WEEK 22, 2022

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Unveiling the Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World," 1886, by Edward Moran. Oil on canvas. Museum of the City of New York.

HISTORY

LAND THAT I LOVE

Learning from the voices of the dead

JEFF MINICK

Becca meets John at a backyard barbeque put together by mutual friends. They hit it off, finding common ground in movies they've enjoyed, and decide to get together for coffee. Over the next few weeks, they become friends, but after a while Becca realizes the attraction has deepened. She's falling in love.

The result? She begins asking more and more questions of John, eager to learn as much as possible about him. Does he enjoy working for his father's construction business? What was it like growing up in a small town? Is he on good terms with his brother and sister? What are his political affiliations? The best moment of his childhood? Does he go to church? What are his hopes for the future?

Immersing ourselves in history can endow us with strength and virtue.

When we fall in love with someone, we want to know everything we can about that person. In Becca's case, she wants to dig below the surface, understand and connect with John, and insert herself into his past.

Which brings us in a roundabout way to American history.

We Can't Love What We Don't Know

Despite all our current divisions, the majority of Americans feel loyalty to their country.

Continued on ***Page 4***

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"U.S. Army Teaches a Trade (G.I. Telegrapher)," 1919, by Norman Rockwell. Oil on canvas. Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Mass. The telegraph was a precursor to the radio.

BOOK REVIEW

A Boy, a Girl, and the Miracle of Radio

ANITA L. SHERMAN

Communication through the air. You cannot see it move. It's a beautiful, magical thing.

The technology has grown by leaps and bounds through the decades. We take our smartphones for granted now. But during World War II, you needed wires, antennas, transmitters, and receivers. Hearing voices from afar and the messages they carried was vital information during wartime.

The highly acclaimed and multiaward-winning author Anthony Doerr wants to remind readers of the remarkable power of the radio—more than its technology: its ability to influence and transform lives by what they are hearing.

In "All the Light We Cannot See," he has given readers two protagonists who are overwhelmingly interesting and deeply sympathetic.

Their choices ultimately have hope-filled and life-affirming consequences. Doerr gets us there with dazzling descriptions of the surroundings, interlaced with memorable and moving players.

Settings, characters, and conversations all move through an intricate pattern of light and color much like looking through a kaleidoscope: It's a beautiful design, but we're not quite sure how all the imperfect pieces fit together so brilliantly.

2 Characters in a Kaleidoscope

It's 1944 in France. Marie-Laure LeBlanc lives in Paris with her father, who works at the Museum of National History. He is a remarkable locksmith and the keeper of many keys that unlock the treasures held within.

Marie's vision of the world is robbed when she becomes blind at the age of 7. By the time she is 12, the two flee Nazi-occupied Paris to the fabled and walled citadel of Saint-Malo in Brittany by the sea. They carry with them the Sea of Flames, what might be one of the most mysterious and valuable gems—or one of the most dangerous.

A poverty-stricken orphan, Werner Pfennig is barely surviving in a children's house in a mining town in Germany. He shares his meager existence with his sister Jutta, other children, and kindly Frau Elena who attempts to mother them all.

But Werner is brilliant, perhaps a prodigy, and his way with radios garners him entrance into one of Hitler's elite schools for boys.

From the beginning, this book is a page turner.

What happens to this young, blind French girl who often finds herself alone in her great uncle's rambling tower house in Saint-Malo? Her father builds a miniature model replica of the city, painstakingly and lovingly crafted to the minutest detail, a roadmap to help her feel her way to safety.

She listens. She learns. She reads the classics by Braille. She feels the sting of the icy ocean as she discovers small snails. She carries loaves of bread. Her life hangs in a daily delicate balance.

What happens to this impressionable young German boy who witnesses atrocity after atrocity at the same time fine-tuning his skill as a radio operator? He was enchanted by the stories told by a Frenchman he listened to as a small boy, but now they nag at his soul. He begins to doubt the world. He grows numb and not just from the cold. His task now is to ferret out the resistance—to seek and kill the enemy.

The lives of these two young souls are eventually interwoven. It's done in such a manner that will leave the reader breathless. The luminosity of their interaction speaks to a universal goodness, omnipresent and rapturous, utterly beautiful and beguiling.

Mythic Stone

And what of this magnificent blue stone, the Sea of Flames, with its mythic origins? Is it cursed as many believe? Where is it hidden? What does it reveal? What part does it play in their lives?

Doerr's use of language is seductively intoxicating. His masterful imagery is illuminating and insightful throughout more than 500 pages but, trust me, they go quickly.

The author's masterful imagery is illuminating and insightful throughout more than 500 pages but, trust me, they go quickly.

An example, describing Marie-Laure's great-uncle Etienne: "His voice is low and soft, a piece of silk you might keep in a drawer and pull out only on rare occasions, just to feel it between your fingers."

Or another, when war-weary Werner starts to lapse into unconsciousness but is renewed with old memories:

"A world of berries and carrot peels and Frau Elena's fairy tales. Of the sharp smell of tar, and trains passing, and bees humming in the window boxes. String and spit and wire and a voice on the radio offering a loom on which to spin his dreams."

Historically accurate in time and setting, the siege of Saint-Malo, this lovely sanctuary by the sea, is brilliantly detailed and the research devoted. Doerr's characters are fictional, but they will last long in memory and message. Theirs is a story of mystery, magic, and miracles.

Poignant, powerful, and masterfully crafted, Doerr's novel is able to celebrate the pleasures and potency of the world against the backdrop of incredible hardship and suffering. Ultimately, the message is about humanity's goodness and its ability to last.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. Anita can be reached at anitajustwrite@gmail.com

'All the Light We Cannot See'

Author
Anthony Doerr

Publisher
Scribner, Jan. 1, 2014

Hardcover
531 pages

The book won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the 2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

BOOK REVIEW

A Time Traveler's Escape From Tragedy Into Yellowstone History

DUSTIN BASS

"Burning Ground" by D.A. Galloway is part time-travel adventure, part travelogue, part historical fiction, part romance, and part survival guide. The book is many things and therein lies its positives and its negatives.

The book begins in 1971 with an immensely tragic moment for the protagonist Graham Davidson and his family. Tragedy multiplied becomes the basis of the novel for the first number of chapters. Davidson finds himself lost within his own family as he continues to blame himself for the mounting tragic events. The author provides an honest take on the toll that tragedies take on a family, and the threads that hold the Davidson family together become quite bare.

As Davidson grows up and tries to deal with his tragic existence, he befriends a Crow Indian by the name of Redfield. It is this relationship that catapults the story. Davidson is given the opportunity to go on a vision quest, a sacred Native American spiritual journey. The protagonist has little to lose, as almost everything he held dear has already been taken.

Travelogue Meets Time Travel

When Davidson secures a summer job at Yellowstone National Park, he finds not only the opportunity to venture through America's first national park, but also the perfect time and place to attempt his vision quest.

The author proves his knowledge of the great national park by providing extensive detail. From the hot springs to the geysers to the lakes to mountainous terrain, Galloway leaves almost no stone unturned. It is this knowledge that enables him to describe the park accurately even before it ever became a national park. This attention to detail, however, is often given too much attention.

Davidson succeeds in the first step of his vision quest and is taken back 100 years to 1871 but remains in Yellowstone. It is the year the federal government sanctioned a team to explore the area. Davidson, with his knowledge of the future Yellowstone, is able to assist in what is known to history as the Hayden Expedition.

The protagonist helps the team of explorers and gets to venture through Yellowstone in a way he would never have before. Galloway hits on all cylinders when it comes to the travelogue aspect of comparing what was before and what is now at the park.

Readers will find the novel helpful if they ever plan to visit the park, by learning what to visit and also learning how to visit. In the novel, the author includes a quasi-survival guide, or at least a guide on what to do and what not to do at the park (for instance, how to deal with bears, among other things).

The author ensures the protagonist practices self-restraint in order to not give himself away as a time traveler. The reader gets the sense that, for the most part, Davidson is simply happy to be thrown into the past, especially during such a momentous occasion. There are still various dangers that surround the survey team and Davidson, like bears, hot springs, and possible Indian attacks.

These dangers, much like the tragedies, are rarely in the background. They often happen to the protagonist or right in front of him, and often predictably.

We are caught between the author's love of Yellowstone and the protagonist's love for the Crow woman Makawee.

History and Romance

As there is plenty to learn from "Burning Ground" regarding Yellowstone, there is plenty to learn about the Hayden Expedition. The reader will learn about what it took to take soundings of Yellowstone Lake, how difficult it was trekking through the mountains, and how the initial paintings and photographs of the park came to be.

The author provides introductions to each member of the expedition, though not all of them are likable. (The historical accuracy of their personalities I can't speak to.) Ultimately, these figures play secondary roles to give way to the relationship focused on.

Davidson meets Makawee, a beautiful young Crow woman who is the guide for the expedition. It is this relationship that competes with the landscape for the reader's attention. We are caught between the author's love of Yellowstone and the protagonist's love for Makawee. It is not a bad place to be caught, though, as the author often utilizes the landscape to bring the two together.

Davidson's pursuit of Makawee is the pinnacle of the story, but I wish the author had gotten to it sooner. Galloway creates an alluring love story, but the reader must work to get there and, even then, it is rather short-lived.

There are plenty of moments to enjoy in "Burning Ground," but it is often a struggle to get to them. When it comes to following the course of the book, the opening tragedies seem practically unnecessary, as they don't drive the story well. With that, the time-travel aspect proves unnecessary. Ultimately, had the story started in 1871 with the Hayden Expedition, it still could have included the travelogue, survival guide, historical fiction, and romance features. A more concise work would have been more accommodating to the author's extensive detail and thematic maneuvering.

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.

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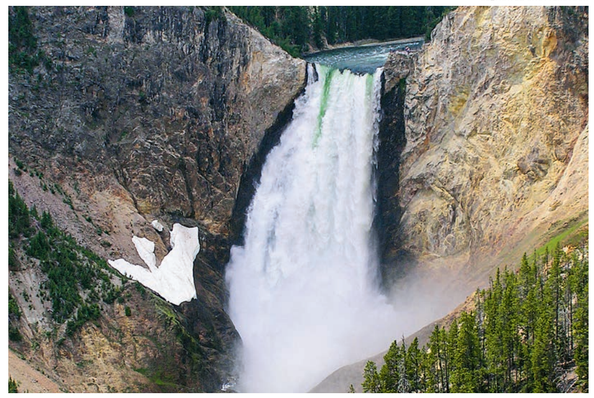


The lower part of Yellowstone Falls. Much of the novel is set in Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.

'Burning Ground'

Author
D.A. Galloway

Publisher
Independently published, released July 6, 2021

Hardcover
492 pages

The author describes the park accurately even before it ever became a national park.

FINE ART

This Dane *Was One of the Greatest* Neoclassical Sculptors

How Bertel Thorvaldsen made classical art great again

LORRAINE FERRIER

Name three great sculptors and, more than likely, Michelangelo, Donatello, or Gian Lorenzo Bernini would first come to your mind. But what about Bertel Thorvaldsen? He believed the only way to become a great artist was to copy classical art. And he became one of the best neoclassical sculptors of his time.

Even Italian sculptor Antonio Canova, whom many believe to be the greatest neoclassical sculptor, admired Thorvaldsen's work.

The two worked in Rome at the same time, when in the second half of the 18th century, the ornate and theatrical rococo style was on its way out and a new style developed whereby artists looked to the principles of the ancient world to inform their art. Art became simple and refined, with ideal figures and restrained expressions that together created a harmonious effect and appealed to the intellect. Classical sculptures are often nude to convey heroes, deities, or semidivine beings. It is a style that is sometimes called "heroic" nudity or "ideal" nudity.

Thorvaldsen first learned of Roman classicism in Denmark from his teachers: the sculptor Johannes Wiedewelt and the painter Nicolai Abildgaard at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. Thorvaldsen's flair for drawing had led him to start training at the academy when he was just 11 years old.

Thorvaldsen's sculptures were so highly sought after that he had 40 assistants helping him in his workshop.

Thorvaldsen grew up watching and helping his father, an artist and woodcarver, create ship ornaments. He continued to help him at the shipyard as he studied at the academy.

When one of his tutors, Abildgaard, led the decoration of Levetzau's Palace (now known as Christian VIII's Palace) at Amalienborg, he put Thorvaldsen in charge of the sculpture. Thorvaldsen made his first full-figure statues at the palace. They were of two Greek muses: "Euterpe" (the goddess of lyric poetry) and "Terpsichore" (the goddess of dance and chorus).

JAKOB FAURVIG/THORVALDSENS MUSEUM

"Christ," 1821, by Bertel Thorvaldsen. Plaster cast; height 11 feet, 4 inches. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Thorvaldsen made many portraits and portrait medallions of Danish dignitaries, including the prime minister. He won a gold medal for his "St. Peter Healing a Crippled Beggar," and then a royal stipend to travel to Rome, which he did in August 1796.

Faith and Hope in Rome

But it was in Rome that he excelled. Thorvaldsen connected with Danish archaeologist Georg Zoega, who taught him about ancient art, Danish-German painter Asmus Jacob Carstens, and Austrian painter Joseph Anton Koch who had a lasting influence on his work. For his "Jason with the Golden Fleece" sculpture, Thorvaldsen used a motif from one of Carstens's compositions. Thorvaldsen was also influenced by the ancient Roman "Apollo Belvedere" by Leochares and the ancient Greek "Doryphoros" ("The Spear Bearer") by Polykleitos.

JAKOB FAURVIG/THORVALDSENS MUSEUM

"Jason With the Golden Fleece," 1803–1828, by Bertel Thorvaldsen. Marble (Thomas Hope commission); 7 feet, 9 inches. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

JAKOB FAURVIG/THORVALDSENS MUSEUM

"Dying Lion" (The Lucerne Lion), 1819, by Bertel Thorvaldsen. Plaster cast; 33 inches by 63.4 inches. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Thorvaldsen made his "Jason" in plaster. Sculptors working in the late 18th century made preparatory plaster models. Canova introduced the practice, and Thorvaldsen used it to great effect. Creating plaster models meant that sculptors could play with their designs rather than being constrained by patrons' requests when sculpting in costly bronze and marble.

According to the Thorvaldsens Museum, most of Thorvaldsen's works are reflective, introspective pieces, but this early Roman piece of the Greek mythological prince Jason differs. The sculpture shows Jason's will and is a more actively engaging piece—extroverted, if you like—bringing the viewer into the space.

"Portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen," 1810, by Rudolph Suhrlandt.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

He wears a strophium (headband) that tames his curls and which traditionally signifies that he's a god or king. Jason's pose almost mirrors the top half of the "Apollo Belvedere," except that Jason's left arm is by his side and draped with the golden fleece. Thorvaldsen depicted Jason in contrapposto pose, balancing most of his weight on one leg, and it appears that he copied this pose from the "Doryphoros." Another similarity is that Doryphoros originally carried a spear over his left shoulder, as Jason carries one over his right shoulder.

Thorvaldsen depicts the point when Jason returns home. He's had an arduous journey, overcome many challenges, and he's fought the dragon to get the golden fleece. Here, he returns with the fleece to regain the throne that his uncle took from Jason's father. The fleece had the ability to protect the country's wealth and fertility.

"Jason and the Golden Fleece" was the masterpiece that made Thorvaldsen more known, and without it he may have left Rome much earlier. In 1803, he was all set to sail home. His scholarship money had run out and his work was slow to sell. But the wealthy English art patron Thomas Hope commissioned him to make the sculpture in marble. A lithograph by Thorvald Jensen shows a morose Thorvaldsen sitting in his studio, with his "Jason and the Golden Fleece" sculpture behind him, unaware that the cloaked figure of Thomas Hope has just walked through the door to offer him a commission. Hope's fame bought Thorvaldsen success and kept him in Rome, for 40 years in all.

One of Thorvaldsen's most interesting commissions is the "Dying Lion" monument at Lucerne in Switzerland, which is carved into a cliff, to commemorate the Swiss guards who died in the French Revolution defending the Tuileries (the royal residence in Paris). A Swiss guard who had been on leave at the time of the attack commissioned the piece. He wanted a dead lion on a pile of weapons with the French royal coat of arms and the Swiss flag, to show the loyalty and bravery of the 600 colleagues who died. Thorvaldsen refused to create a dead lion, choosing instead to design a lion taking its last breath, resting on a shield with the fleur-de-lis emblems of French royalty. Thorvaldsen made the bronze model for the work, and the stone carving was made true to his design by another sculptor.

If Thorvaldsen's name wasn't familiar to you, his works may be, especially his sculpture of the resurrected Christ. It's a powerful work, showing Christ's compassion and the sacrifice he made. Christ looks to the ground while showing us the wounds on his hands and feet. Thorvaldsen depicted Christ as if he's gently walking among us, showing us the rewards of faith in the face of suffering.

The sculpture was made for the Castle Church at Christiansborg Palace, along with statues of the 12 apostles, but it was moved to the high altar of the Church of Our Lady. Across the world, copies of the statue have been made.

Thorvaldsen left all his works, including his plaster molds and his art collection, to the Danish people in a museum that he and the public funded for the purpose. He's buried onsite under a bed of roses, at his request.

To find out more about Bertel Thorvaldsen, visit ThorvaldsensMuseum.dk

HELLE NANNY BRENDSTRUP/THORVALDSENS MUSEUM

"Thomas Hope Arriving in Thorvaldsen's Studio to Buy 'Jason With the Golden Fleece'" 1872, by Thorvald Jensen. Lithograph. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

HISTORY

Land That I Love

Learning from the voices of the dead

Continued from ***Page 1***

We don't need to take a poll to prove this point. Millions of people are immigrating to these shores, legally and illegally, but only a relatively few Americans annually renounce their citizenship and move abroad, an act of repudiation that most often involves investments and finances. Whatever the political situation, Americans still believe theirs is a land of opportunity and freedom.

Unlike Becca's interest in John, however, many of us neglect our country's past. Perhaps because we grew up here, familiarity has bred not contempt but instead a lack of interest in the ideas and events that have shaped us as a people.

The history that students were supposed to learn in school is either forgotten or (worse) never taught, and many of us simply take for granted our right to attend a church or synagogue, switch jobs when we so choose, move across the country, and generally do as we please within the limits of the law. These freedoms are the American way, as natural and unquestioned as the air we breathe.

In short, we have eyes and ears for the present, but we are blind and deaf to the past.

But the past can make itself seen and heard if we allow it. If we enhance our intimacy with those who built our country, who fought bloody wars to protect our way of life, and who battled for "liberty and justice for all," then by examining their words and actions, we may eventually realize that our ancestors were hoping we would keep faith with the legacy they bequeathed us.

And the only way we can reach across this canyon of time and shake hands with those who came before us—the only way we can see them and hear their voices—is through the study of history.

A Basic Query

We begin our excursion into the "old days" with some fundamentals.

Here's a starter list of 10 simple questions about our history that any American high school graduate should be able to answer. If you wish, test yourself and your older children or grandchildren. To encourage research, if research is necessary, no answers are provided.

1. What was the main point of the Declaration of Independence?
2. What are the three branches of government laid out in the Constitution?
3. What is the Bill of Rights? Name one of these Rights.
4. During what war was "The Star Spangled Banner" written?
5. What was the Emancipation Proclamation?
6. What event took place in Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865?
7. Name three presidents who served in office between 1900 and 1960.
8. What president said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."
9. What is the general thrust of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
10. Who was the first American to walk on the moon?

Despite our current divisions, the majority of Americans feel loyalty to their country.

These questions, and others like them, are of course but the skeleton of the past. To give flesh, blood, sinew, and nerve to those bare bones, we must further expand our knowledge of the American story.

The Endless Resources at Our Command

The ways and means of exploring the history of the United States are abundant. An excellent basic textbook, for example, is Wilfred McClay's "Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story," which is a balanced, informative account of the successes, failures, and troubles our country has faced.

For those who prefer to direct their gaze at more specific events, our libraries and bookstores offer an array of books for young and old alike. Even a modest public library, for example, will contain scores of volumes of American history for adolescents and adults, ranging in subject matter from the work of the Founding Fathers to the battles of the Civil War, and from the westward expansion to the fearful days of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Biography, too, affords a splendid vehicle for conveying us into an older America and learning wisdom from the men and women who faced their own special tribulations. Daniel Brown's "The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics" isn't just a story of athletes and the human spirit; it also depicts the suffering inflicted by the Great Depression.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

A depiction of the reading of the Declaration of Independence, 1877, by Filippo Costaggini. A frieze in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol.

An excellent textbook to begin an acquaintance with American history.

"Embarkation of the Pilgrims," 1857, by Robert Walter Weir. Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum.

David McCullough's "Mornings on Horseback," which tells us of the early life of Theodore Roosevelt, and his "John Adams" are exquisite studies in the character and temperament of two outstanding Americans. Louis L'Amour's autobiography "Education of a Wandering Man" provides us with a splendid account of a young man's adventures while roaming the country in the 1930s and vividly demonstrates the great American tradition of the autodidactic learner.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

For those wishing a more imaginative approach, fiction also throws open windows on the past. Betty Smith's "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," "The Kent Family Chronicles" by John Jakes, and hundreds of other stories written by authors past and present are historically sound and enkindle the imagination. In addition, novels for adolescents set in the America of yesteryear, like "Across Five Aprils" or "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry," can spark a lifelong interest in history.

The Payoff

In "Orthodoxy," G.K. Chesterton wrote: "Tradition means giving a vote to most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."

Communing with the dead—that is, reading and absorbing history—removes us from Chesterton's "small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."

While today we can see the grievous flaws of such an oligarchy, whether its practitioners are sitting in Congress or serving on our local school board, our trek through the past should demolish such self-obsession and strutting pride. History's lessons and examples give us a longer view, a telescope to see beyond the latest headline or the next election.

That same journey into the past can also offer solace to fearful or weary travelers unhappy with the times in which they live. We then realize that those who came before us did not dwell in some golden age, but faced their own hardships. Understanding their troubles helps put our own present-day difficulties in perspective.

Moreover, immersing ourselves in history can endow us with strength and virtue. Reading about the tenacity of Ulysses Grant at the Battle of Shiloh, for example, when he rallied his defeated troops to win the battle the next day, can inspire us to stand fast through our own personal trials.

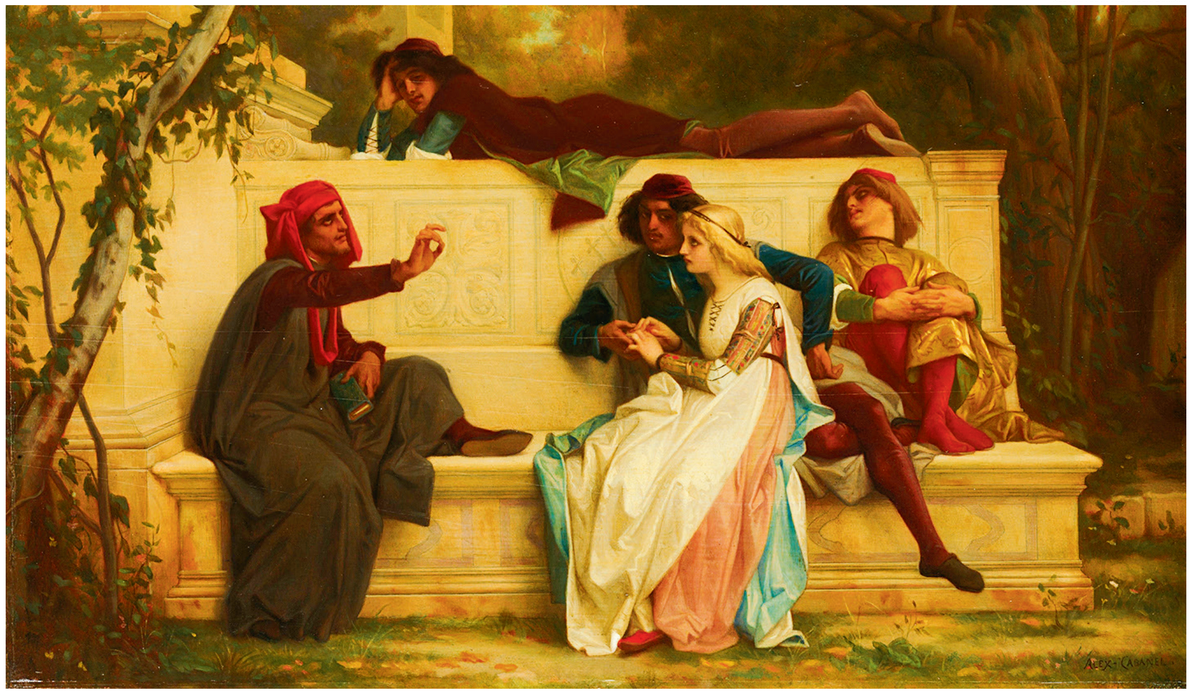
The integrity of men and women like Senator Robert Taft and Harriet Tubman reminds us of the importance of principles in a fallen world. The "Little House on the Prairie" books about the Ingalls family and their rough-and-tumble lives on the frontier can inspire our young people to persevere when confronted by life's stumbling blocks.

To preserve our republic and to restore its culture means that we must understand our country. To understand America, we must study history, the good and the bad from our past.

And with that understanding, there should emerge an abiding love for who we are and who we hope to be.

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

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN



"Florentine Poet," 1861, by Alexandre Cabanel. Oil on wood. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

POETRY

Literary Standards: Are They Real?

JAMES SALE

There's long been a debate on whether art should be valued simply because I (or you) like it via a totally subjective stance.

Recently, I was privileged to be invited to be one of the two final judges of the 100 Days of Dante poetry competition run by the Calvin Center for Faith & Writing with the Society of Classical Poets. My co-judge was poet and professor at Fordham University, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell whom, at the point of being paired with her, I knew nothing about.

Because she was a co-judge, I decided to buy a couple of her collections (specifically, her "Still Pilgrim" and, more recently, "Love in the Time of Coronavirus") to check her out. To be frank, I was more than impressed. I thought: Here is a major American poet writing in the great tradition. Why hadn't I heard of her before?

Leaving that aside, I felt reassured that in judging the poetry, I was at least going to be working with somebody who knew what they were doing. And lo! Such proved to be the case, and even more so than I could have imagined.

"Six Tuscan Poets," 1544, by Giorgio Vasari. (L–R) Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Francesco Petrarca, Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante Alighieri, and Guido Cavalcanti. Minneapolis Institute of Art.

"Calliope, Muse of Epic Poetry," 1798, by Charles Meynier. Oil on canvas. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Clearly, the notion that all poems are equal is absurd.

I Like It, Therefore It's Good Poetry

One view: All art appreciation—and let's just consider the art form of poetry here—is entirely subjective, and there are no actual standards of performance. Whether any poem is actually any good or not is entirely a matter of personal opinion. If it's good for me, if I like it, that's enough. End of debate.

Indeed, it's not only the end of the debate, but how dare you suggest that my opinion of a poem is in any degree less valid than yours? I'm uncomfortable with your elitist reaction to my opinion!

As we come to the word "elitist," of course, we realize that we are not far from invoking the magic word "equality." I am equal to you, my opinion is equal to yours, and—the final non sequitur—all poems are equal in merit.

Professor Mark William Roche summed it up neatly in his book "Why Literature Matters" like this: "Art is whatever a certain group deems it to be. To suggest otherwise is to risk being viewed as a censor of others' perspectives, instead of a critic seeking the best truth claims."

Clearly, the notion that all poems are equal is absurd, but that is where we are. I could write a whole essay on why it is not the case that all poems are equal, and not all views about poetry are equal, either. In the good ol' days, it seemed to be obvious that there were informed views and less informed views, and that we should give more credit and credence to informed views.

How could we know that they were informed? Because they advanced coherent and perceptive arguments, insights, and ideas based on closer readings of the texts, we could weigh these arguments one against another and see which were the weightiest.

From this process, over time, of course, a canon would emerge: These are the important works, these are the less important works, and these don't matter at all, so we can abandon them without any real sense of loss. But this kind of ranking took place in the good ol' days, days on which the sun has long gone down.

An Informed Understanding of Poetry

But sometimes, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins observed, "though the last lights off the black West went/ Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—"

Such was my experience working with Angela O'Donnell: a deep reaffirmation of the order of things in the cosmos, a deep validation that things are not equal, and that such concepts as "standards" are true whatever the contemporary world wishes to pretend to the contrary. How was this, then?

First, and to be clear, I am not suggesting that Professor O'Donnell agrees or supports my interpretation of what occurred.

Secondly, we had to have a modus operandi for judging: We needed to create four winners (in four categories) from the shortlist of 21 poems that we received. We agreed to create a rank order of the top three in three of the categories, and in the overall winning category to nominate the winner with a possible alternative.

Furthermore, we agreed, though without being too explicit about it, that we would not share our listings with each other, and we would work independently of the other's list; in other words, we would be blind to what each other thought.

Let's look at the principle that poetry appreciation or value is an entirely subjective affair. We had 21 poems to sort. What would be the probability be that we would agree, without consultation, on the following: 1) agree on all four winning categories, including the overall winner; 2) agree on second and third places in all but one category, but even here we were close to an agreement. This was the result without having discussed any of the merits of the poetry!

If there were no such thing as standards, the odds of that happening would be minuscule. The reality is that there are standards but, as with everything else, one has to do the work to understand what they are.

Why Do We Trust Some Experts?

One of the ironies of our modern situation is that we seem absolutely, co-dependently determined to seek and follow expert advice when it comes to technology or science or medicine. Take COVID and the absurd rules that some of the experts foisted on us, and which we followed. But when it comes to art and poetry, we disallow expertise and consider it hierarchical, elitist, and infringement of our freedom.

Unfortunately, because of this unwillingness to consider some artworks better than others, we have undermined thinking itself: It is in the arts and poetry that some of our deepest and profoundest thinking, imaginatively, is to be found.

Finally, then, I would like to reacquaint readers with a standard from the past that today is rarely considered at all. Perhaps the greatest critic in the English language is from the 18th century: Dr. Samuel Johnson. To read Johnson is to read a manual on how to read.

Johnson would have profoundly agreed with Mark William Roche's more recent observation:

"Morality is not one sub-system among others, such as that there is art, science, religion, business, politics, and so forth, 'alongside' morality. Instead, morality is the guiding principle for all human endeavors."

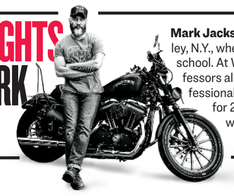
Precisely, for as Johnson noted, "he who thinks reasonably must think morally" (from his "Preface to Shakespeare"). And what is morality? A standard, a standard of good and evil, and knowing the difference between them, which is all that the modern world wishes, sadly, to blur, obscure, and ultimately bury.

James Sale has had over 50 books published, most recently, "Mapping Motivation for Top Performing Teams" (Routledge, 2021). He has been nominated for the 2022 poetry Pushcart Prize, won first prize in The Society of Classical Poets 2017 annual competition, performing in New York in 2019. His most recent poetry collection is "HellWard." For more information about the author, and about his Dante project, visit EnglishCantos.home.blog

GILES KEYTE/TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION

Mark Watney (Matt Damon) is an astronaut trying to figure out how to live on Mars, in "The Martian."

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.

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION

Matt Damon portrays an astronaut who faces seemingly insurmountable odds.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Matt Damon's 2015 Merry Mission-to-Mars Movie

MARK JACKSON

NASA is still trying to put a man on Mars. Which is a fine endeavor. But when "The Martian" debuted in 2015, I felt we'd be better served if NASA had put its considerable resources toward helping to contain the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown. If ever there was a situation that called for all hands on deck, right? At the time, it seemed conceivable that we'd all die of radiation, or irradiated tunafish, before NASA figured out how to fly humans 34 million miles from the blue planet to the red planet. I'm still pretty sure we'll be seeing eight-headed turtles before man ever sets foot on Mars.

However, via its fictional NASA, Hollywood put Matt Damon on Mars so we could stick our collective heads in the Martian sand and forget about Fukushima for two hours. Ridley Scott's "The Martian" was an instantaneous, thrilling American space classic about ingenuity, courage, and all-for-one-and-one-for-all teamwork. Director Scott had transcended the slump he was in, and there's really nothing we don't enjoy watching Matt Damon in.

Spaceman-genuity

There's a space crew on Mars, outside their module, collecting samples, when a Martian haboob (Mars here looks very Hindu Kush-like; "haboob" is Arabic for sandstorm) blows up: red sand everywhere, blocking out the sun.

Due to an equipment malfunction, Damon's astronaut Mark Watney gets skewered with a flying antenna. While he's down for the count, lost in the haboob, his crew members abort the mission, blast off, and leave him for dead.

But he's not dead, and he's a botanist, so he jury-rigs and MacGyvers up a greenhouse. And ransacks the collection of space-crew freeze-dried poo packets to make some, ahem, in-a-pinch—fertilizer! It'll be four years before anyone can conceivably get to him, so he'd better grow some tasty vittles. Such as bushels of pootatoes (not a typo).

Ground Control to Maj. Mark

Back on Earth, Watney's given a hero's farewell, and then the satellite-monitoring NASA scientists discover he's still alive. What to do? Tell the crew? They need to concentrate on getting home safe. But is there any hope for a rescue?

First order of business, more low-tech jerry-building: Watney treks (in the Martian dune buggy) a long distance to a buried piece of communication equipment from a previous mission, and with much duct-taping, a rudimentary spelling gizmo is hatched. Now Mark Watney, extraterrestrial, can phone home.

Some of this jury-rigging and jerry-building is reminiscent of Robert Downey Jr.'s lab-tinkering on the "Iron Man" suit, replete with an explosion that blasts him across a room and bounces him off a wall; it's the exact same gag and almost as funny. It's a sure bet that Ridley Scott was inspired by "Iron Man"; there's more than a little Iron Man-like maneuvering involved in Watney's rescue attempt. As the saying goes: Good artists borrow, great artists steal.

Supporting Cast

Jeff Daniels plays the no-fun, budget-and-image-conscious NASA director, while Chiwetel Ejiofor plays the head of NASA's Mars missions; he's much more in touch with the astronauts and scientists.

Donald Glover plays the rudimentary-life-skills-challenged supergeek who does the mega-math and masterminds a classified, high-risk meta-rescue involving a Chinese missile.

Kristen Wiig plays NASA's director of public relations. Audiences immediately laugh just looking at her, so conditioned are we to seeing Wiig wigging out, comedically. Which she does here in muted form.

Sean Bean plays a NASA flight director. Look for a nice grouping of "Lord of the Rings" inside jokes in his presence. And then there's Michael Peña, whose star had fully risen by 2015. There's no more imminently watchable actor these days than Peña. He's a rare actor who can shine brightly on both extremes of the comedy–drama spectrum.

'The Martian' really boils down to the dedication of teams.

'The Martian'

Director: Ridley Scott

Starring: Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Michael Peña, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sean Bean, Kate Mara, Jeff Daniels, Donald Glover

Running Time: 2 hours, 24 minutes

MPAA Rating: PG-13

Release Date: Oct. 2, 2015

★★★★½

Disco Infernal

In American pop culture, if you let enough time go by, you can shoehorn even our most annoying, ickiest pop songs into a movie and have the mash-up create a weird kind of wonderful atmosphere. The barrel-bottom dredging of 1970s AM-radio musical cheese for movie soundtracks, happening in "The Martian," undoubtedly has "Guardians of the Galaxy" to thank. It features disco "classics," ABBA, and the fluffier David Bowie cuts jammed in there under the pretext that they're Capt. Melissa Lewis's (Jessica Chastain) personal playlist.

Will they drive Watney mad, should he discover them? Will they drive you mad? You may discover that hearing songs which, in any other context, would normally provoke a knee-jerk "Turn it off!!!" flailing response, here will make you feel strangely happy.

Funny Farm

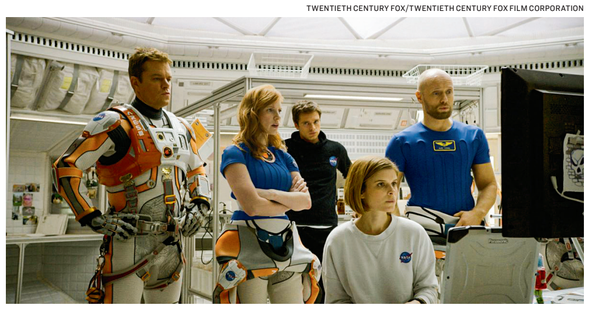
Damon is the man for this role of the astronaut/farmer-as-standup-comedian, the only flaw being that the situations and set pieces telegraph low-hanging-fruit jokes with obvious punchlines. Then again, it's nice to see Ridley Scott—normally a creator of creatures who bite your face off—going for some laughs.

"The Martian" really boils down to the dedication of teams: people who signed on for come-what-may because it's their calling—in this case, ingenious jury-rigging creativity and the brainpower to handle the math behind the astrophysics. And to use their talents to save one of their own. They can't get enough of that. Neither can we.

It seems apropos to end with a Beatles lyric more fitting for the film than, say, ABBA's "Waterloo": "Limitless undying love, which shines around me like a million suns, it calls me on and on across the universe."

I still feel that the real NASA should stop focusing on space travel and attempt to rectify Fukushima's aftermath and purify Earth's water supply before the world's oceans turn red, thereby creating two red planets in the universe, which will render future Mars missions redundant.

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION



(L–R) Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Sebastian Stan, Kate Mara, and Aksel Hennie portray the crew members of the fateful mission to Mars.

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION

Mark Watney (Matt Damon) grows "pootatoes."

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PD-US

"One Hundred Horses," 1728, by Giuseppe Castiglione. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk; 3.1 feet by 25.5 feet. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

FINE ART

Italian Artist Giuseppe Castiglione: Bridging Art East to West

DA YAN

It may be difficult to believe that such a sublime Chinese landscape was painted by an Italian artist.

The receding layers of mountains, ridges, and misty valleys, lushly embellished with sinuous pines, betray a sensibility found in Chinese literati aesthetics. A reclusive villa hides behind a hill, while two discoursing figures stand atop a cliff admiring a waterfall. The water disappears into the mist and reemerges from under a footbridge to cascade through rocky terrain into the foreground. At the left, another villa sits amid the woods where a gentleman leisurely reclines in pensive solitude by his hut.

The sense of sublime nature, the insignificance of human presence, and the yearning for a hermetic life were all common themes in Chinese painting. On closer examination, however, the painted architecture displays a heightened effect of realism seldom seen in works of this genre at the time. The buildings appear to be rendered from a fixed viewpoint in accordance with a trained, optical perspective. The masterful techniques of chiaroscuro (strong contrasts between light and dark) and linear perspective were the hallmarks of European art, which were especially admired in the imperial court.

This landscape was painted in Beijing in the early 18th century, during a period of increasing cultural exchange between Baroque Europe and Qing China.

An Artistic Mission

Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), better known by his Chinese name Lang Shining, was a Baroque-era painter who studied art in Milan, Italy. A few years after joining the Jesuit order, he was called to serve the Church in a very unconventional way: The 26-year-old Castiglione was sent to China in 1715 to become a court painter for the Qing Dynasty emperors.

Castiglione lived in Beijing for the next 51 years of his life and executed an impressive number of still lifes and portraits. Throughout the years, he became especially known for his horse and flower paintings, which incorporated both European techniques and longstanding Chinese symbolism.

"Gathering of Auspicious Signs" was painted to celebrate the Yong-zheng Emperor's coronation in 1722. The double-blossom lotuses and the double-eared grains were symbols of a sagacious rule, while the celadon vase appealed to the court fashion of collecting fine antique porcelain. Though Castiglione continued to render shading to create a sense of volume and depth, he nevertheless diminished the use of chiaroscuro and removed the uniform light source. Instead, the lotus flowers glow with a mellow luminosity that is balanced by the warm glaze of the vase. Altogether, the composition exudes a graceful tranquility that Qing aristocrats greatly appreciated.

Throughout the years, Castiglione became especially known for his horse and flower paintings, which incorporated both European techniques and longstanding Chinese symbolism.

In Devotion to Art

Castiglione did not travel to another continent merely to paint for the aristocrats' pleasure; he firmly believed that his work at the Qing court had a purpose. Though never officially ordained as a priest, Castiglione believed that winning imperial favor would allow the Jesuits to smoothly carry out their missionary work in China. Therefore, he endured much hardship in the service of the emperor.

Court life for the European artists was not an easy one, especially during the reign of Qianlong (1735–1796), who took a keen interest in Western art. To cater to his taste, Castiglione and his European colleagues had to continually experiment with different artistic styles. They seldom had time for themselves and enjoyed very little freedom. As the emperor enjoyed watching them at work, they were required to paint every day and were often given specific instructions.

Few of Castiglione's colleagues were able to endure the isolated and repetitive lifestyle. Some complained about the lack of spiritual nourishment, and others simply left the court and returned to Europe. Castiglione, always of a gentle temperament, never said a word in complaint. For 51 years, he commuted almost daily from his resident church to the studio in the Forbidden City, immersing himself in the minute lines and delicate colors.

Castiglione believed that the realism of European art could serve as a mirror for the Christian faith and, through beauty, his artwork would communicate that truth. A poem composed toward the end of his life summarizes the extraordinary mind of Giuseppe Castiglione, the artist who believed and persevered:

"Endowed with imperial grace in the sagacious age of Kang(xi) and Qian(long),
[I] become a courtier in the dynasty of the Qing;
With Chinese moderacy and Western methods [I] draw the meticulous brush,
[So that] the true image of still lives may wake ten thousand souls."

Da Yan is a doctoral student of European art history. Raised in Shanghai, China, he lives and works in the Northeastern United States.

A detail of "Landscape," 18th century, by Giuseppe Castiglione. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk; 56.3 inches by 35 inches. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

(Left) "Gathering of Auspicious Signs," 1723, by Giuseppe Castiglione. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk; 68.1 inches by 33.8 inches. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
(Right) "Landscape," 18th century, by Giuseppe Castiglione. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk; 56.3 inches by 35 inches. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

MUSIC

Franz Schubert and the Pathway to Romanticism

PETE MCGRAIN

The story of Austrian composer Franz Schubert (1797–1828) was one of the most tragic in classical music. When historians look back on his work, they view it equal in every measure to that of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven. Apart from a few composers of that time (Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms) who found and championed his compositions, Schubert might have been completely overlooked for the genius he was.

This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Schubert died at 31 years of age, eight months after his first and only public performance in 1828. It wasn't until after his death that this vast treasure trove of music was discovered. Of course, by then Schubert wasn't around to experience the recognition he deserved.

It's actually a testament to his genius that the work lived on. Schubert's first formal music teacher, Michael Holzer, who was the organist and choirmaster of Lichtental Parish Church, remarked that he could find nothing to teach the child; he was left to regard him in "astonishment and silence."

It is not such a tragedy for listeners today. We still have his wonderful music to explore. However, we might wonder how Schubert would have felt if he'd known the many hearts his music would touch.

'Wanderer' Fantasy

I am a real fan of piano sonatas. With solo piano, there is nowhere to hide. Without the cover of an orchestra, the details of every part—melody, counterpoint, harmony, and rhythm—are all exposed. The genius of the work is thus revealed, as well as the personality of the composer. Every note is a clue to who the writer is.

Schubert, a shy and retiring gentleman, was full of mischief, mystery, and wonder. His piano sonatas are an incredible contribution to our heritage and reveal him as a man with a limitless interior landscape of emotion. There is enough polite, baroque gaiety to enjoy, but on closer examination, Schubert's sonatas reveal sensitively expressed romance, pathos, and yearning.

The Fantasy in C, Op. 15, more commonly known as the "Wanderer" Fantasy, was written for solo piano in 1822, and is one of Schubert's most well-known and frequently performed works. It is considered one of the greatest compositions in the entire piano repertoire. This four-movement fantasy is linked by a unifying theme with each movement flowing into the next, starting with a variation of the opening phrase from a former composition "Der Wanderer." This lied (poem set to music) was originally composed in 1816 for piano and voice with lyrics and title derived from a poem by Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck.

The "Wanderer" Fantasy is considered his most challenging work; he is quoted to have barely the ability to play it himself. Composed during the post-Enlightenment, the fantasy alludes to the onset of changing tastes—the complexity, the sense of searching, and his contemporary time itself. Musically it is incredible; as a cultural reference, it is absolutely magnetic.

In the song, the wanderer seeks a distant paradise but cannot find it anywhere among men: "Where are you, my dear land? Sought and brought to mind, yet never known. ..." Searching for happiness, the wanderer asks, "where?" and a ghostly breath answers, "There, where you are not, there is your happiness."

The "Wanderer" Fantasy broke away from the classical form in that it was created to be performed without a break between the movements. Both the virtuosity and structure captivated other Romantic era composers, most intently the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, who transcribed it for piano and orchestra. Editing Schubert's original score, Liszt rearranged the final movement and added alternative passages into the fantasy.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Illustration of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "Erlkönig" (translated as "king of the fairies"), 1849, by Moritz von Schwind. Narodni Galerie Praha, Prague.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Portrait of Franz Schubert, 1846, by Josef Kriehuber.

Poetic Music

There are over 900 works by Schubert to explore, ranging from traditional Viennese waltzes like the dreamscape "Serenade" for full orchestra, viola, or cello to his poetic lieder. "Erlkönig" (translated as "king of the fairies") is one of Schubert's more preeminent lieder. Set to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem of the same name, it is a dramatic and challenging composition that is widely regarded as a masterpiece of the early Romantic era.

The lied tells the story of a father who swiftly rides home on horseback, holding his anxious and feverish son. As the story unfolds, the child experiences "hallucinations" of the malevolent spirit of the Erlking (personification of death) that tries to lure the boy. As they race through the forest, the frightened father tries to console his child by defining the supernatural experiences as mere natural causes: a streak of fog, rustling leaves, and the shimmering willows. When they reach home, the father discovers that his son has died.

Schubert was only 18 years of age when he created this evocative and theatrical composition in 1815. Composed for vocals and piano accompaniment, the song features four characters—narrator, father, son, and the Erlking—all sung by a single vocalist. All characters are sung in the minor key except the Erlking, whose character is sung in the major key.

You will also hear the seeds of the dramatic use of piano that would later accompany many of the first black-and-white movie melodramas. The piano simulates the galloping of horse hooves with a distinct triplet passage and leitmotif bassline (recurring musical theme).

'Death and the Maiden'

String Quartet No. 14, also known as "Death and the Maiden," was composed in 1824 after Schubert learned of his imminent death. The quartet was inspired by one of his earlier lieder, using the same title, and was originally set to a poem by German poet Matthias Claudius. The theme of the quartet is a death toll about the terror of dying and the hopeful anticipation of the comfort and peace that follows. In the dialogue between the maiden and death, the young woman fearfully casts death away, crying out: "Go, savage man of bone! I am still young—go!"

The verse sung by "Death" in Schubert's lied reads:

"Give me your hand, you fair and tender creature;
I am a friend and do not come to punish you.
Be of good cheer! I am not savage,
Gently you will sleep in my arms."

Despite Schubert's illness and depression, he continued to write tuneful, light music that evoked warmth and comfort. The String Quartet No. 14 was first played privately in 1826 and not published until 1831, three years after his death.

Unfinished Symphony

To make time to write the "Wanderer" Fantasy for the wealthy patron Carl Emanuel Liebenberg von Zsittin, Schubert stopped writing what would come to be known as the "Unfinished Symphony." Unfortunately, the "Unfinished Symphony" remained unfinished, and the "Wanderer" Fantasy wasn't performed in public until 1832, long after the composer's death.

If there was any doubt about Schubert's pure emotionality, the drama of the "Unfinished Symphony," also known as Symphony No. 8, will quickly dispel all doubts. Although the symphony is missing its finale, which would complete the musical form, it is not lacking in any other sense.

Schubert, a shy and retiring gentleman, was full of mischief, mystery, and wonder.

Due to the lyrical drive of the dramatic structure, the unfinished Symphony No. 8 is often referred to as the very first Romantic symphony, which cements Schubert's place in the annals of music history. The bold symphonic scope of Schubert's music as well as its dramatic power and emotional tension celebrate him as a "romantic" who influenced the next group of musical legends such as Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss.

It's easy to see why his work is considered in the same league as the works of Mozart, Bach, or Beethoven. Schubert's compositions are still being discovered by audiences that appreciate its depth and emotive expression. I just wish he had known that we would still know his name almost 200 years later.

Pete McGrain is a professional writer/director/composer best known for the film "Ethos," which stars Woody Harrelson. Currently living in Los Angeles, McGrain hails from Dublin, Ireland, where he studied at Trinity College.

REWIND, REVIEW AND RE-RATE

Blythe Danner Steals Our Hearts

MICHAEL CLARK

As baby boomers continue to age, and with their disposable entertainment dollars becoming less likely to support comic-book franchises, Hollywood, at its usual glacier's pace, has reacted by tossing them a bone or two per year. "I'll See You in My Dreams" ("ISYIMD") is a prime example of this type of offering.

If for no other reason, boomers (or anyone else looking for a gripping romance) should consider investing a couple of hours and minimal dollars to see "ISYIMD" featuring the underrated and vastly overlooked Blythe Danner, in what could rightfully be considered the defining performance of her stellar career.

The Face, the Voice, Maybe Not the Name

Known to most as the mother of Gwyneth Paltrow, Danner has shown up in over 100 movies, TV shows, and stage productions in mostly supporting roles since 1968. Long ago committed to raising her children with her late producer husband Bruce Paltrow, Danner has always provided what the industry calls "flavored accent" to productions in which she's appeared.

You know the face, you know the voice, but you can't quite recall the name. It's a pity that this movie didn't come out in the late fall of 2015 because it would have surely put Danner on the short list for an Oscar nomination. Such is the life and career of a preeminent character performer.

As Carol, Danner portrays a woman we all know or would really like to know. She's been a widow for two decades, lives in a semi-upscale California retirement community, and is ultra cool, although she doesn't know it (which is good).

Carol plays bridge and golf, drinks probably more than she should (but not too much), and regularly resists the urging from her friends (Rhea Perlman, June Squibb, and Mary Kay Place) to get out there and find a new man.

Sizzle at Any Age

Being the willowy, understated, fetching type, Carol doesn't have to find a man, and as it turns out, the right man (Sam Elliott as Bill) finds her. Bill is the kind of guy we've come to expect from the most recent incarnation of Elliott—ruggedly handsome, unaffected, and bluntly charming.

He sees Carol across the way; they make lingering eye contact, and he works his baritone, gravel-voiced magic. They go out and then they go out again. It's heaven for both of them, and we realize that passion, longing, and the newness of romance doesn't have to fizzle out with the graying of the temples.

For reasons that remain dodgy, for the duration of the film director Brett Haley ("Hearts Beat Loud") and his co-writer Marc Basch include a second possible love interest for Carol in the form of Lloyd (Martin Starr), a pool boy who is young enough to be her son and far too old to be a pool boy. Directionless but nervously appealing, Lloyd involves Carol in platonic-ish activities like karaoke (where she excels), but the gleam in his eye indicates that he'd go further if she opened the door and invited him in.

After finding out about the friendship with Lloyd, the bridge club girls work themselves into a lather and make their requisite cougar asides, and it's good for a quick chuckle but nothing more. Lloyd's best contribution comes in the final act when he performs the film's title song while playing a ukulele.

One of the more impressive and refreshing aspects of the movie is the way the filmmakers handle the subplot involving Carol's adult daughter Katherine (Malin Ackerman). Far too often in projects of this genre (and others), the mother-daughter dynamic is heightened and exaggerated to absurd levels, with the thinking that forced dramatic tension somehow adds to the emotional impact of the narrative.

The fact that these two women get along so well and don't come with any past baggage to unpack is just another facet proving that it is indeed possible to make a great movie about normal people.

Presented in a brisk 92 minutes, "ISYIMD" deserves high praise for not trying too hard to be deep, yet still does so by being (mostly) natural and avoiding a traditional A-to-B narrative.

There aren't any grand character arcs or life-altering revelations, and only a minimal amount of plot. It covers the day-to-day events in the life of a woman of advanced years who slowly breaks free from routine and begins to see why everyone is so taken with her. The only thing better than knowing Carol is being Carol.

If you're looking for another excellent movie with Danner containing similar subject matter, check out "What We Had" from 2018.

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.

ALL PHOTOS BY BLEECKER STREET

Blythe Danner as Carol in "I'll See You in My Dreams."

Sam Elliot as Bill and Blythe Danner as Carol in 2015's "I'll See You in My Dreams."

Blythe Danner portrays a woman we all know or would really like to know.

'I'll See You in My Dreams'

Director:
Brett Haley

Starring:
Blythe Danner, Sam Elliott, Martin Starr, Rhea Perlman, Malin Akerman

Running Time:
1 hour, 32 minutes

MPAA Rating:
PG-13

Release Date:
May 15, 2015

★★★★½