WEEK 23, 2022

THE EPOCH TIMES ARTS& CULTURES



Princess Rita and Prince Nicolò Boncompagni Ludovisi at Villa Aurora.

FINE ARTS

Roman Treasures: **The Eternal City,'** the Villa Aurora, and Princess Ludovisi

ELIZABETH LEV

Rome's serene skies and stately buildings often serve to salve the wounds of its history. Layers of monuments and ruins conceal centuries of struggles and triumphs. Through its many rebuildings, the Eternal City seems to declare "Tomorrow's another day."

Villa Ludovisi Aurora is a case in point. Tucked away behind the grand hotels of the Via Veneto on the Pincian Hill, this little oaIn 2021, the villa was catapulted into the global spotlight. sis shows little trace of the dramatic events and remarkable characters that have trod its grounds.

Yet in 2021, the villa was catapulted into the global spotlight when it was announced that the building, grounds, and its unique mural by celebrated Baroque artist Caravaggio would be put up for public auction.

Continued on Page 4





Gold \$10,000**Merkin Hall-KMC** NEW YORK Sep. 2022 VOCAL.NTDTV.COM

+1-888-477-9228 VOCAL@GLOBALCOMPETITIONS.ORG

DONATE YOUR CAR

To a media that stands for **TRUTH and TRADITION**

Your old vehicle can support The Epoch Times' truthful journalism and help us get factual news in front of more readers.

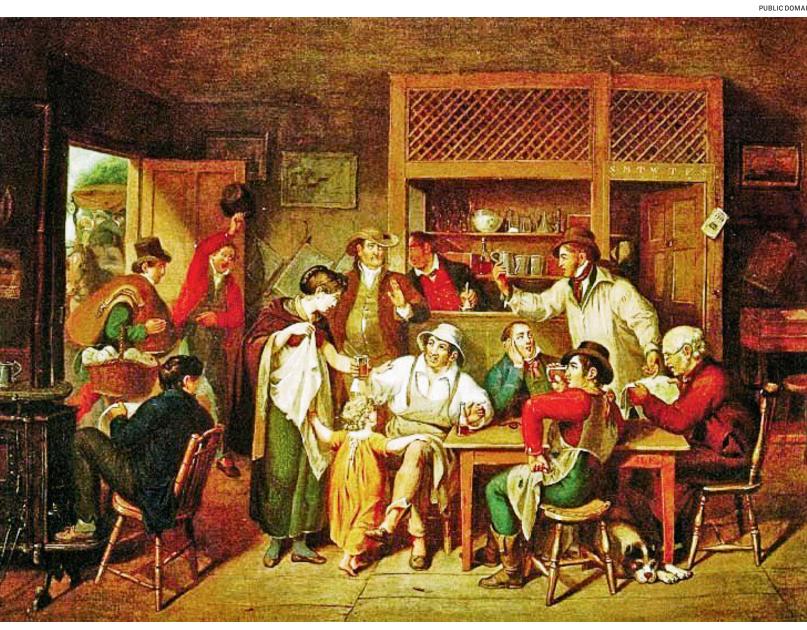
WHY DONATE TO US?

Accept cars, motorcycles, and RVs Free vehicle pick-up Maximum tax deduction Support our journalists



Our independence from any corporation or holding company is what ensures that we are free to report according to our values of Truth and Tradition. We're primarily funded through subscriptions from our readersthe stakeholders that we answer to, who keep us on the right track.

THE EPOCH TIMES



"In an American Inn," 1814, by John Lewis Krimmel. Library of Congress.

FOLK MUSIC

Stories in Song: American Ballads

JEFF MINICK

"Hang down your head, Tom Dooley Hang down your head and cry Hang down your head, Tom Dooley Poor boy, you're bound to die"

It was 1959 or 1960 when I first heard the Kingston Trio's "Tom Dooley" on the jukebox in Grady's Café in Boonville, North Carolina, population of around 600 souls. I don't remember what I was eating, who I was with, or why I was there, but I recollect perfectly sitting in a booth, staring into space, and being mesmerized by that song. they immigrated to America. "Danny Boy," And so began my lifelong love affair with American ballads.

ready learning ballads and folk songs in reflected this heritage. In Southern Apelementary school or from children's records. "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Oh! Susanna," "On Top of Old Smoky," and "Erie Canal" are just a few of these classics I recall singing in class. When I was 11, just before I abandoned my piano lessons, I dressed up like a cowpoke and performed "I'm a Poor Lonesome Cowboy" to an au- convict on the gallows, and I've heard a dience in our school auditorium. Thank heavens no one recorded that screechy performance for posterity.

Since then, I have listened to songwriters and singers as famous as Johnny Cash or as little known as my brother deliver these stories in song. When my children were growing up, we listened to recordings like "Wee Sing America," and to this day they can still belt out some of the songs they heard. Hearing one or more of them sing the chorus to "Goober Peas" always American Originals brings a laugh.

much to shape American culture.

Roots of the Ballad

"A ballad," declares one online dictionary, is "a poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas."

That's about as succinct and brief a definition we'll find.

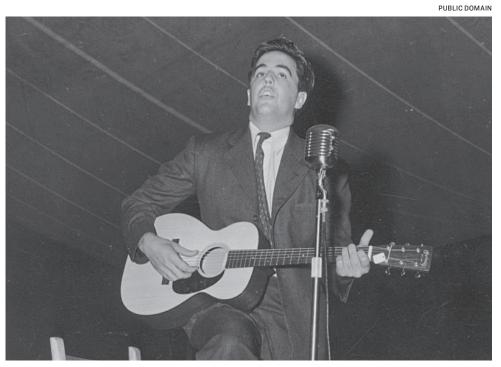
The ballad is centuries old, going back to the minstrels of the Middle Ages. Rarely put into writing or print at that time, ballads were passed from generation to generation, an oral tradition also often practiced in America throughout the 19th century. Settlers, particularly from the British

Isles, brought these song-stories when "Annie Laurie," and other pieces have now become part of the American repertoire, My siblings, my friends, and I were al- and sometimes entire cities and regions palachia, for example, the Scots and Scots-Irish who made those mountains their home kept alive their music, and it remains popular to this day.

> Here's another example of this trans-Atlantic cultural enrichment: Johnny Cash recorded "Sam Hall," the story of a couple of fellows roar out the words along with Cash. That rousing song comes to us from England.

> Sometimes, too, the old country songs are dressed up in new clothing. The folkrock group Steeleye Span, for instance, dug out some old British folk songs and ballads and put them to rock music. American musicians have also transformed old tunes and even the words of the songs.

In their Introduction to "American Ballads Let's take a look at just a few of these and Folk Songs," John and Alan Lomax, songs, old and new, that have done so who spent years seeking out sources and collecting this music, wrote this about the



Alan Lomax at the Mountain Music Festival in Asheville, N.C., between 1938 and 1950. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

breeding grounds of the American ballad:

"The cowboy, the miner, the tramp, the lumberjack, the Forty-niner, the soldier, the sailor, the plantation Negro (and also his sophisticated city cousin) ... all have 'made-up' songs describing their experiences or detailing situations. ..."

This father and son team also observed:

"A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads. The gamut of human experience has been portrayed through this unrecorded (at least until recently) literature of the people. These people had no literary conventions to uphold. But they were lonely or sad or glad, and they sought diversion.

The Good Ol' Songs

And that quest for diversion gave us some wonderful American music. The classic ballad "Streets of Laredo," its tune taken from an English folk song,

describes a dying cowboy, his regrets for having lived a bad life, and his requests for his funeral:

- "So, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly Sing the Death March as you carry me
- along Take me to the green valley,
- there lay the sod o'er me For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done
- wrong."

Then there's John Henry, a black "steel-driving man" who pitted his muscles and hammer against a steam drill in a contest to see whether man or machine might drill deeper Johnny Cash in 1977. mine. One day, when "a timber into stone. John Henry won the contest, but he died from ex-

haustion. One version of the song known by grabbing the "saggin' timber": by many Americans begins like this:

- "Well, John Henry was a little baby Sittin' on his daddy's knee
- He pick up a hammer and a little piece of steel,
- And cried, "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord Hammer's gonna be the death of me"
- In "Sweet Betsy From Pike," we meet a woman who displays the rugged spirit of the American pioneer.
- "Did you ever hear tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
- Who crossed the wide prairies with her lover Ike,
- With two yoke of cattle and one spotted hog, A tall shanghai rooster and an old yaller

dog?'

When we come to know the original lyrics of this song about Betsy's westward trek, we find that she isn't quite so sweet as we might assume. She gets tight on whiskey, dances around the wagon train, and raises

her dress indecently high. When Ike later

divorces Betsy, she sends him off with a of a boy whose father, having decided to shout: "Goodbye, you big lummox, I'm glad you backed out."

The Tradition Remains Alive

Though we may think of these song-stories as part of an old America, musicians have continued to bring us ballads.

When I was a kid, if one of us sang out "Born on a mountain top in Tennessee," everyone within listening distance could join in that ballad about Davy Crockett. The television show, starring Fess Parker as Crockett, made coonskin caps and that music as ubiquitous as our childhood fantasies of living like that

rugged pioneer. Written and performed by

> Jimmy Dean, "Big Bad John" became a huge hit in late 1961, and the following year won Dean a Grammy Award for the Best Country & Western Recording. This song tells the story of a big, quiet man who appears out of nowhere and sets to work in a cracked and men started cryin',"

Big John saves the miners' lives

"And with all of his strength he gave a

mighty shove Then a miner yelled out, "There's a light up above"

And twenty men scrambled from a would-be grave

Now there's only one left down there to save, Big John.'

Johnny Cash popularized all sorts of ballads, both old and new. Along with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson, Cash made a hit out of Jimmy Webb's "Highwayman," the story of a rough man whose spirit goes down through the ages. One of Cash's early compositions was "Ballad of a Teenage Queen," the story of a girl who leaves her hometown and her boyfriend for Hollywood, where she wins fame but eventually gives up everything for love and returns home.

One humorous ballad, originally writ- Their Wings," and two works of nonten by children's author Shel Silverstein, was raucously received when Cash first performed it at Folsom Prison. The song, writes in Front Royal, Va. which became a smash hit, tells the story See Jeff Minick.com to follow his blog.

leave his wife and baby, names his son Sue so he'll be forced to grow up fighting and defending himself. Later the two men meet in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, where they get into a brutal, no-holds bar fight. After Sue is victorious, his dad explains:

"And he said, "Son, this world is rough And if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough

And I knew I wouldn't be there to help you along

So I give you that name, and I said good-

And I knew you'd have to get tough or die It's that name that helped to make you strong."

Folk songs have done so much to shape American culture.

Ballads are the rough-hewn face of our culture. Most of the ballads are about ordinary men and women: workers, drifters, outlaws, adventurers, the good, the bad, and the beaten-down. Knowing and singing these songs helps keep our past alive.

Teaching them to our children gives them pathways into history that they might never otherwise find. And from many of these songs, most of them easily memorized and sung, our young people will also deepen their understanding of the human spirit: hardship overcome, the strength and the fragility of love, and the beauty of aspirations and dreams.

But there's one more great reason to learn some ballads. They're just plain ol' fun to sing.

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 fiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and

The Epoch Times Needs Your Help
Because Everyone Deserves to Hear the Truth

One Book (published by The Epoch Times) + One Movement =



As of December 2021, more than 389,000,000 people have realized the truth about the CCP and have taken a stand for freedom.



You've come to rely on The Epoch Times for news you can trust, stories censored else, presented without fear or favor.

And because we're a nonprofit:

• We rely on you, our readers—not only for subscriptions, but also for donations.

- Donations to The Epoch Times are tax
- deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Yes, I'd like to donate!

□ \$50 □ \$10 □ \$500 □ \$1,0				
Payment Method				
CREDIT CARD / DEBIT CARD:				
	IC 🗆 AMEX 🗆 DISC			
□ CHECK \$	#			
CHECK PAYABLE TO	The Epoch Times Association Inc.			
MAIL CHECK TO	Attn: Accounting Department 229 W. 28th St., Fl. 7, New York, NY 1000			
OR DONATE ONLINE	SupportEpoch.com			
THE EPOCH TIMES				

With your generous, tax-deductible contribution, we can reach even more people in 2022.

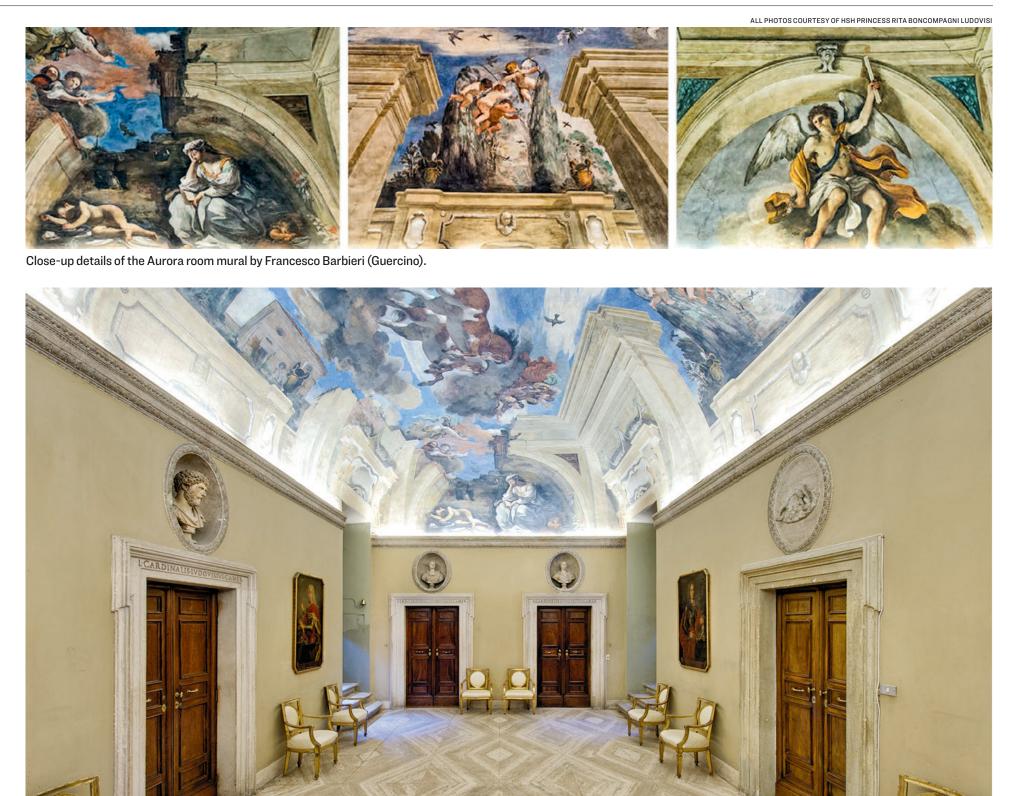
Because everyone deserves to hear the truth.

As our way of saying thank you for **any gift of** \$100 or more, we'll send you a free the bestselling book, Nine Commen the Communist Party, which reveals

China's secret strategy and what the free world must do about it before it's too late. This blockbuster book is yours free with your gift of \$100 or more.

\$100 or more, we'll send you a free copy of the bestselling book, Nine Commentaries on	SupportEpoch.com		
the Communist Party, which reveals Communist		or Please use this form	×
YC	OUR BILLING INFORMATION (PLEASE PRINT LEGIBL	Y)	

FIRST NAME		LAST NAME		PHONE					
ADDRESS					_	UNIT #	ŧ	 	
CITY		STATE		ZIP		-			
EMAIL								 	
CARD#*									
EXPIRATION	M M Y	cvv		ZI	P				
NAME ON CA	RD			SIGNATURE				 	
*We use your credi	t card solely, and securely, for	our donation. We do not sl	hare it with any th	rd parties.					



Aurora room at the Villa Ludovisi Aurora in Rome.

FINE ARTS

Roman Treasures: 'The Eternal City,' the Villa Aurora, and Princess Ludovisi

Continued from Page 1

Inheritance wars, art thefts, and family drama all came to light as attention was trained on the villa with its asking price arose from the ashes. of 471 million euro (approximately \$521 million) and a lineup of rumored prospective buyers from Bill Gates to the Sultan of Brunei.

The terrain was troubled from the beginning. Julius Caesar set up a fabulous garden on the site, but after his brutal murder in 44 B.C. it fell to the historian Sallust. A jewel among the aristocratic Née Rita Jenrette, the journalist, actress, pleasure palaces, it was burned to the and real estate broker rivaled Caravaggio

ground when Alaric invaded Rome in 410. The area lay fallow for over a thousand years until under the new Caesars of Rome, the papal court, new structures

The Princess in the Palace

After arson and murder, a public auction will seem pretty tame, but to Princess Rita Boncompagni Ludovisi, who has called the villa her home since she married Prince Nicolò Boncompagni Ludovisi of Piombino in 2009, it is a death knell.





in notoriety in her youth, until she met her prince.

Rita was reborn in the Villa Aurora (named, incidentally, for the goddess of the dawn). For 12 years, she worked to maintain the villa, in constant need of repairs, putting the site back on the list of great things to see in Rome as it had once been during the age of the Grand Tour when Henry James claimed that there "is nothing so blissfully right in Rome, nothing more consummately consecrated to style." Princess Rita often led the tours herself, sharing her love for the history and beauty of the place.

The princess said in an exclusive interview with The Epoch Times: "Nicolò gave his life for this ... and for years I have supported this villa through my efforts." After all that effort, she is "heartbroken to see it sold."

The villa is no stranger to sudden sales, however. Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, a Tuscan ally of the Medici dukes, purchased the property in 1596 only to have it requisitioned for the nephew of the reigning pope. It was returned in 1599, when the cardinal hired Michelangelo Merisi, also known as Caravaggio, to paint his one and only mural on the vault of a little attic chamber.

Caravaggio, on the eve of his stratospheric success with the "Calling of St. Matthew" in San Luigi dei Francesi (St. Louis of the French), chose a daring composition: three towering deities—Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto—seen in the nude in a sharp vertical foreshortening. Here, where Cardinal del Monte performed his alchemy experiments, whether fabricating gold or observing the heavens, Caravaggio personified the elements of water, air, and fire, each accompanied by

The Villa Aurora.



Mural of the entrance vault in the Aurora room by Francesco Barbie (Guercino



A detail from Caravaggio's mural on the vault of the attic chamber

Ceiling mural of the personification of Fame (fama), and a detail of its center (C) by Francesco Barbier (Guercino)

its respective animal: an eagle, a hippogriff, and the three-headed dog Cerberus. They are arrayed around a translucent painter to paint the personification of celestial sphere with Earth visible at its Fame upstairs. center. In a strange twist of fate, Galileo

The tiny room with three giants crowding the vault, all painted with the same dark scowling features of Caravaggio's own self-portrait, would perhaps be daunting to many. But for the princess, it is "the room where she does yoga."

The villa changed hands again when Cardinal del Monte sold it to a new papal family: the Ludovisi Boncompagni of Bologna. From 1621 to today, it has stayed within the family, handed down from generation to generation.

The Ludovisi family expanded the property to an astonishing 74 acres spread over the Pincian Hill. The cream of the Baroque painters left their work in the villa and their sculpture collection became the envy of Rome.

To fresco the entrance vault, the family hired Francesco Barbieri, nicknamed Guercino, a disciple of the famed Carracci academy. In his first Roman work, he painted Aurora galloping across the ceiling strewing flowers and dispelling darkness. Like Caravaggio, he used a dramatic viewpoint from underneath up, demonstrating his exceptional draw-

ing skills. The family so appreciated his work that they rehired the Bolognese

The princess knows these works as if Roman court of his heliocentric theory. to "spend many nights in the Aurora room playing cards," and she fumes over Italian landscape and seascape painter Agostino Tassi's collaboration on the vault, after his notorious rape of Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi. Her tone softens, however, as she says: "I love Guercino. I like the Guercino more than practically anything else in the villa."

> Since the glory days of the 17th century, the villa has been assaulted by time and greed. Speculation in the 19th century saw the estate dwindle to the half acre it is today. In 1896, J.P. Morgan considered buying the site for the American Academy. One hundred and four of the finest Ludovisi sculptures were sold to the Italian State in 1901, yet Caravaggio and Guercino have remained steadfast at the villa.

> Princess Rita also discovered another priceless asset of the villa—the archive of family documents, a vast sea of papers that she has spent 10 years organizing, preserving, and digitalizing. Working with both Rutgers University and the Italian Art Police, Rita succeeded in reclaiming a handwritten 1867 letter from St. John

Bosco to Princess Agnese Ludovisi, stolen in 2016 "by relatives." The categorized 150,000 pages of documents—from letters of Marie Antionette, to a document, signed in Pope Gregory XIII's own hand, would come to the villa a few years later they were old acquaintances. She re- recognizing the legitimacy of his natural on one of his many trips to persuade the counts her discovery that Bernini used son, Giacomo—are the legacy that the last owners of the villa will leave to the world.

The loss of the villa is devastating. Following Prince Nicolò's death in 2018, the inability to reach an agreement between Princess Rita and Prince Nicolò's sons from his first marriage and settle the estate's debt resulted in the magistrature's involvement, which ordered the sale. The first auction on Jan. 18, 2022, produced no bidders, and the villa suffered the same fate on a second auction on April 7. The third round, in what has been dubbed the "Sale of the Century," will take place on June 30, when the starting price will be lowered again.

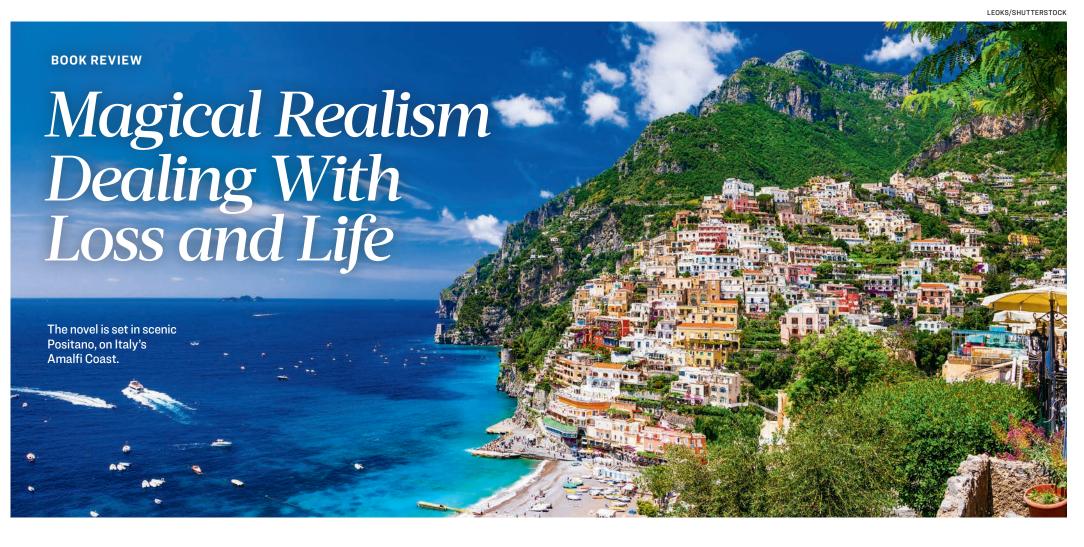
The princess has no regrets regarding the time, energy, and personal funds she poured into the villa, saying: "The only thing that survives is art and architecture, ... our paintings and our literature from generation to generation."

As Aurora galloping across the villa's vault knows, no matter how dark the moment may be, the sun always rises.

Elizabeth Lev is an American-born art historian who teaches, lectures, and guides in Rome.



A peek at a salon and ceiling



ANITA L. SHERMAN

wanted to like this book from the beginning. I was hooked on the fact that it takes place in Italy during the summer. What's not to love.

L Ilearned it was about a strong motherdaughter relationship. I also learned it was about loss. I had a mother; I have a daughter. The main protagonist, Katy Silver, is 30 when we meet her. When my daughter, Sophia, turned 30 we traveled to Savannah, Georgia, to celebrate her birthday. We created such memories for both of us.

For Katy, she was looking forward to a mother-daughter trip. Then she loses her The book explores mother.

When I was in my 20s, my mother gave me a touching compliment over coffee one afternoon. "You are my daughter, but you are also a lovely young woman and I am glad to know you."

It was an acknowledgment of me as a separate person: not only my mother's daughter, but my own woman.

These are the dominant themes in Rebecca Serle's new novel: exploring powerful mother-daughter bonds and at the same time celebrating one's own individuality and what all that means, particularly when one is grieving.

On to Positano

BOOK REVIEW

'Lived'

Many

Centuries

cancer. Grief grips her tightly. She is not eating. She is numb. Her husband, Eric, is unable but smiling. to console her.

What of the planned trip to Italy? Her mother had wanted to retrace her route for her daughter when she visited Positano at Katv's age.

Impulsively, Katy decides to go on her own, without her husband, without her precious mother-only with her memo-

ries. her vulnerabilities, her fears, and her deep sense of loss. She's never traveled by herself, even on a

weekend. She's emotionally distraught. But that is about to change.

Once at the Hotel Poseidon in Positano, Italy, she finds herself almost immediately refreshed by the visual splendor of the place, the warmth of the sun, the glistening blue sea that surrounds this cliffside village, the serenity of summer, and the charming and welcoming staff. It's magical.

powerful motherdaughter bonds and at the same time celebrates one's own individuality.

Delectable Descriptions

The ambiance of breakfast at Il Tridente on the terrace awakens all her senses. Added to the menu, she meets an American businessman: smart, engaging, and easy on the eyes. Will a new romance bloom with an uncertain marriage at home?

She begins to explore her new luscious surroundings, the little quaint shops, the beach-Katy's beloved mother, Carol, has died from es, and the ancient paths that take her high above the town leaving her sun-drenched

Katy is starting to come back to life. Her appetite is at times insatiable. She fills her aching heart and body with nourishment. Serle has a knack for bringing the reader right to the table for that fresh tomato salad, warm bread dipped in olive oil, glass of wine, or berry torte.

We can see Katy and what she's wearing:

PUBLIC DOMAIN

designer fashions from high-end boutiques. She has led a pampered life.

Meeting Her Mother

And then the unexpected happens. The unexplainable vision that literally causes her to black out in the hotel lobby.

Katy sees her mother, Carol. Not the woman in her 60s whom she has recently lost. But Carol when she was 30—a young, vibrant, effervescent woman sauntering through the hotel. She's beautiful. She's radiant. She is light in Katy's darkness.

Katy asks for no explanations. She has her mother back although this young woman does not recognize her. They become instant friends, and the days ahead are filled with adventures and many moments of quiet reflection and sharing.

Their lives become more intertwined. Katy recognizes in Carol a young woman, like herself, trying to make her way, find her niche in the world, and form lasting, loving relationships

Katy begins to write her own narrative, a narrative outside of her mother's influence. This young Carol becomes a mentor, a guide to self-discovery, a healer of sorts.

And the new young man in her life? What role does he play?

No spoilers, but the story has a midway twist. When this happens, Katy is bearing the unbearable again. Will bonds be broken or strengthened and at what cost?

Critic's Corner

This is a quick read. Lovely as a beach read (preferably on the Amalfi Coast in Italy). Katy has been spoiled. She seems indifferent to her husband. Some may find her selfish and emotionally immature, but she is authentic. She's real.

When Katy meets Carol as a young woman, about grief, it's what are readers to conclude? Is this a dream? drenched in sunlight

and image (often through art) over the centuries. Some of the ways he was used would have pleased the saint, and at other times would have displeased him.

Art and Architecture to Discuss

the Saint Boucheron displays his artistic and historic knowledge as he traverses the centuries discussing architecture, like various basilicas and statues, and moments in Catholic and Italian history. He also discusses the many interactions between factional groups in Italy, often within the same religion, yet possessing varied doctrinal beliefs. These disagreements at times were resolved violently and with the saint, typically depicted through a work of art, at the helm of one of the factions.

St. Ambrose indeed was a strong figure during his days as a bishop.

Whether for good or ill or somewhere in between, Ambrose seems to have been used by whoever thought to use him first. And it was often the right choice: right, in the sense that it proved successful.

For readers, the book demonstrates how the image of an individual, in this instance a saint, can be construed to fit whatever purpose a group—political, religious, or otherwise—wishes. In an almost comedic sense, the reader may also wonder what the spirit of Ambrose might have thought when watching himself be utilized and A hallucination? Is Katy having a mental breakdown? Is this a time-travel theme or parallel universe?

For the author, it is a literary genre: magical realism. In other words, it happened. There are blurred lines between fantasy and reality. Don't fight Carol's resurrection. Suspension of disbelief is required.

This is a feel-good story. It's an emotional story. It is enchanting escapism that doesn't have to be logically explained to enjoy.

This is also a transcendent story about grief, about the love that binds, and ultimately about finding your way forward after loss. It's about restoration and renewal and about giving yourself approval to embrace happiness again.

There's a tantalizing timeliness to it, appropriate for Positano where so little has changed.

I do like this book.

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



This is a quick read

and although it's

Author Rebecca Serle Publisher Atria Books

'One Italian

Summer'

Date March 2022 Hardcover 272 pages

manipulated in such ways.

A Fine Religious History Work

"Trace & Aura" is a well-researched work of religious history (several hundred pages of cited notes) that covers over 1,000 years, centering on one man and how he was remembered, and at times misremembered. For those interested in religious (Catholic, in particular) history, this book is a very interesting and insightful read.

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.



St. Ambrose was one of the four original Doctors of the Church.

'Trace & Aura: The Recurring Lives of St. Ambrose of Milan

Author Patrick Boucheron Publisher Other Press

Date Jan. 25, 2022 Hardcover 576 pages

How a Saint Through

DUSTIN BASS

Patrick Boucheron, the French historian, has written a very insightful work on the life of St. Ambrose titled "Trace & Aura." But the subtitle, "The Recurring Lives of St. Ambrose of Milan," clarifies that the book is not so much about St. Ambrose's life while he was alive, although those days are discussed, but rather centuries after he died.

Through an immense amount of research, Boucheron does a masterful job of showing just how much St. Ambrose, who died just a few short years before the start of the fifth century, had his name and memory utilized, if not manipulated, in the centuries after his death. Through art, architecture, politics, and religion, St. Ambrose was inserted into varying conversations and interactions.



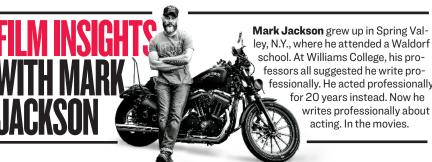
"Saint Ambrose Barring Theodosius From Milan Cathedral," 1619, by Anthony van Dyck. The National Gallery, London.

A Changing Saint

St. Ambrose indeed was a strong figure during his days as a bishop. The author points out early in the book that the position and authority of bishop over the Christians of Milan was "foisted" upon him. It was a position he did not want, and for those accounts cited, he fled and did all he could to avoid such an appointment. Alas, he eventually succumbed. Through this event, and Bishop Ambrose's doctrinal works and correspondences, Boucheron points out that it was the bishop himself who was "the first artisan to fashion Ambrose's memory." From there, Boucheron shows how the great saint of Milan was often used for political or religious purposes, and often those two intersected, and in ways that

were averse to his true nature. Ambrose's personal interactions with at times contentious, political, and other religious figures, make for interesting reading. It was these interactions, and religious fervor itself, that allowed for future political and religious figures and factions to use his name

ALL PHOTOS BY FIRST RUN FEATURES



DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

How the Devil's Music Came From the House of God

2018's 'How They Got Over'

MARK JACKSON

Elvis Presley could only be shown on TV from the waist up, in the 1950s. His was the original dirty dancing. Parents averted their children's eyes from the Elvis pelvis. In America, we talk about "the devil's music" a lot. Why? Because America is where it got started.

Actually, that's not quite true. It got started back in the European Renaissance, but its induction was so subtle that it was barely noticeable. But that's where Lucifer originally snuck into music. And that's a whole different article.

In America, with the birth of rock 'n' roll, it was far more obvious. However, what the documentary "How They Got Over" purports to demonstrate is how rock 'n' roll came from Southern gospel. It doesn't talk much about the more direct musical source of rock'n' roll, which was the blues. But the blues and gospel are inextricably linked. The upshot is that the so-called devil's music ironically developed out of God's music. As they say: The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

While "How They Got Over" doesn't exhaustively make the case for gospel being responsible for rock 'n' roll—it doesn't dot all the i's and cross all the t's—common sense can fill in the blanks. I submit that it was the union of 1) gospel, 2) musicians in starvingartist, survival mode, and 3) American show business marketing that ultimately produced the devil's music. And it's a delicate issue to discuss in America, especially in today's hypersensitive climate.

Why Call It 'the Devil's Music'?

It's not a quaint phrase and it's not a pious, church-y construct; it's a real thing and a serious issue. Here's a progression of lyrics for comparison. The following are sacred lyrics of Renaissance composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (circa 1525–1594):

"Glory be to God on high, and on Earth peace to men of good will. We praise Thee. We bless Thee. We adore Thee. We glorify Thee. We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory. Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty. O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ."

Here's a Baptist hymn:

"The heavens declare your glory, the firmament your power; day unto day the story repeats from hour to hour. Night unto night replying, proclaims in every land, O LORD, with voice undying, the wonders of your hand."

That's the music of God's house. Here's where we are now: This is the devil's music:

"Burning from the inside out, bloody foam spews from your mouth, smell the putrid stench of flesh as it burns you to your death."

That's the (white) death metal version of the devil's music. Here's a gangsta rap (black) version:

"I used to love her, too bad I had to put a slug through her/Dumped her body in the trash like I never knew her/Blood runnin down the gutter into the sewer/Her body stunk for weeks like horse manure."

This is what American children are listening to. The gradual degeneration and destruction of human morality is real, and the soundtrack that accompanies the degeneration (the devil's music) is real. And the above samples are very, very, very mild. If you do some research and read some lyrics, and you're even a little bit sensitive, you'll feel immediately physically ill. And by the way, for punk musicians, suicide accounted in 2015 for 11 percent of their deaths; for metal musicians, a staggering 19.3 percent.

'How They Got Over'

While "How They Got Over" intends to demonstrate how 1930s, '40s, and '50s black gospel quartets ushered in the birth of rock 'n' roll, it doesn't do a good job of this. It's cited Sister Rosetta Tharpe as one of their

got no instructive voiceover that connects the dots cohesively. But anyone who knows American music knows this to be the true, historical, sacred-to-profane American musical evolution. What producer and director Robert Clem offers in this directorial debut is a chance to enjoy film clips of the pioneers of commercial gospel music.

"How They Got Over" traces the birth of gospel quartets from their sacred origins in the African American church, to the traveling troupes taking the show on the road, and the success of these groups on national television in the '60s. It's a fine history lesson. Talking-head interviews with the original musicians, now venerable elders of the art form, along with curated footage of their performances, is a deeply nostalgic and heartwarming experience.

Not a Lot of Options for Southern **Black Men**

Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, one of the successful groups of the '30s and '40s, explains that there weren't many work options for Southern black men in the Great Depression. There was fieldwork, boxing, and music. Professional team sports were all segregated. But lots of people knew how to sing because they sang from a young age, growing up in the church.

And so gospel quartets could work a church circuit, with meals and room and board provided. It wasn't much of a living, but it was better than digging ditches. The idea of making money by singing was purely logical, and the fact that churches were built-in community centers providing access to large audiences (which eventually led to radio appearances and record contracts) made the whole concept a no-brainer.

As the saying goes, "The business of America is business." It's about marketing, branding, finding a niche, targeting demographics, and selling. The business that America especially excels at is show business—the packaging and selling of entertainment.

And so the evolution of gospel quartets eventually taking the show on the road was very logical. Gospel "quartet" is a catch-all term (many "quartets" had more than four members), and the groups literally thrived on competition. They didn't so much function as rivals but as a sprawling team effort in terms of generating buzz. Song "battles" were lucrative for both participating "rival" groups.

And here's where commerce led to the devil's getting a toe in the door: The quartets needed, like sharks, to maintain forward momentum in innovation so as to remain competitive and cutting-edge. Originally, the groups performed a cappella, or to organ accompaniment when in church, but they began to see the need to distinguish themselves from other competitors, thinking things like: That group got themselves a guitarist; we better get one too.

Little by little, whole backing bands came into existence. The louder and therefore more noteworthy, the better. The audience always wants to see and hear something new, and you better bring it, or perish.

This is especially true given the bristling, hostile racism all these groups encountered from the local constabulary while on the road. In most of these encounters, the groups stoically shrugged off as having been a phase of American life that they just had to tolerate and forbear in order to survive.

Probably the most influential musician during those times was Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose electric guitar-generated musical inventions influenced Chuck Berry, from whence all rock 'n' roll stemmeth, and who in turn directly influenced the next generation of rock guitarists, most notably British Invasion visionaries John Lennon of the Beatles, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton. These then became the musical influencers of Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, whose heavy metal music (with some help from punk rock) directly led to the death metal listed at the outset of this article. In addition to Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Aretha Franklin, Jerry Lee Lewis, Tina Turner, and Johnny Cash have also



"SOUL STIRRERS"

Sam Cooke (first L) with the Soul Stirrers.

S. R. CRAIN, Mgr. 542 E. 65th ST., Chicago 15, 18.

main musical influences.

Gospel 'quartets' literally thrived on competition.



A Dixie Hummingbirds 45 RPM single record in "How They Got Over."



An example of a gospel music concert poster.

'How They Got Over Director: **Robert Clem** MPAA Rating: Documentary

Release Date: 2018 **Running Time:** 1 hour, 27 minutes

* * *

And naturally, lyric-wise, the music gradu-

ally segued from the sacred to the profane. Nothing sums it up better than one gospel elder saying, "Instead of saying 'God,' put 'baby."" That's how you sell records.

"Hard gospel" shouters, who would leave the stage and walk among the faithful, would gin the emotions up so high, shouting for God, that the ladies present would have passionate experiences distinctly more profane than sacred. In fact, one amusing anecdote is of an elder recalling some singer saying that his group would always have audiences on their feet applauding. This elder said his group calculated the success of their performances more by how many women were laid out on the floor in a dead faint.

Sam Cooke

Perhaps the most famous graduate of the gospel movement was the Soul Stirrers' Sam Cooke. Good-looking, with a soulful crooning tenor, Cooke was one of the first to sign a contract as a pop singer. He'd pull out scads of cash to demonstrate to the gospel musicians he'd left in the dust that there was tons of money to be made on "the other side."

Some were steadfast, such as Isaac Freeman whose astounding basso profundo is a reason all by itself to watch this documentary. Freeman told Cooke he'd rather starve than sell out for money. Cooke was followed by Aretha Franklin (who'd toured the gospel circuit with her father) and by Lou Rawls, and eventually Dennis Edwards of (the sacred) The Mighty Clouds of Joy, who later joined (the secular) The Temptations.

One could argue that gospel more accurately segued into American soul music via Franklin and Rawls, but since Tharpe's guitar influenced the four "kings" of rock 'n' roll-Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley-it generated both. Missing, strangely, from the lineup, is Mahalia Jackson, who was arguably the most popular gospel singer of all time.

Where We Are Today

Gospel's still an important force in churches today. Although musically, while retaining its original roots, it has been hugely influenced by late 1970's fusion jazz, and the virtuoso musicianship that reigns today among musicians such as former child-prodigy organist Cory Henry (of the band Cory Henry and the Funk Apostles) and his cutting-edge bassist, Sharay Reed. Reed posts his church gospel playing on Instagram every Sunday.

Ultimately, "How They Got Over" is an opportunity to view archival footage and listen to the originators of the genre. But it's also a bit of a treatise and example of what tends to happen in America at the crossroads of spirituality and commerce.



Sister Rosetta Tharpe and her Les Paul custom guitar had a potent impact on future musicians.

ADIMIR TEREBENIN/THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM

Art and the Love of Wisdom: 'Mercury Crowning Philosophy, Mother of Art'

ERIC BESS

Have you ever seen a work of art that you thought was beautiful but had no idea what it meant? In our series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart," we interpret the classical visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We try to approach each work of art to see how our historical creations might inspire within us our own innate goodness.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Socrates turned the poets away from his utopian Republic. He claimed that the poets were too dangerous because they created illusions that led citizens away from the truth. The antidote he suggested was a philosopher king: a wise leader who would censor the poets and guide them in their creations.

The philosopher king would not permit the poets to tell tales of mischievous gods—like those in Homer's poems. Instead, the philosopher king would guide poets to display gods with dignity and honor so that their actions would be an example for citizens to emulate.

It's not only poetry, though, that the philosopher king would censor. All of the arts would be under the philosopher's control. For instance, the philosopher king would guide musicians to compose martial pieces to harden warriors and prepare them for war instead of sentimental tunes that might soften them and inhibit their ability to serve and protect their country.

With Nietzsche's critique of Socrates in the 19th century, Socrates came to be seen as someone who censored ideas and emotion, and therefore limited human potential. Nietzsche suggested that the artist is the one who, having endured the hardships of fate, could create and fashion himself into his own work of art, a self he could be proud of upon his death.

These two thinkers had two different approaches to art. Socrates suggested that artistic truth was beyond human experience and existed within the world of the divinely rational; Nietzsche, on the other hand, suggested that artistic truth was relative to human experience and the connections we ultimately make with each other.

These differing viewpoints lead to the question of whether beauty is objective or subjective. Is there true beauty existing beyond sensuous perception, serving as a standard by which we can judge what is beautiful and what is not? Or is beauty based on our subjective, that is, relative experiences of the world around us?

The Crowning of Philosophy

The Italian painter Pompeo Batoni provides what I think is an artistic response to this question. In 1747, Batoni painted "Mercury Crowning Philosophy, Mother of Art."

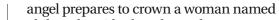
At the far left of the composition, the god Mercury, dressed in yellow with his winged helmet and holding his caduceus (staff), leads our eye into the picture plane. He points to an angel at the far right of the composition. The



<image>

Crowning Philosophy, Mother of Art," 1747, by Pompeo Batoni. Oil on canvas; 47.2 by 35.2 inches. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

"Mercury



Philosophy with a laurel wreath. The focal point is Philosophy. She is modestly dressed, but the golden crown already on her head and the scepter in her hand reveal her royal stature. She holds one of Plato's books in her hand, and her other hand is open as if she is ready to give or receive something, and it leads our eye to the toddler below her, whom we can presume is Philosophy's child.

The child sits among artistic implements: paintbrushes, a bust, compass, and a lyre. The child holds a torch in the darkest area of the composition, and the position of the torch leads our eye back up to the angel behind Philosophy.

Batoni's Response to an

Ongoing Question

So, how does Batoni's painting provide a response to the philosophical question posed earlier? Let's first start with Mercury.

Mercury is the Greco-Roman god messenger. He relays messages between the gods. The staff he holds is the caduceus, which was given to him by Apollo—god of the sun, beauty, and music—after Mercury invented the lyre. Already, we can see Mercury's connection with the divine, with art, and with beauty.

Mercury instructs the angel to put the crown on Philosophy's head—a reward that comes from above. Philosophy looks above at Mercury as he instructs the angel, which reassures us that Philosophy is concentrating on the divine messenger and thus the divine message.

Interestingly enough, the laurel wreath is being placed right on top of the crown Philosophy already wears, and we can presume that it will cover and not replace her earthly crown.

Philosophy holds a book by Plato, who was the mouthpiece of Socrates. Batoni is letting us know which philosophy he finds to be of benefit to the arts: It is Socrates's philosophy that is in the best interest of the arts and of

the public.

Philosophy presents her hand as if she is both giving and receiving something. Maybe she does both: Perhaps she receives a divine message from Mercury and gives a divine message through her child, who represents the arts.

In this sense, philosophy is the medium by which art presents a divine message. Is this why the child holds a torch in the darkest area of the composition, because he represents the divine message that can guide humans out of the darkness and toward the light of divine truth?

Batoni seems to suggest, like Socrates, that the purpose of art is to exhibit divine messages for the benefit of civilization. The divine, not human experience, becomes the absolute standard by which beauty is judged, and the way to the divine is through philosophy, that is, the study of wisdom, which finds its source in the divine.

Socrates is often accused of censoring the arts because he turns away the poets and the illusions they create. Yet, we cannot practice wisdom without also practicing discernment. That is, we have to say yes to some things and no to others. In other words, wisdom requires a degree of censorship.

So, yes, Socrates may say no to the poets who create illusions, but in the tenth book of Plato's "The Republic," Socrates encourages poets to make their case and defend themselves. According to our interpretation of Batoni's painting, which poets might Socrates admit into the republic? To which poets would Socrates say yes?

Would it not be the poets who thoughtfully engage in the pursuit of truth for the good of society? Would it not be the poets who let the love of wisdom—philosophy—give birth to their art? Would it not be the poets who search for and express what is righteously divine?

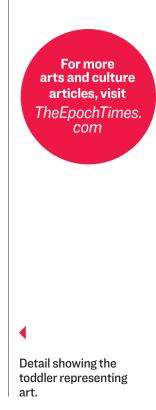
Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

lead to the question of whether beauty is objective or subjective.

Differing

viewpoints

189.





LITERATURE

Beauty, Enlightenment, and Emerson's 'Nature'

Take a moment and reacquaint yourself with nature

DUSTIN FISHER

Recently, I took a short hike on a trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The trek wound through dense forest, across quick-flowing mountain streams, and ended in a short climb to the base of a towering waterfall.

In the heat of midday, the cold mist from the falls was an exhilarating reprieve and allowed for inspirational reflection. There, isolated among the stillness of the afternoon, time seemed to stand still only for a few moments, until the trek resumed back down the mountainside.

'Return to Reason and Faith'

The restorative experience was reminiscent of what Ralph Waldo Emerson describes in his 1836 book "Nature":

"In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befal [sic] me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity...which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes."

Emerson maintains that individuals can seek peace and solitude through connection with the natural world. This notion is particularly important in our modern existence, as it seems that mankind's spiritual and physical "Among the Sierra Nevada, California," 1868, by Albert Bierstadt. Oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Harmony between the individual, nature, and God is key to understanding Emerson's arguments.



Waldo Emerson, circa 1878, by Stephen Alonzo Schoff. Library of Congress. relationship with the environment is fractured and continually degrading.

Emerson's "Nature" is largely credited to have begun the philosophical and literary movement of American Transcendentalism that included writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley. Transcendentalism's basic premises and ideals would go on to influence important sociopolitical changes in American society such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, and the establishment of a national park system.

According to Lawrence Buell, professor emeritus of American literature at Harvard University, Transcendentalists believed that humans possess a "higher 'Reason,' or divine intuition, distinct from mere 'Understanding,' or inductive reasoning, that is capable of direct intuitive perception of Truth with a capital T." It is precisely amid nature itself that Emerson finds opportunities to obtain such wisdom, enlightenment, and divine truth that is locked within the human spirit.

Love of Beauty

Emerson argues that humankind's relationship and connection to nature is the very essence of a divine understanding of the universe, beauty, and God. Not only does the world provide commodities for the continuation of social existence, but it also is the reference point for artistic and philosophical awareness. Emerson writes:

"All men are in some degree impressed by the face of the world. Some men even to delight. This love of beauty is Taste. Others have the same love in such excess, that, not content with admiring, they seek to embody it in new forms. The creation of beauty is Art. The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity.... Aleaf, a sunbeam [sic], a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty."

Art and philosophy have similar aims toward ultimate enlightenment, only that the poet seeks beauty while the philosopher seeks out truth. The ultimate goals of both artist and philosopher begin as ideas birthed from a connection to nature. Emerson states:

"It is, in both cases, that a spiritual life has been imparted to nature; that the solid seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought; that this feeble human being has penetrated the vast masses of nature with an informing soul, and recognized itself in their harmony. ..."

Harmony between the individual, nature, and God is key to understanding Emerson's arguments regarding nature's importance

and power. Many of his theories that regard humanity and social interactions all stem from the regenerative power of nature and its connection to the divine.

As Buell notes, Emerson and early Transcendentalist writers studied and adapted theories from Buddhism and German philosophy, as well as Western Enlightenment ideals passed along by John Locke and Thomas Jefferson.

Nature's Regenerative Power

The motif of rebirth as part of nature's regenerative power is, for Emerson, an essential part of human spiritual awakening. He compares the newborn child to the death of an elderly man as nature's gift of continual opportunities for deeper human understanding and spiritual transcendence.

For men and women to tap into this potential, one must connect with nature to truly contemplate beauty and the relationship one has to the planet and universe.

Considering the chaos of today's world, it is important to take a moment and reacquaint oneself with nature—not just for activity or leisure, but for brief contemplation and spiritual connection. Emerson maintains that beauty can be found even in mundane tasks, through introspection and contemplation.

This type of deep understanding helps bridge the splintering gap between mankind and the natural world. Through this connectivity, positive individual and social change can spring forth. Emerson says:

"As when the summer comes from the south, the snow-banks melt, and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits, and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, and warm hearts, and wise discourse, and heroic acts around its way, until evil is no more seen."

As summer approaches and the days grow warmer and longer, be sure to take time to contemplate the beauty of nature around you. The water in the streams, the leaves on the trees, and even the afternoon rainstorms that leave vibrant rainbows in their wake.

Take a deep breath and consider how nature's balance provides beauty, enlightenment, sustenance, and constant opportunities for spiritual rejuvenation.

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.

A Touching Tribute to Fatherhood

TIFFANY BRANNAN

GOLDEN AGE FILMS

Rarely do we acknowledge loving, caring male parents, and sometimes we even take fathers for granted. The official holiday that is meant to compensate for this oversight is Father's Day, one Sunday in June dedicated to appreciating dads.

A father figure can fill the void as a loving mentor, whether he's a stepfather, another relative, a teacher, or a friend. Stepparents have a bad reputation, but they can be wonderful influences on their stepchildren's lives.

Modern entertainment and media tend to depict fathers and other male figures of authority as bumbling, clueless goofballs instead of dignified, intelligent role models. To find respectful, inspiring father figures in films and television shows, you often must look to movies made decades ago.

While there are countless old movies that would be appropriate for Father's Day, I want to highlight 1949's "Family Honeymoon." Here, the head of the family becomes a stepfather by marrying a widow with three children.

A Fun Premise

Widow Katie Armstrong (Claudette Colbert) is joyfully planning her marriage to Grant Jordan (Fred MacMurray), a botany professor at the local university. Grant is nervous about becoming a husband and a father all at once, and he hasn't spent much time with his fiancée's three young children, Charlie (Jimmy Hunt), Abner (Peter Miles), and Zoe (Gigi Perreau).

He is determined to win them over, though, despite their formality with him. Preparations for the nuptials go smoothly until Katie's sister (Lillian Bronson) falls down the stairs right before the ceremony and breaks her leg. Since she was going to care for the children,

the newlyweds can either cancel their plans or take the children with them on their honeymoon. They decide on the latter.

During their trip to the Grand Canyon, they

face a series of adventures and misadventures, including losing the boys at a train stop, spending the night with a farmer who skins skunks, sleeping on a daycoach, and almost losing the daughter's beloved stuffed toy off a ledge. Can the new marriage survive all these trials?

This movie's main comedic premise is described by its title. Katie and Grant agree that a family honeymoon is better than no honeymoon at all, but the trip quickly turns into a family vacation. Grant decides to use the impromptu family trip as an opportunity to bond with his new sons and daughter, even though that wasn't their original plan for the trip.

A Real Father

Before Grant and Katie get married, he expresses concern that he doesn't really know her children. When he comes over to the Armstrong house one evening after a date with Katie, the three children sneak out of bed to say hello.

He tries to win them over by describing the things they'll do together once he lives with them, but he can't measure up to their late father's skills. He even struggles to keep the boys' names straight, and the three youngsters still call him Mr. Jordan!

During the titular family honeymoon, Grant quickly proves that he will be a loving, doting father figure. He caters to the youngsters' whims, buying them anything they want and prioritizing their feelings, no matter how silly. He even risks his own life to rescue Zoe's beloved but troublesome stuffed panda bear from the edge of the canyon. Yet instead of being grateful, the children often respond with criticism and continued formality. Through it all, Grant remains patient and loving.

On their first day at the Grand Canyon, Katie is doubtful when Grant volunteers to stay with the children while she goes to the beauty parlor. However, he insists Here, the head of the family becomes a stepfather by marrying a widow with three children.



Claudette Colbert on a magazine cover in 1947.



A publicity photo of Fred MacMurray from the 1930s.



A lobby card for "Family Honeymoon."

that he can look after them by himself. The little boys think they can get away with murder because their mother isn't present, but they're wrong. Rather than being swayed by their crying and protests, Grant stands his ground, since he knows that a good father doesn't spoil his children.

What Makes a Father

This lighthearted movie integrates serious, touching themes into an entertaining storyline. This is truly a family film with playful moments that children will enjoy, as well as mature struggles that parents will appreciate.

In addition, the cinematography of the beautiful Grand Canyon in the 1940s will entice you to pack your bags and head for Arizona's most famous landmark. Unusual for this era, scenes for "Family Honeymoon" were actually filmed on location at Grand Canyon National Park.

Whether you want to celebrate biological fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, or other father figures, "Family Honeymoon" is a delightful tribute to the men who shape our lives.

Tiffany Brannan is a 20-year-old opera singer, Hollywood history/vintage beauty copywriter, film reviewer, fashion historian, travel writer, and ballet writer. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.

BLEECKER STREE

FILM REVIEW

'Montana Story': The Uneasy Family Ties That Bind

MICHAEL CLARK

Had creator and show runner Taylor Sheridan chosen another name for his wildly popular Paramount+ TV series "Yellowstone," it could have just as easily been "Montana Story." Like this film with that name, it includes a patriarch with a lot of baggage (emotional and otherwise), siblings with emotional scars, and years' old unfinished business to tend to amid the backdrop of some of the most gorgeous natural scenery God ever created.

Not long after the opening credits, a vehicle passes underneath an entrance archway with the family name in cast iron: "Thorne." It's not dissimilar to the wooden "Dutton" sign shown regularly in "Yellowstone," but this is where any comparisons to the two productions cease. The viewer is not entering a sprawling estate chock-full of intrigue and obscene riches, but one of desperation and resigned, nagging closure; a once-imagined great life desiccated by poor decisions and would-be grandeur.

The Wayward Son Returns

After learning that his father, Wade (Rob Story), is in a coma with mere days to live, civil engineer Cal (Owen Teague, "The Stand"; the bully in "It") returns home from Wyoming where he lives with his cat, Oscar Wilde. Named after baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr., Cal also plays the mandolin, keeps his own counsel, and has resigned himself to the upcoming unpleasant chore of tidying up Wade's meager estate, selling the family chicken farm, and taking care of a mountain of his father's ever-mounting debt.

Upon arrival, Cal is warmly greeted by Valentina (Kimberly Guerrero), a Native American woman who could be Wade's housekeeper or his girlfriend, or both. The women in Wade's life don't tend to fare well, including his daughter (and Cal's older half sister) Erin (Haley Lu Richardson, "The Chaperone," "The White Lotus").

Disappearing into thin air seven years earlier, Erin now works as a chef at a New Age restaurant in upstate New York, and her arrival stuns Cal who had reluctantly given her up for dead. Their reunion is at best bittersweet with their sole remaining shared bond being their bitter disdain for Wade.

What to Do With Mr. T

The reunion appears to end almost immediately as Erin decides to bail but changes her mind once Cal tells her what he intends on doing with Mr. T, the 25-yearold family horse that was born the same year as Erin. Exactly what Cal wants to do with it, and Erin's counterproposal are better left explained by the film, but their respective positions are polar opposites with little room left for compromise.

Watching all of this unfold with guarded fascination from not quite the sidelines is Ace (Gilbert Owuor), Wade's Kenyan nurse, who regularly imparts pearls of wisdom while acting as a nonjudgmental metaphorical salve to the ever-present sibling friction.

The above covers most of what transpires in the first act and it is stupendous. Longtime writer and director partners Scott McGehee and David Siegel never dole out too much information too soon, and the narrative is rich with percolating subtext. With a résumé of just five features ("Suture," "The Deep End," "Bee Season," "Uncertainty," and "What Maisie Knew") over the last three decades, McGehee and Siegel never do the same thing twice, yet all of their features include blood-related characters who rarely see eye to eye.

A Near-Fatal 2nd Act

The considerable momentum amassed up to this point is nearly lost when the filmmakers hit their own erected brick wall at the beginning of the second act. A scene that should have been dispatched in two minutes drags on for nearly 20, and it is only because of the undeniable chemistry between Richardson and Teague, and their investment in their respective roles, that the entire endeavor escapes a complete meltdown. It also helps that most of this portion of the story takes place



The siblings redeem themselves and rescue a relationship that initially seemed unsalvageable.

'Montana Story'

Directors: Scott McGehee and David Siegel

Starring: Haley Lu Richardson, Owen Teague, Gilbert Owuor, Kimberly Guerrero, Rob Story

Running Time: 1 hour, 54 minutes MPAA Rating:

Release Date: May 27, 2022

 \star \star \star

outdoors, with the spectacular natural Montana skyline taking center stage. It is when Erin begins delivering a symbolheavy monologue, which includes references to Dante's "Inferno," at the mouth of a giant crater dubbed "Copperhead" that the film gets back on its feet and regains the steam it established so well in the opening act. Owen Teague as Cal and Haley Lu Richardson as Erin in "Montana Story."

The Darkness Before the Dawn

This is where the filmmakers redeem themselves by waiting as long as possible before revealing Cal and Erin's respective ghosts and the unconventional ways they are conquered, or perhaps not. For a movie rife with so much acrimony and regret, we never sense a loss of hope or get the idea that the siblings won't be able to overcome and triumph over the negativity of their past. They redeem themselves and rescue a relationship that initially seemed unsalvageable.

Neither of the leads is present in the final scene, one that will likely give animal lovers cause to shed an emotional tear or two and leave every viewer with goose flesh and a soaring heart.

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.



THE 6TH NTD INTERNATIONAL FIGURE PAINTING COMPETITION

Reviving the pure authenticity, beauty, and goodness in art

June 2023 | New York City

Call for Global Entries / Deadline: 1/15/2023 / US\$25,000+ in Awards

NTD 1-888-477-9228|Oilpainting@globalcompetitions.org OILPAINTING.NTDTV.COM

