses [= tricks] me to damn me. I'll have grounds
> More relative [= conclusive] than this—the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. (II. ii. 598–605)

Hamlet is a complex character, capable both of extreme passion and of calm, balanced reasoning. He ended the previous passionate soliloquy by calming himself and becoming reasonable again. Now he enters in his calm state, reasoning dispassionately about why people in general don't rush off to do things that might get them killed. The "To be or not to be" speech unfolds the track of that reasoning.

The Latin 'Quaestio'

The speech is a version of the intellectual debate, called in Latin a "quaestio," characteristic of medieval universities like Wittenberg, where Hamlet has been a student. A question is posed to students in the morning, they debate it during the day, and the rector resolves it in the evening. Such questions were hypothetical and had some moral, philosophical, or theological import—for example, "Does God exist?" or "Does man have free will?" Students were expected to offer both pro and contra answers with supporting and contrary arguments for each.

In this speech, Hamlet is engaging in just such a "quaestio." He is asking whether it is better to be alive or not. He first gives the reason why it is better not to be alive: life is characterized by all kinds of suffering. Then he gives the reason why people don't remove themselves from life: the unknown suffering that might lie in store after death.

> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time ...
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of?

In general, people don't escape the misery of life by doing something that would get them killed because, once dead, they might have to undergo something worse in the afterlife.

> ... There's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.

That is, there is the consideration that extends the lives even of those who are suffering.

In short, the speech is a calm, rational discussion of a general human reason for Hamlet's particular decision not to kill the king without further evidence of the king's guilt.

Hamlet as a Good Student

Students of the play will have to look elsewhere for Hamlet's passionate outbursts (which are many), for "the most important speech in the play" (of which there are several options), and for the flaw in Hamlet's character that leads to the tragic outcome. (Try Act III, Scene iii, where Hamlet decides to make sure the king is not only killed but also damned.)

In this "To be or not to be" speech, Hamlet is taking a calm, rational look at the facts of the human situation, like a good student of philosophy. It's a great speech, but it is does not contain the main theme of the play. The essence of the moral and spiritual drama in this great tragedy lies elsewhere.

Gideon Rappaport has a Ph.D. in English and American Literature with specialization in Shakespeare. He has taught literature, writing, and Shakespeare at all levels and works as a theatrical dramaturge. He podcasts at AppreciatingShakespeare.BuzzSprout.com

ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO

"David Victorious," 1408–9; 1416, by Donatello. Marble; 6 feet, 3 inches tall. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

FINE ARTS

Donatello and His Victorious Davids

LORRAINE FERRIER

Italian sculptor Donatello worked at the dawn of the Renaissance. His works epitomize the beauty and ingenuity of the era and set the standard for sculpture from then on.

Donatello sculpted figures full of life. He did so by looking at the classical sculptures of ancient Rome, and by faithfully copying life itself. His sculptures have realistic human features, gestures, and expressions.

Sculptures made so true to nature had never existed before.

Two of Donatello's statues, made nearly three decades apart, show how the master departed from the graceful Gothic style of his time, full of idealized figures with elongated limbs, to develop his realistic style.

Both sculptures, each called "David Victorious," show the point of David's victory over Goliath in the age-old biblical tale of how a young man's faith and courage achieved the impossible. In both sculptures, Donatello departed from tradition by showing the victorious David as a young shepherd, rather than as a king. In the bronze version of the sculpture, David holds the giant Goliath's sword after he'd used it to sever Goliath's head.

Donatello made his marble version of David when he was in his twenties. He'd been commissioned to make the figure for the dome of Florence Cathedral. He used the newfound rules of perspective from his friend, the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, so the figure could be seen accurately from below. But the statue fell too short for it to be placed so high, and it never made it up on the dome.

His bronze David is considered his masterpiece, and it was the first freestanding bronze statue since ancient times. The Medici family is believed to have commissioned the piece as, in the 15th century, David became the symbol of Florence after the city successfully overcame its enemy.

Both Davids stand in contrapposto, a pose from ancient Greek art, when the body's weight rests on one leg. Sculptures in contrapposto naturally appear as if in motion.

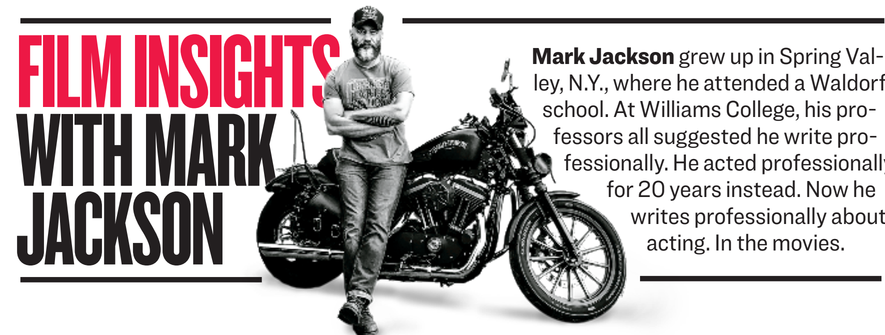
Donatello's marble David is wearing clothes, some of which are draped, and his fingers and neck are elongated as per the Gothic style. He gazes into the distance, rather detached.

In contrast, Donatello's bronze David is more dynamic and his face shows real expression. He's naked, similar to classical art, which was rare. (Medieval artists created nude figures of certain subjects only to show morality, such as when depicting Adam and Eve or souls being banished to hell.) His toned, athletic body reflects his trade as a shepherd boy out in the fields tending his sheep, under the harsh heat of the sun.

Behind his back, he holds one of the rocks he used to bring the giant down—another symbol showing the triumph of faith in the hard-fought battle over tyranny.

On the pedestal of Dontaello's marble David is inscribed: "To those who fight bravely for the fatherland the gods lend aid even against the most terrible foes."

Donatello's David statues are part of the "Donatello: The Renaissance" exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi and the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, Italy. The exhibition runs until July 31. To find out more, visit PalazzoStrozzi.org



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.

The Best Action Sequel of All Time

MARK JACKSON

Finally. In "Top Gun: Maverick" we have an old-school, 1970s/'80s/'90s-quality summer blockbuster, like they used to make 'em, that's also very possibly the best action movie sequel of all time. In fact, it's safe to say that the sequel outshines the original. Fans have waited 36 years for this, and thanks to movie star and producer extraordinaire, Mr. Tom Cruise (and original producer Jerry Bruckheimer), "Top Gun: Maverick" exceeds all expectations. It's been a long time since I exited a movie theater wanting to immediately go back in for the next available screening.

A sequel by definition can never be quite as good as the original, due to losing the elements of surprise, and never-before-seen world building. But in nearly four decades, the original "Top Gun" had time to fade into myth and legend, while leaving a wide wake of cultural influence: Who doesn't know what a wingman is by now? Or buzzing the tower with a fly-by? Who doesn't "feel the need for speed"? Who's never heard of Goose, Iceman, and Maverick? "The soundtrack for "Top Gun" was arguably one of the most immediately recognizable ever.

Because of the interminable wait, the new movie is able to achieve a rare, paradoxical thing: feeling at once brand new while at the same time being reunited with old friends. Not to mention basking anew in the sheer awesomeness of Navy warplanes.

F-14 Tomcat

Speaking of warplanes, one of my worries was this: The iconic F-14 Tomcat of the original "Top Gun" has long been mothballed. The F-18 Super Hornet of the sequel, while far more technologically advanced, doesn't look as cool. Even Navy fighter jocks attest to this—the Tomcat was supremely good-looking; it was the '69 Camaro of fighter jets. Just looking at it brings to mind Matthew McConaughey's muscle-car brag from "Dazed and Confused":

"Let me tell you what Melba Toast is packin' right here, alright; we got 4:11 Posi-trac out back, 750 double pumper, Edelbrock intake, bored-over-30 11-to-1 pop-up pistons, turbo-jet 390 horsepower. We're talkin' some ... muscle."

However! The movie producers have that covered. "Top-Gun: Maverick" has one of the most drop-dead coolest jets you've ever laid eyes on: an outrageously supersonic, SR-71 Blackbird-like, next generation SR-72 Darkstar spy plane. Unlike its Mach 3 predecessor, it goes Mach 6.7 and is armed to the teeth. It's so hot–I say, in gratitude to the movie gods, thank you for the very concept of this exquisite piece of machinery. It makes grown men cry just to look at it. And to be fair, the F-18 Super Hornet is no slouch.

Story

Maverick (Cruise) was all brash warrior in 1986. The original was two hours of macho insubordination, sweaty muscular beach volleyball, cheesy come-on lines, and acute high testosterone intersquadron competitiveness, all of which got a hall pass due to the shock and awe of never-before-seen F-14 catapult shots and tail-hook carrier landings, and radio intercept officer Goose's (Anthony Edwards) hilarious humor. The focus was on Maverick's self-centered glory-grabbing pilot whose misguided attitude eventually (but not directly) contributed to getting Goose killed.

In 2022, all-grown-up Maverick's still got an acute need for speed and envelope-pushing, but he's finally learned what that other elite Navy group (SEALs) drum into their warriors from day one—teamwork. Now, he's more interested in what's best for the group as opposed to what's best for him. He's matured from warrior to king and elder, giving wisdom and blessings to the younger generation of fighter pilots.

These character changes show up in the very first action sequence: Maverick's working as a test pilot, hoping to take the aforementioned Darkstar 10 times the speed of sound in order to prove that a manned jet is more effective than an unmanned drone. And whereas the old, young Maverick would've been motivated by ego to become the fastest pilot in history, the new Maverick is motivated to save his test team's jobs from the coming AI robots.

One of the great Naval senior officers of the original was Mike "Viper" Metcalf (Tom Skerritt), but Ed Harris here creates a new, steely-eyed, flinty rear admiral who handily replaces Skerritt's character. He arrives at the test compound just in time to stoically take a massive sonic boom sandblast to the face as Maverick (in mule-headed violation, naturally) rockets off the runway 25 feet over his head. It's a great scene.

This stunt nearly gets Maverick dishonorably discharged from the Navy. His only option (and only because the admiral knew he was witnessing greatness in the Mach 10 attempt): Go teach the kids at Top Gun under the highly intolerant scrutiny of aircraft carrier air-boss, call sign Cyclone (Jon Hamm).

Maverick thus heads back to Fighter Weapons School (Top Gun), where he trains the newest best-of-the-best Top Gun graduates, including the obnoxious Hangman (Glen Powell), who at first appears to be a later-generation version of Val Kilmer's Iceman, but who's really an amalgamation of the worst of both Iceman and the young, ridiculously cocky Maverick. Also Rooster (Miles Teller), the son of Maverick's late, great, best buddy Goose. And a female pilot.

Interesting note: There are no female Navy SEALs because of the physical demands of the job, but there are female Navy pilots. But male Navy SEALs are in awe of the courage, cool-headedness, and precision it takes to land a shrieking 16-ton fighter jet on a heaving carrier deck, in 30-foot waves, in a rainstorm, in the pitch-black night—flying by instruments only. Go lady Navy pilots!

With Miles Teller's Rooster, we get a character just like Maverick: haunted by the legacy of an aviator father who died in combat, who's got something to prove but without the young Maverick's pride. Through their interaction, we witness the weight of Maverick's past manifested in the flesh: the pain he's caused, and the do-over wishes that haunt him.

Recaps

"Top Gun: Maverick" manages to hit all the highlights without being redundant. And you know what you want to see in a "Top Gun" movie: hazy sunrises and sunsets; the opening soundtrack that was originally stolen from "Chariots of Fire," the one with the church bell added in; Micky-mouse-eared deck hands doing ritualistic cat-shot-prep dance moves; warplanes screaming off carrier decks; deafening jet engines; pilots carousing in bars; Maverick motorcycling; beach volleyball; arrogant stick jockeys; flat spins; and of course, dogfight mayhem in the skies.

The original (which over the years has become a cult classic with lines that accumulate more cheese with every passing year) might have, however, had a stronger element of realism and tragedy in the death of Goose, which was anchored by Meg Ryan's powerful performance in her breakout role as his grieving widow. While "Top Gun: Maverick" has the tragedy of Val Kilmer's real-life throat cancer affliction, it's a different kind of gravitas.

Also, in 1986, the movie world hadn't yet been infected with the insidious cartoonish-ness of CGI Marvel-verse-type violence. "Top Gun Maverick" has one such cartoonish survival of an unsurvivable situation, but it's played to such excellent comedic effect that it's thoroughly forgivable. Look for the type of scene that we Americans so dearly love: A parched, still-smoking, singed astronaut stumbles into a dead-silent bar with very twangy 1940s country music quietly playing in the background, and slowly drinks a tall glass of water. "What is this place?" he asks. A rapt, 10-year-old boy replies ...

Cruise

As Maverick, we're reminded of just how good the vastly underrated Tom Cruise is. He's one of the greatest living action stars. There's no arguing that. But here's the range that Maverick allows Cruise to navigate: leading man, action hero, romantic lead, and a comedian with impeccable timing.

Speaking of romantic leads, Jennifer Connelly does a fine job as Penelope "Penny" Benjamin, a single mother, bar owner, daughter of a former admiral, and Maverick's new love interest. Actually, she's an old love interest. From the original "Top Gun": (Maverick getting chewed out by the Carrier Air Group commander [James Tolkan] for not landing his plane when ordered) "You've been busted, lost your qualifications as section leader three times, been put in hack twice by me, with a history of high-speed passes over five air-control towers, and one admiral's daughter."

"Top Gun: Maverick" is likely to be the best action film of 2022, with some of the best aerial dogfight scenes in film history. It really needs to be seen on the biggest screen possible. It improves upon the original in every conceivable way.

Signing off with my new call sign: Phantom (lol). I had an additional choice of Reaper and Hades. It's a movie marketing gimmick at #whatsmycallsign? That's one unrealistic thing about "Top Gun" movie call signs; they're all cool. Real-world military call signs are generally based on when classmates catch you doing something exceptionally stupid and you get stuck with a shaming call sign you hate. I, Phantom, recommend seeing "Top Gun: Maverick" in IMAX, several times in a row.

ALL PHOTOS BY PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Tom Cruise as Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, a test pilot and Top Gun flight instructor in "Top Gun: Maverick."

Val Kilmer as Adm. Tom "Iceman" Kazansky, a fellow instructor, friend, and former rival of Maverick, and the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

The film has one of the most drop-dead coolest jets you've ever laid eyes on.

'Top Gun: Maverick'

Director:
Joseph Kosinski

Starring:
Tom Cruise, Val Kilmer, Jennifer Connelly, Ed Harris, Jon Hamm, Miles Teller, Glen Powell, Bashir Salahuddin, Monica Barbaro

MPAA Rating:
PG-13

Release Date:
May 27, 2022

Running Time:
2 hours, 11 minutes

★★★★★
for coolness

★★★★★
for awesomeness

Monica Barbaro as Lt. Natasha "Phoenix" Trace, a mission pilot trainee.

(L–R) Tom Cruise as Maverick, Glen Powell as Hangman, Miles Teller as Rooster, and Monica Barbaro as Phoenix.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak,"1863, by Albert Bierstadt. Oil on canvas; 73 1/2 inches by 120 3/4 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

'The Road of Destiny':

Willa Cather's 'My Antonia' and the Romanticized West

DUSTIN FISHER

The American West and settling of the plains and prairies during the mid-to-late 19th century is a narrative fascination that still holds sway in today's culture. Recent streaming services developed and offered the popular shows "Yellowstone," "1883," and "Longmire," which illustrate the collective impact that the era of "manifest destiny" still has on the American imagination.

Much like the protagonist of "My Antonia," Cather was born in Virginia in 1873 and her family moved to homestead in Nebraska when she was 10 years old. A year later, her father moved the family to the small town of Red Cloud, where he went into the real estate business.

However true or exaggerated this snapshot of history may be, few narratives focused on the experience of prairie life for the many immigrants and early European settlers in the West. Germans, Swedes, and newly freed slaves all fled to the plains looking for a better way of life, but the reality was tough and unforgiving.

Willa Cather, one of American literature's major female voices of the early 20th century, experienced prairie life firsthand. Living on the plains of Nebraska in the late 19th century, Cather drew inspiration from the natural landscape, culture, and citizens that populated the nearby countryside.

In her 1918 novel "My Antonia," the reality of living and farming on the prairie is developed through its young protagonist and narrator, Jim, after he befriends a first-generation Bohemian immigrant family on the plains.

The novel personifies the early cultivation, progress, and eventual modernization of the central plains through Jim and Antonia's physical and psychological development and growth. Moreover, it demonstrates the harsh reality of life for many early immigrants as well as a blossoming nation rapidly advancing into the 20th century.

Cather and Prairie Life

Much like the protagonist of "My Antonia," Cather was born in Virginia in 1873 and her family moved to farm in Nebraska when she was 10 years old. A year later, her father moved the family to the small town of Red Cloud, where he went into the real estate business.

Cather eventually took to writing and attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln; she graduated in 1896. After college, she was a journalist in Pittsburgh and eventually moved to New York City to edit the magazine McClure's. Many of her novels, however, return to the central plains of her youth. The novels "O Pioneers!" "Song of the Lark," and "My Antonia" focus on prairie life and young females who attempt to scratch out their survival on the harsh plains.

Descriptions of settings and characters in Cather's writing paint the 19th-century plains as both beautiful and a location of social and technological change. "My Antonia" is a "bildungsroman" (a coming-of-age story) of Jim Burden, who is transplanted to 1870s Nebraska after the death of his parents in Virginia.

The story is told via his writings about Antonia Shimerda, a young Bohemian girl whose immigrant parents purchase nearby farmland and stake out a living. They become friends as Jim and his grandmother teach Antonia and her sister English because their family has little grasp of the language or culture. As the narrative develops, so do Jim and Antonia. They progress from plains settlers to small-town dwellers as the landscape rapidly shifts from prairie to farmland to urban areas.

When Jim and Antonia first meet, the Nebraskan prairie is rugged, rough, and a site of limited survival for many of the European settlers. Antonia's family lives in a "dugout" home that is built into the side of a hill.

The historian Greg Bradsher explains that many first-time immigrants on the plains resided in types of dugout homes due to the fact that timber was hard to find. He writes: "Pioneers usually built a dugout first, scooping a hole in the side of a hill, blocking the front with a wall of cut sod, and covering the top with a few poles that held up a layer of prairie grass and dirt."

When Jim first encounters the Shimerda family in their small dugout, they express disdain for their lowly dwelling, as it is in complete contrast to the "cultured" European existence they left behind.

Their existence in the harsh Nebraskan environment is created to draw a parallel between the natural landscape and lifestyle with Antonia's youth and beauty. One of the earliest encounters between Jim and Antonia showcases this juxtaposition of nature and the girl's youth and beauty that later builds a symbolic motif. As Antonia matures to womanhood and establishes a family, the prairie—as developed by the immigrants—transitions to its own future.

After first meeting, Jim takes her into the overgrown pasture that surrounds the Shimerda settlement and shows the vastness of the countryside that surrounds them:

"I remember what the conductor had said about [Antonia]'s eyes. They were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks, she had a glow of rich, dark color. … We were so deep in the grass that we could see nothing but the blue sky over us and the gold tree in front of us. It was wonderfully pleasant."

As the novel continues, Jim's family leaves the farm and moves to the small town of Black Hawk for him to attend school. The second act of the narrative follows the teenaged Jim in town among neighbors, family, and the culture. There are dances in Black Hawk that he and Antonia attend, music concerts, and a hotel. As the prairie develops, so do the ages and lifestyles of Jim and Antonia while the prairie and agrarian life are never far beyond the borders of town.

Romanticization of Cultivating the Plains

"My Antonia" romantically celebrates early settlers on the Nebraskan prairie through the descriptions of the Bohemian Shimerda family's struggles to tame the land as well as Antonia's physical development. As the story progresses, Jim and Antonia eventually part ways. Jim goes to law school on the East Coast, and Antonia eventually returns to the farm and raises her children.

It is much later that Jim finds her widowed and living in her mother's home, in the ploughed landscape now crisscrossed with paved highways and railroads. By the end of the novel, the prairies are more developed and populated, and Jim finds himself romanticizing his youth:

"As I wandered over those rough pastures, I had the good luck to stumble upon a bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country. … Everywhere else it had been ploughed under when the highways were surveyed; this half-mile or so within the pasture fence was all that was left of that old road which used to run like a wild thing across the open prairie, clinging to the high places and circling and doubling like a rabbit before the hounds."

His ruminations on youth and nature help bring the story to a close. Antonia and Jim, both raised on the prairie, eventually move away. Unfortunately for Antonia, her story ends where she began, single-handedly tending to the fields, children, and an aging mother.

As Jim's story concludes, he recalls: "For Antonia and me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be."

Jim and Antonia's destinies were much like the settlers and pioneers called forth to the West. The plains were an untamed land that saw the intersection of peoples and races working together to build lives and new opportunities for future generations.

"My Antonia" is a novel that compares youth with the pastoral central plains. Cather's depiction of young immigrants paving the way for technological and cultural change in a rugged land is what defines the narrative.

These compelling stories, people, and descriptions of a time long gone are all reasons for revisiting one of America's first great female authors of the 20th century.

Dustin Fisher is a writer and educator. He has penned multiple articles on film and popular culture as well as given lectures and presentations at universities in both the U.S. and UK. Currently, he is teaching at Edison State College while completing his doctorate in film studies and American literature at the University of Cincinnati.

MUSEE D'ORSAY PARIS

"Calling in the Gleaners," 1859, by Jules Breton. Oil on canvas.

BOOK REVIEW

A Call for Accountability for a Ruthless Past

DUSTIN BASS

More than 75 years removed from the greatest military conflict in human history, there is so much to remember. Unfortunately, there is so much forgotten. David de Jong has written a book, "Nazi Billionaires: The Dark History of Germany's Wealthiest Dynasties," in hopes that the world may not forget the families who enriched the Nazi regime and also enriched themselves.

War as Moneymaker

World War II catapulted America out of the Great Depression and into a thriving postwar economy. The country was the manufacturing hub for the Allies. Prior to the onslaught of World War II, Germany began its push for rearmament. Its methods, however, were counter to America's, aside from its being against the Treaty of Versailles.

De Jong discusses in detail how Adolf Hitler and Nazi Party officials, like Joseph Goebbels and Heinrich Himmler, began their political conniving with some of Germany's wealthiest industrialists even before they had officially taken complete political power. Donations were met with promises from the future regime—promises of immense profits and security from competition.

One of the questions de Jong tackles is the issue of necessity. Since these industrialists were already uber-wealthy, and they were working against limited competition (Germany was in the throes of a poor economy as well), why would they need to pour money into a political movement?

"Nazi Billionaires" makes it very clear what many may remember: The Nazi Party became an unstoppable force destined for political dominance. Security came with a financial incentive for both parties: the Nazi Party and the industrialists. It was extortion that proved both profitable and agreeable to the industrialists.

Who Were They?

On the surface, it appears to be merely "go along to get along." In fact, this was a common excuse relied upon by those very industrialists during the Nuremberg trials. De Jong proves, however, that it was something much more sinister than that.

The names of these industrialists are practically unknown to the American populace, except for Porsche. Names like Quandt, Flick, Oetker, and von Finck are rather unrecognizable. Some of their businesses, however, are slightly more recognizable: BMW, Allianz, and IG Farben.

Wealthy industrialists are wealthy and industrial because they know when to make profitable moves. The idea of profit is not at issue in de Jong's book. It is the method by which these wealthy industrialists multiplied their wealth. In disturbing detail (disturbing from a business perspective), the author discusses how these business owners utilized the ongoing pogroms against Jews to benefit themselves.

Through the process of "Aryanization," Jewish business owners and stockholders were forced out of their positions and shareholdings. With the threat of impoverishment, concentration camps, or immediate death, Jewish businessmen sold their businesses and shares typically well below fair market value. But in Nazi Germany there was no recourse. It was "submit and leave or suffer the consequences" of remaining in Nazi Germany.

Once these German businessmen swindled their way to full ownership or majority shareholder, they further increased profit margins by utilizing forced and slave labor, often pulling people from concentration camps. Many of these people died as they worked. All of them endured cruel conditions.

De Jong makes convincing arguments about the guilt of these families, a much more guilty verdict than that handed down by the Nuremberg judges.

Postwar Excuses

De Jong presents the reasons why these men conducted themselves so ruthlessly. He quotes from their defenses at the Nuremberg trials, and also from their correspondences to their lawyers and others. Now that Hitler was dead and the Nazi Party defeated, it was understandable for these industrialists to retreat toward ignorance and claim being under the Nazis' thumb. De Jong, however, proves otherwise by producing the correspondences from before the war ended, and before it appeared that the Nazis were on the losing end.

The reasons conveyed by the Porsches, Quandts, Flicks, Oetkers, von Finks, and their ilk do fall flat. But those patriarchs (matriarchs as well) eventually passed away, and that wealth transferred to the heirs. The heirs of that German wealth have hidden their families' complicity with the Nazi regime. It was often hidden so well that some of the current heirs, the grandchildren, were unaware of their grandparents' involvement. For some, it is an unfortunate past. For others, it is regrettable. A few, irredeemable.

What Is Being Done?

De Jong points out that some element of reconciliation with the past is being undertaken. Donations are made. Compensation is given to families. In the grand scheme of how much was profited (billions) by so few (a handful of families) and how much was taken (everything) from so many (Jewish business owners, prisoners of war, and others), the book shows that in many ways it is too late and most definitely too little. But this leads to another question: How much is enough? How does one quantify the necessary compensation? Is that even possible? De Jong doesn't approach that topic, and perhaps that is wise.

FOTOSEARCH/GETTY IMAGES

The Nuremberg Trials, circa 1945. The Nazi industrialists were given a slap on the wrist at the trials, according to author David De Jong.

The current issue is almost equivalent to that which was the immediate postwar issue. Germany was left in the hands of the Americans, the British, the French, and the Soviets—three capitalist democracies and a communist nation. Germany was split in two: East and West. The Iron Curtain had been drawn, and the West had to figure out how to best offset the influx of communism. The hot war was now the Cold War, and Berlin was the dividing line between democracy and communism. The Allies decided to move forward against a now common enemy, the Soviets, and move past a defeated enemy, the Nazis.

In most instances, the Nuremberg cases against these industrialists resulted in little more than a slap on the wrist. These elites eventually returned to their business dealings, having spent perhaps a few years in prison. Again, in the grand scheme, the punishment hardly lives up. But what should have been the decision? Were there other viable options? Should the Allies have stripped the industrialists of their corporations and factories; or handed them over to the guiltless German entrepreneurs (if there were any); or installed German-speaking benefactors from the Allied nations, such as France, Britain, or America; or simply destroyed whatever was left of the German industry and call it even?

It is a question, among many other post-World War II questions, that will haunt the world still further into the future. Regardless, those who were directly involved are now gone. Some have been gone for decades. Some only recently passed. But requiring personal and direct retribution is not the goal of de Jong's work. Rather, it is about shining a spotlight on the names of these families and their businesses to ensure the world remains aware of how they collaborated and profited from the Nazi regime.

De Jong does not write with anger, but rather with a sense of perplexity. His perplexity, however, is our perplexity. The same emotion that comes from the writer infects the reader. It is this perplexity that causes us to ask: "How could these people do this? And secondly, how can the heirs act almost flippantly about it?" The author is not asking the heirs to embrace their past to the point of self-loathing, but rather to at least acknowledge their families' history in a manner that is honest.

This leads us to another question. How long should this dark historical cloud hang over these families? Will it be enough for this generation? Perhaps the next? A hundred years from now? What is clear is the demand that the cloud not dissipate until proper rectification is made, and that begins with owning up to a most ruthless past.

A Powerful Read

De Jong has done his homework with this book. Then again, he had been doing his homework well before he began writing it, as he had been covering such topics for Bloomberg News. The book is written in chronological form, starting from before the outbreak of war, while there were hostilities toward the Jews of Germany, and then moving from the founding generation to the children and then the grandchildren.

De Jong makes convincing arguments about the guilt of these families, a much more guilty verdict than that handed down by the Nuremberg judges. Regarding guilt, I found it difficult to rely on his primary source for the Quandt patriarch's guilt, as that was Goebbels. A more sinister man can hardly be found, not to mention that he was the Nazi Party's Minister of Propaganda.

Overall, it is a powerful read that demonstrates how greed can create a wealth of evil and how not dealing with the demons of the present only condemns the future generations to exorcising them.

Dustin Bass is the host of Epoch TV's "About the Book: A Show about New Books With the Authors Who Wrote Them." He is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast.

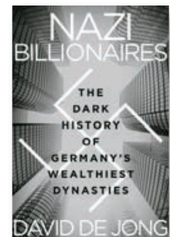
'Nazi Billionaires: The Dark History of Germany's Wealthiest Dynasties'

Author
David de Jong

Publisher
Mariner Books

Date
April 19, 2022

Hardcover
400 pages



The book covers three generations of industrialists' families.

BOOK REVIEW

Welcome to Hotel Metropol and a Noble Soul

ANITA L. SHERMAN

Author Amor Towles visited Moscow in 1998. At that point, the Metropol Hotel was nearly celebrating its 100th anniversary. Opening in 1905, it joined the ranks of other leading grand hotels of its era like the Waldorf Astoria in New York, Claridge's in London, and the Ritz in Paris. All of these hotel siblings shared similar characteristics for luxury and service. You could travel from one to the other and feel at home.

The Metropol was the first hotel in Moscow to have hot water and telephones in the rooms, international cuisine in the restaurants, and an American bar off the lobby. Stomping grounds for the internationally rich and famous and the elite of the city, the Metropol was at the heart of Moscow, situated on Theatre Square and across from the Kremlin.

Opulent, lavish, and with an otherworldly ambiance—but what if you couldn't leave? What if you faced eminent elimination if you left the hotel's inner sanctum?

House Arrest

It's 1922 and Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, a Russian nobleman, is sentenced to lifetime imprisonment in Moscow's Metropol Hotel. It's five years after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. What saves him from being sent to Siberia or immediate execution is a poem he wrote years before being judged to have sympathetic leanings to the Bolshevik cause.

Rostov was used to the Metropol. He occupied a series of rooms as a count accustomed to life's finer pleasures. But the house arrest moves him to a small room in a sixth-floor belfry that once housed servants. A tall man, he regularly bumps his head when attempting to stand in certain parts of his meager quarters, and he no longer has grand views from the room's windows.

Despite what appears to be claustrophobic environs, Rostov makes the most of his situation, approaching each day with optimism and resolving to see the best in everyone.

Spanning more than three decades from 1922 to 1954, the count's stay is enriched by the myriad of personalities who ensure that the hotel runs smoothly, and some quintessential life-changing characters who come through the main doors and become an integral part of his existence.

An aristocrat at heart, Rostov brilliantly turns conversations into erudite discussions by offering his wit, sense of humor, and indomitable spirit to all those he meets. While his physical circumstances have been greatly reduced, his emotional world grows by leaps and bounds as his heart becomes increasingly intertwined with the hearts of those closest to him, several of whom he cares very deeply about.

Intriguing Hotel

The Metropol is like a character in itself. As the hotel seems to magically open to him with its labyrinth of layers, passages, and doorways, Rostov is caught in its many twists and turns, discovering daily new perspectives on leading a meaningful and purposeful life.

Towles does a brilliant job structuring the novel by interspersing footnotes that speak to the historical era. These give the reader a sense of the tumultuous events happening outside the hotel's world.

The book has an ending that will leave you breathless and alive.

The story unfolds beautifully as the main protagonists bloom and grow against harsh realities that threaten to undo them.

The rich trappings of the hotel, the thick carpets, the artwork, all mirror the enchanting tapestry of this tale: knotty and messy on one side but brilliantly woven on the other.

The Metropol hums with intrigue whether we find Rostov in the Shalyapin bar, dining in the Boyarsky restaurant, peering over a balcony, sharing culinary insights with the irascible chef Emile in the kitchen, or listening to Sofia play Chopin.

Memorable Characters

Rostov's genteel nature is sure to win readers over with his effervescent charm, elegance, sensitivity, and (you'll be surprised) his sleuthing talents. Little goes unnoticed when it matters the most. He is in a class all to himself, predicated on strength of character, moral discipline, and a resilient spirit that far exceeds his aristocratic upbringing.

And then there is the actress Anna Urbanova, a willowy femme fatale. Does she lead to the count's undoing?

Or perhaps the party officer Osip Glebnikov with his requests to learn more about French and English cultures. They enjoy discussing books and watching American films, but what part will their longstanding friendship play?

The American, Richard Vanderwhile, shares a similar upbringing to Rostov's. He eventually works for the State Department and visits the count regularly. He tells him about Stalin's poor health and impending death, and what that will mean for the future of Russia and America.

The characters are so poignant and powerful that you may find yourself Googling to see if they are based on actual people. While the backdrop for the story is real, Towles's characters are fictional. Many of them are also particularly endearing and will stay in your memory bank.

There is so much to love about this novel. It's tantalizing, nuanced, elegantly crafted, nostalgic, hopeful, and with an ending that will leave you breathless and alive.

Step into the Metropol Hotel with Rostov as your gentleman guide and you will be mesmerized.

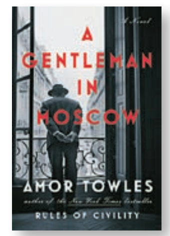
'A Gentleman in Moscow'

Author
Amor Towles

Publisher
Viking Penguin

Date
Sept. 6, 2016

Hardcover
462 pages



The book covers three generations of industrialists' families.

Top 5 Baseball Movies

MICHAEL CLARK

With the 2022 Major League Baseball season finally underway, it's probably a good time to reflect back on what I feel are the best of all baseball feature films. A sport that many people (including me) think is lacking in action (but strong on strategy and personality), it has also provided a wellspring of the greatest-ever sports movies. This could have easily been a Top 10 list. (See the included "honorable mention" titles.)

UNIVERSAL PICTURES

A scene from "Field of Dreams," one of five great baseball movies picked for your spring pleasure.

'Field of Dreams' (1989)
Directed by Phil Alden Robinson and based on the bestselling novel by W.P. Kinsella, "Field of Dreams" is all that and a bag of chips. Kevin Costner stars as Ray, a New York native now eking out a living as a fledgling farmer in Iowa with his wife Annie (Amy Madigan) and daughter Karin (Gaby Hoffman).

While tilling his cornfield, Ray hears the repeated, haunting whisper "If you build it, he will come." He eventually interprets it as a message to build a baseball field to salvage the reputation of the maligned "Shoeless" Joe Jackson (Ray Liotta), a member of the disgraced 1919 Chicago White Sox. Further messages prod Ray to visit reclusive writer Terence Mann (James Earl Jones) and the mysterious Midwestern doctor Archie "Moonlight" Graham (Burt Lancaster), which leads to an emotional catharsis that he and we never see coming. Have boxes of tissues at the ready.

'Bull Durham' (1988)
As with basketball and football, many (but not all) baseball fans believe that minor league (or college level) play is the best indicator of the true talent and love of the sport. Those who participate because they will play for peanuts, only hoping that a bigger financial payday might follow, show their dedication.

Catcher Lawrence "Crash" Davis (Kevin Costner again) used to be one of those guys but is now just an aging veteran trying to stay active and maybe snare a long-shot break. He's hired by the Durham Bulls, a AAA North Carolina farm team, to hone the rough edges off of promising yet headstrong upstart pitcher Calvin "Nuke" LaLoosh (Tim Robbins), while both of them (at least for a while) compete for the amorous attention of resident superfan and hipster mystic and soothsayer Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon).

'The Pride of the Yankees' (1942)
Less of a movie about the game itself, and more of a simple biography of one of its most iconic and inspirational players, director Sam Wood's loving homage to baseball's "Iron Man" was released barely a year after Lou Gehrig passed away.

Nominated for 11 Academy Awards, the film almost didn't get made as both producer Sam Goldwyn and leading man Gary Cooper (as Gehrig) were not baseball fans, and each took some convincing before agreeing to do the project. Gehrig's slightly more famous teammate Babe Ruth lobbied fiercely to be in the film, and it was only after he committed to lose significant weight was he cast as himself (as were other then-current and former Yankees).

What made the film a perennial favorite among many non-baseball enthusiasts was the romantic subplot between Gehrig and his wife Eleanor (Teresa Wright), who also served as a consultant on the production.

All titles are available on assorted streaming services. For options, visit justwatch.com

'Major League' (1989)
Cited by many players (pro or otherwise) as their own favorite (and most realistic) baseball movie, "Major League" is also the funniest baseball flick ever made, and it only gets better with repeated viewings.

Written and directed by David S. Ward (who wrote "The Sting," and co-wrote "Sleepless in Seattle"), the story centers on a ragtag group of has-beens, never-will-be's, and unknown startup players (Corbin Bernsen, Tom Berenger, Charlie Sheen, Dennis Haysbert, Wesley Snipes, and others) who are signed by the Cleveland Indians. Former-showgirl owner Rachel Phelps (Margaret Whitton) wants them to lose so she can move the team to Miami.

Rene Russo makes her feature debut as the Berenger character's love interest, and Bob Uecker plays a fictionalized version of himself as the Indians's hard-drinking radio announcer.

'Eight Men Out' (1988)
Written and directed by John Sayles ("Passion Fish," "Lone Star"), "Eight Men Out" is the true story of the 1919 World Series, in which the heavily favored Chicago White Sox lost on purpose. This would have probably never happened had owner Charles Comiskey (Clifton James) hadn't been such a tightwad who cut corners, underpaid his players, and welched on bonuses for a team considered by most at the time to be the greatest ever assembled.

With bribes provided by crime boss Arnold Rothstein (Michael Lerner), seven starters and one benchwarmer are easily coerced by dim go-betweens to throw the games. As much of a black eye this event forever gave baseball, it also led to the swift implementation of strict and unwavering rules (which are still levied) requiring lifetime bans on any and all MLB players caught gambling or even associating with other gamblers. (Pete Rose is the recent and most memorable modern example of this exacting punishment.)

Here are some other quite worthy and highly recommended titles that didn't quite make the final cut: "Moneyball" (2011), "A League of Their Own" (1992), "The Natural" (1984), "The Rookie" (2002), "For Love of the Game" (1999), "The Bad News Bears" (1976), "The Sandlot" (1993), and "42" (2013).

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Also of note are three Ken Burns-directed, PBS-produced documentaries: "Baseball" (1994), its two-part 2010 sequel "The Tenth Inning," and "Jackie Robinson" (2016).

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.

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