

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



After Washington's victory at Trenton, he was poised to become a Caesar. "General George Washington at Trenton," 1792, by John Trumbull. Oil on canvas; 92 1/2 inches by 63 inches. Gift of the Society of the Cincinnati in Connecticut. Yale University.

HISTORY

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S DILEMMA:

To Be Cato or Caesar

How the great American traversed the Roman path

DUSTIN BASS

In August 1755, George Washington had been made commander in chief of Virginia's colonial forces. A year later, however, the 25-year-old commander became incensed at being passed over for a royal commission. He was also bitter

over the manner in which his fellow Virginians, those who had "behaved like men and died like soldiers," had been treated by the British. The Virginia Regiment had been the first to enter into the fray of the French and Indian War.

"Your endeavors in the Service and Defence of your Country must redound to your Honor, therefore pray don't let any unavoidable Interruptions sicken your Mind in the Attempts You may pursue," warned George William Fairfax in a letter to Washington in April of 1756. "Your good Health and Fortune is the Toast at

every Table, Among the Romans such a general Acclamation and public Regard shown to any of their Chieftains were always esteemed a high Honor and gratefully accepted."

Washington, who had a hand in starting the war at Jumonville, had constantly put his life on the line for the British and colonists. During the Battle of the Monongahela, he had two horses shot out from under him and had four bullet holes in his hat and uniform.

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Scores of writers produced bestselling novels and exciting stories now buried by time in the out-of-print boneyard.

LITERATURE

Book Life, Education, Culture, and Ideas That Endure

JEFF MINICK

Out of print. Can there be three sadder words for a living author?

In 1975, Farrar Straus & Giroux published Larry Woiwode's "Beyond the Bedroom Wall." Here was an extraordinary novel over 600 pages long, a tale of heartbreaking beauty written by a young man about a mid-20th-century American family. Novelist John Gardner, a writer who set high standards for fiction, called it "simply brilliant" and "an enormous intelligent novel," adding that "nothing more beautiful and moving has been written in years." Esteemed literary critic Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* ranked "Beyond the Bedroom Wall" as one of the great American novels of the 20th century.

Today, "Beyond the Bedroom Wall" is years out of print and is likely unknown to most American readers. Mr. Woiwode, who took 10 years to write his novel, died in 2022.

So why is so magnificent a work no longer available from a publisher and unrecognized by so many readers? Perhaps critics like Gardner and Yardley were simply overenthusiastic in their appraisal.

Perhaps, too, a tome as thick as "Beyond the Bedroom Wall" simply can't appeal in an age of texting, Twitter, and TikTok. Then, too, a novel about a large family living in North Dakota and the death of a young mother may lack resonance with today's audience.

It helps to remember as well that in any decade of the past century, scores of writers produced bestselling novels and exciting stories now buried by time in the out-of-print boneyard.

On the other hand, in that cemetery are sleeping books whose resurrection might benefit our broken culture. Here, for example, are three out-of-print works—a memoir and two novels—plus a collection of essays undeservedly ignored, all of them concerned in one way or another with education, which might prove invaluable to parents, teachers, and students.

A Meditation on Culture, Learning, and Decline

"Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber" is less a book about learning and more about the culture, including the demise of education.

In 1993, Yale University professor David Gelernter, computer scientist and artist, opened a package which then exploded in his hands, permanently crippling him. The then-infamous technophobe, the Unabomber, had struck again. Gelernter opens "Drawing Life" by describing his recovery from this assassination attempt. He then offers readers a personal meditation on such topics as the modern university, the importance of marriage and family, religious faith, and a disintegrating culture.

Critical of the political correctness then rearing its head, Gelernter drew the ire of some pundits. And no wonder, for as a description on the book's jacket puts it, here was "a thought-provoking analysis of our culture and where it's headed," which by Gelernter's lights was decidedly downward.

Published 26 years ago, "Drawing Life" now seems prophetic in its analysis of the negative impact of technology, our ailing system of education, and the undermining of traditional institutions and American ideals by today's radicals.

If we wish to see where we're going, it helps to know where we've been. In "Drawing Life," Gelernter gives us some missing pieces of that map. Reading him, we realize how deep the damage to our culture extends.

A Model for Character and Classroom

In "Good Morning, Miss Dove," Frances Gray Patton creates a fictional teacher and classroom of the Great Depression era. "The terrible Miss Dove," as the townspeople call her—many of them were children in her elementary school geography classes—is a disciplinarian who teaches morality along with the oceans and mountain ranges of the world. Though some critics thought

the book idealistic in its portrait of a teacher, for many who once sat in such elementary school classrooms and knew such teachers, as I did, Patton's story hits home. The novel underscores the importance of classroom discipline to learning.

"Good Morning, Miss Dove" also reminds us of the vital interplay between school and community. In this little town of Liberty Hill, the school is a central feature of life, much more than a building of classrooms and teachers. It plays a vital role in the community as a conveyor of culture and traditional morality, and Miss Dove is its prime exemplar. From her, the children—and some of the adults as well—take lessons in character-building that will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

Discipline in the classroom, parental involvement, and the disappearance of fundamentals and memory work from the curricula are all hot topics in today's educational debates. In addition to telling a delightful story, "Good Morning, Miss Dove" demonstrates the success of the old, traditional techniques of teaching.

Writers continue to put out books advocating and celebrating traditional learning.



Larry Woiwode's "Beyond the Bedroom Wall," a novel about a South Dakota family, is now out of print.

AJHOLGARD/CC BY-SA 4.0

A College Like No Other
Josiah Bunting III devoted much of his life—and still does—to education, serving, for example, as the superintendent of the Virginia Military Academy. His 1998 novel "An Education for Our Time" is a fictional account of billionaire and high-tech pioneer John Adams who, dying of cancer, writes out his plans to found and endow a college. He envisions a school with a rigorous program, academic and physical, aimed at producing leaders "whose bent is to command not to chatter, to lead not to criticize, to serve not to whine, and to give rather than calculate the cost."

Using examples from history, philosophy, literature, and his own experiences, Adams delineates in detail how the carefully selected students of his college should live and learn, and who should lead them. This vision of instilling endeavor, excellence, and a sense of service in students stands in stark contrast to nearly all of the practices of our current institutions of higher learning.

Here is a book that can give high schoolers ideas about what college should be, even if they themselves have to shape that experience.

Hidden Treasures

Some excellent books fall through the cracks. A small publisher may lack the budget to promote them, or they may not fit the needs or interests of major reviewers. They're not out of print, but they're out of sight.

From 1974 to 2004, Episcopalian priest F. Washington Jarvis served as headmaster at Boston's Roxbury Latin School, the oldest continuous school in North America. During Jarvis's years at Roxbury, a series of his addresses to his students appeared in the school's newsletters. In 2010, the David R. Godine Publishing Company collected the best of these essays in "With Love and Prayers: A Headmaster Speaks to the Next Generation." In all of these exhortations is a common sense blend of philosophy, religion, history, literature, and anecdote, with the topics centered on such virtues as courage, perseverance, and faith.

If ever there was a time in our nation's

history when teenagers needed such wise, practical guidance, that time is surely now. "With Love and Prayers" allows them to learn from a man sympathetic to their stage of life and its attendant confusions, but who never patronizes them. Instead, Jarvis recognizes their deep desires to get at truths and fundamentals so often overlooked in their own classrooms while constantly encouraging his young audience, as Tennyson would have it, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

"With Love and Prayers" makes a perfect gift for young people and, for that matter, for their parents and teachers as well.

The Stars Are Still Shining

With some hunting, all of these out-of-print books and others may be found and ordered online, or tucked away on the shelves of a public library or a secondhand bookshop.

And if you can't get your hands on these specific works, here's some good news. These books may be out of print, but the ranks they once marched in receive a steady stream of replacements, heirs to their thoughts. Publishing houses like Regnery Publishing and Encounter Books continue to issue excellent books on education, and writers continue to put out books advocating and celebrating traditional learning.

In his 1998 review of "Drawing Life," John Attarian mentions Gelernter's call for a return of truth-telling to education, and then adds this sentence from the author's book: "Only when the basics of culture and morality are under attack do we have the privilege of seeing their beauty (like stars when the city lights go dim) as clearly as we do today."

The authors reviewed here saw that beauty, and others will continue to step forward to share that same vision with us.

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

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

"This is true journalism. This is what the Founding Fathers meant by 'freedom of the press.'"

— DARRYL AGEE

"You have been my source of hope. The truth is so scarce in media. The quality of my life is subject to the quality of truth in my life. Friends, work encounters, community interactions, all hinge on truth. The meticulous delivery of all sides of issues you cover permit me to sustain my hope in humanity. You have my deep respect and gratitude. I have told many, many patients (I am a physician) about you and will continue to do so. Truth + trust = hope + health."

— DR. MARY ELLEN BLUNTZER

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— STEPHEN SZYMANSKI

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— ANNE KELLY

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TRUTH and TRADITION

In Our Own Words

The World Through a Journalist's Eyes

Dear Epoch VIP,

Thank you for your continuing support—we are at your service.

My name is Petr Svab and I've been covering politics, courts, police, immigration, economy, and other topics during my 16 years at *The Epoch Times*.

It is my pleasure to work for a newspaper that stands for values I can wholeheartedly endorse and fittingly summed up in our motto of Truth and Tradition.

I believe that truth is the living world, and an infinite journey of exploration. The more topics I tackle, the more issues I delve into, the more I realize how complex, multifaceted, and enormous the world truly is. We can never dream of grasping it all, but, with diligent effort, a journalist can map a part of the journey and present it to readers, hoping to help them navigate their own realities.

Moreover, I've found, a journalist can open doors closed to others, give readers the facts of the story, the context that enlightens them, as well as the insights of the participants.

I remember walking the streets of West Baltimore a few years ago. My plan was just to interview some local business owners to see what the city was doing about some of its issues—from piles of trash and abandoned houses to homelessness and crime.

Within five minutes of my arrival, a man on the street noticed me and started to shout: "Guy with a camera! There's a guy with a camera here!" A group of young men further up the street took notice as I approached.

"Are you a cop?" asked one of them. He was a young man with wide eyes that looked like they'd already seen more than their share.

I introduced myself and my business of the day, handing the gentleman my card. The young man's expression softened as he realized I was here to report on a story—the story of his home.

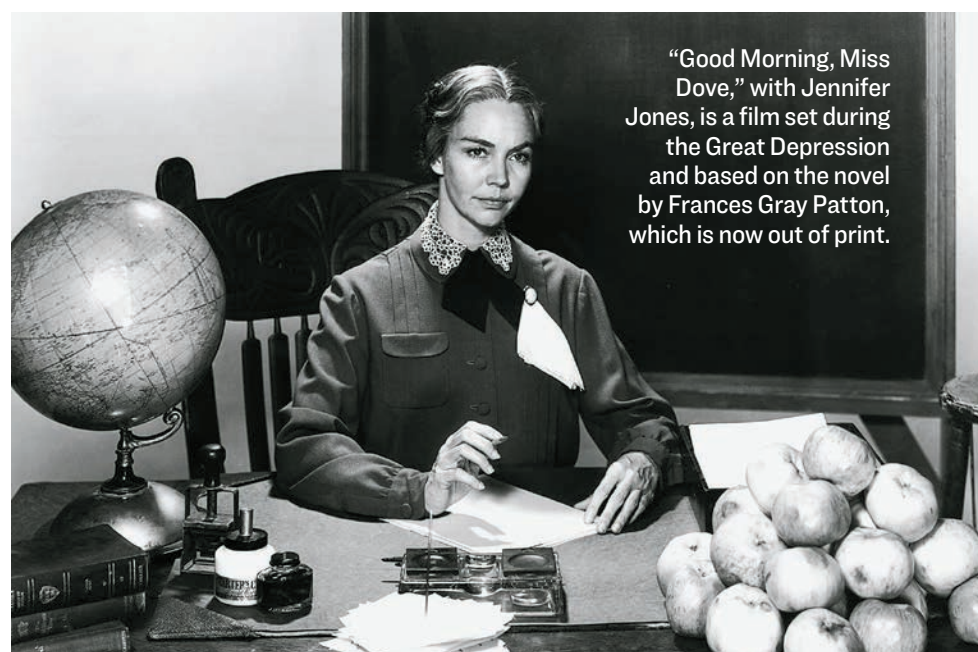
As it turned out, the young man was not only ready to share with me his insights on the local issues, but also to offer advice on where to find what I was looking for. We parted ways with a handshake.

In all my experience talking directly to the people



"With diligent effort, a journalist can map a part of the journey and present it to readers, hoping to help them navigate their own realities."

Petr Svab
Reporter



"Good Morning, Miss Dove," with Jennifer Jones, is a film set during the Great Depression and based on the novel by Frances Gray Patton, which is now out of print.

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involved in various events, **the truth seldom (if ever) favors partisan narratives—its much more colorful: sometimes humorous, other times tragic.**

Consider the story, for example, of Trayvon Martin. According to some, an innocent child killed by a racist man. According to others, a thug killed in self-defense. But after filmmaker Joel Gilbert retraced Martin's last moments, weeks, and months, it turned out neither narrative was quite true. Gilbert told a story of a young man whose life was falling apart and ultimately plunged into a tragedy that nobody wanted.

So if that's truth, what is tradition, then? For me, it is the lessons of history. It's the distilled universal wisdom collected by our ancestors over millennia—the timeless lessons of the enlightened, the sages, and the saints. This treasure chest of the past is where we can turn to help us better understand the truth at present.

My work is to safeguard this treasure, let it live through the pages of *The Epoch Times* and the hearts of our readers.

While it may seem the foundations of the civilization itself are now under attack, I truly believe our readers will be best equipped to withstand the storm—through clarity and peace of heart. For whatever the future holds, I believe the path will be less treacherous for those who walk it steadily, making choices informed both by truth and tradition.

What I pledge to you is yet more meticulous research, analysis, and fact-finding. I'll do the digging for you, while letting you make up your own mind. Furthermore, I'll also hone my wit to give you an ever-better read along the way.

Yes, we strive to be an influential media in the world, but **I believe that our true success is measured in minds sharpened, hearts uplifted, and lives improved.**

Once again, thank you for joining us on this journey. We do live in truly epochal times, wouldn't you say?

In Truth and Tradition,

Petr Svab
The Epoch Times

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Trumbull's painting captures the glory of a conqueror, as Washington accepts Cornwallis's surrender after the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. "Surrender of Lord Cornwallis," 1820, by John Trumbull. Oil on canvas; 12 feet by 18 feet. Capitol Building, Washington.

HISTORY

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S DILEMMA:

To Be Cato or Caesar

Continued from Page 1

At the end of 1758, with the war still several years from conclusion and having survived battles, smallpox, malaria, dysentery, and pleurisy, Washington resigned his commission. His entrepreneurial spirit would supersede his military passions, but according to historian Ron Chernow, Washington "had acquired a powerful storehouse of grievances that would fuel his later rage with England."

The Roman Chieftains

Cato the Younger and Julius Caesar had their first standoff in 63 B.C. debating the allegations of the Catiline Conspiracy—a conspiracy to overthrow the republic, led by Lucius Sergius Catiline, who had just lost the election to consul for the second time. Cato and Caesar argued in the Senate whether to dispense with constitutional proceedings and execute the conspirators, which included several senators, or abide by the constitution, preserve their lives, but once found guilty, sentence them to life in prison and confiscate their properties. The Senate initially agreed with Caesar's proposal of constitutional adherence, but Cato's rebuttal won the day.

It is hard to say which decision was the right one. What resulted after the executions and the defeat of Catiline was a continuation of political upheaval and backroom dealings that led to a civil war, the death of Cato, and the dictatorship of Caesar in 46 B.C. Though Caesar would be assassinated in 44 B.C., the republic could not be saved and would soon recede into the irretrievable past, giving way to the rule of emperors.

The age of Julius Caesar is one of history's greatest dramas. One of Shakespeare's tragedies is based on the events centering around Caesar's assassination.

The colonists in America, Washington among them, were well acquainted with Shakespeare—they were British, after all. There was another British playwright that Washington enjoyed: Joseph Addison. His play "Cato, a Tragedy," which premiered in London in 1713, was a British sensation that carried over into the colonies. Cato had been a staunch republican; Addison's version was even more so. The play was a source of inspiration for Washington, who quoted from it often.

Washington was well-versed in the real and the fictive versions of both Cato and Caesar. When King George II died two years after Washington's resignation, the choice to become either of those great Roman chieftains would soon present itself to Washington.

Would Washington use his military might to establish his new empire, as Caesar had done?

A Man of the Field: Farm and Battle

Mere weeks after resigning, Washington married Martha Custis. His farm life would expand. His entrepreneurial ideas and land speculations increased. He had transitioned from bloody fields to fertile soils, exchanging gunpowder for tobacco leaves.

When the war ended, France lost its lands west of the Mississippi River, except New Orleans. In September 1763, Washington and 19 others created the Mississippi Land Company in hopes of claiming 2.5 million acres in the Ohio Valley. The following month, though, King George III issued a royal proclamation banning Brit-

ish colonists from expanding west of the Appalachian Mountains. The troubles with the Crown would soon amass.

With each passing year, attempting to pay off its immense war debts, the British government continued to issue new taxes on the colonists. The colonists felt less strongly about taxation than they did about being taxed without representation. Their rights as British citizens were ignored, though their protestations would at times result in the Crown altering course. Over the following decade, more acts would be passed, interspersed with flare-ups like the Boston Massacre in 1770 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773. A final straw was the Quartering Act of 1774, a far more invasive version of the one passed in 1765. This act allowed British soldiers to be housed in private homes and businesses, like taverns and inns.

The abuse by the world's greatest power had gone far enough. Washington met with other leaders of Fairfax County, Virginia, on July 18, 1774, to demand that their rights be restored as British citizens and "Descendants not of the Conquered, but of the Conquerors." The Fairfax Resolves, written by him and George Mason, were a thorough rebuke to the British Crown and Parliament. Less than two months later, 56 delegates from 12 of the 13 colonies met in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. After more than a decade of what the colonists viewed as being ignored, abused, and reduced "under absolute despotism," a conflict seemed inevitable. The inevitable took place on April 19, 1775, with the Massachusetts battles of Lexington and Concord. The proverbial Rubicon had been reached. Exactly two months later, Washington would be commissioned to lead the Continental Army across it.

Cato Versus Caesar

There are arguments to be made in defense of both Cato and Caesar. Their actions were noble in their own way. Although Cato had chosen expediency over the constitution during the Catiline Conspiracy, the rest of his life was dedicated to sustaining the republic and ending political corruption. Cato hoped to retain the republic as it stood, but convince the senators to refrain from corruption. Caesar, on the other hand, had favored the constitution, but now believed that the only way to cleanse the republic of its corruption was through dictatorship. Cato was the champion of Roman tradition. Caesar was the champion of the Roman people. Cato deplored Caesar; Caesar revered Cato.

To Cato, Caesar was the harbinger of tyranny. Caesar confirmed that suspicion on January 10, 49 B.C., when he crossed the Rubicon with his army and marched on Rome. It lit the fires of civil war and, retrospectively, signaled the end of the Roman Republic.

Washington: Both Cato and Caesar

The salutary neglect practiced by the British monarchy for 150 years had given the British Americans a near unequalled freedom in the world. When the new king made it clear that those times were over, Washington personified the qualities of both Cato and Caesar. He believed, as Cato did, that nothing was more sacred and necessary than liberty. He also believed, as Caesar did, that the established government had reached its expiration. This dual conception is reflected in his statement that America was "either to be drenched with Blood or Inhabited by Slaves."

Washington walked with a sense of destiny. He aspired to attain the glory of the great military leaders of the past, having ordered busts of the duke of Marlborough,

Frederick II of Prussia, Prince Eugene of Savoy, Charles XII of Sweden, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar. Adhering to this sense of destiny, he portrayed an air of invincibility, which was reaffirmed during the winter of 1776-77.

After splitting his army into three groups on Christmas Day, Washington crossed the Delaware River into Trenton, New Jersey, during a snowstorm and defeated the Hessians despite missing two-thirds of his army. During the Battle of Princeton days later, Washington, on his white horse, charged within 30 yards of the enemy. The British and Continentals fired, an officer described, with Washington's "important life hanging as it were by a single hair with a thousand deaths flying around him."

When the smoke cleared, Washington was unharmed and unfazed, yelling to his men, "The day is our own!" The miraculous events of those two battles caught the attention of the imperial world, stirring Frederick the Great of Prussia to extol Washington and his army's successes at Trenton and Princeton, saying that they "were the most brilliant of any recorded in the annals of military achievements."

The Caesar in Washington's sails was proving to be the prevailing wind. But as 1777 progressed, that wind began to change. Washington and his army had plummeted to near defeat—saved only by the stunning victory, sans Washington, at Saratoga. Huddled in the confines of Valley Forge throughout the winter of 1777-78, the great general conceived to inspire his men by way of his alter ego: Cato.

With both him and Martha in attendance, "Cato: A Tragedy" was performed for the troops. The Continental Army had triumphed in victory and suffered in defeat, but their struggle for liberty in a world "made for Caesar," as Addison's Cato stated, would continue for several more years.

Washington's Final Choice

Through the actions of a Caesar and the intentions of a Cato, Washington maneuvered America closer to victory and independence. Reminiscent of his Trenton and Princeton moments, Washington would emanate Caesar a final time at the Battle of Yorktown in September and October 1781. He personally initiated the relentless cannonade by firing the first shot. The surrender of Gen. Charles Cornwallis signaled the

end of the war, though the Treaty of Paris would not be signed for another two years. The moment of Washington accepting the surrender of Cornwallis was captured in all its glory—the glory of a conqueror—by painter John Trumbull.

Washington was well-versed in the real and the fictive versions of both Cato and Caesar.

Immediately, rumors swirled concerning Washington's next political move. He had marched on the British and won. Would America dethrone one king just to submit to another? Would Washington use his military might to establish his new empire, just as Caesar had done?

Col. Lewis Nicola proposed to Washington the idea of becoming the new nation's first monarch. Washington's response indicated that he had left the Caesar persona on

the blood-drenched field of Yorktown: "If I am not deceived in the knowledge of myself, you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable ... If you have any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity—or respect for me, ... banish these thoughts from your Mind."

On December 22, 1783, a celebratory dinner was thrown by Congress in Washington's honor. The following afternoon, he stood before the Continental Congress and resigned his commission. "Having now finished the work assigned me," said Washington, "I retire from the great theater of action." The light of Cato could not have shone more brightly.

Trumbull captured this moment as well, and upon reflection recalled:

"What a dazzling temptation was here to earthly ambition! Beloved by the military, venerated by the people, who was there to oppose the victorious chief, if he had chosen to retain that power, which he had so long held with universal approbation? The Caesars, the Cromwells, the Napoleons,

yielded to the charm of earthly ambition, and betrayed their country; but Washington aspired to loftier, imperishable glory—to that glory which virtue alone can give, and which no power, no effort, no time, can ever take away or diminish."

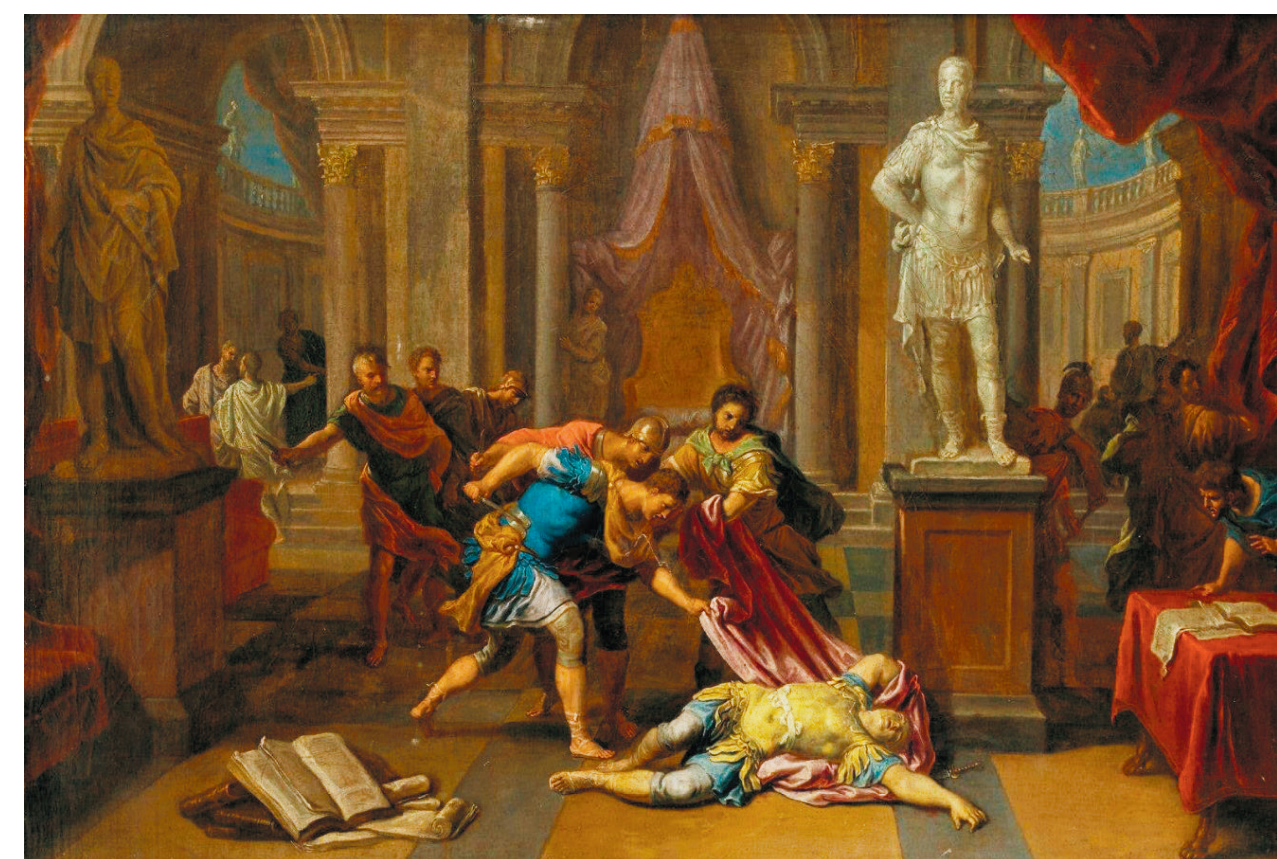
It may not have been a surprise in America that Washington resigned. Across the Atlantic, however, the decision invoked both perplexity and awe. King George III was quite certain that Washington would simply take his place as ruler. When he was informed by Benjamin West, the court history painter, that Washington had in fact resigned, the king responded, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."

Washington wasn't the world's greatest man because he was a Julius Caesar or a Cato. He was the greatest because he was both, consistently alternating between the two out of strategic necessity in order to defeat his enemies and inspire his troops, but never out of personal ambition.

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



Here Washington resembles Cato. "General George Washington Resigning His Commission," 1817-1824, by John Trumbull. Oil on canvas; 12 feet by 18 feet. U.S. Capitol, Washington.



"The Death of Caesar," between 1673 and 1736, by Victor Honoré Janssens. Oil on canvas; 23 5/8 inches by 35 inches. Private Collection



Senator Catiline's conspiracy to overthrow the Roman government in 63 B.C. was prevented and exposed by Cicero. Seated left is Catiline in "The Catiline Conspiracy," 1792, by Jean-François Janinet after Jean-Guillaume Moitte. Etching; 9 3/4 inches by 20 3/8 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

No Miracle Cure Is Greater Than Love

by **RUDOLPH LAMBERT FERNANDEZ**

In the town of Pine Mills, Oregon, legend has it that a tall, shadowy figure emerges from the waters with fire on his chest and hope in his eyes. That's how David Oyelowo's fairy tale-like movie "The Water Man" begins.

Gunner Boone, 11, (Lonnie Chavis) is a highly intelligent graphic-novel nerd, drawing, sketching, imagining, and creating mysterious plots and subplots around his own literary creation: the character Detective Knox. Gunner would rather hang out in a bookstore exploring possible clues and characterizations for his mystery books than fool around with a ball on a field.

But when Gunner discovers that his beloved mother, Mary (Rosario Dawson), has leukemia, he abruptly switches priorities and starts researching cancer instead, thinking about the problem whether on his electric cycle-scooter or not.

Gunner's research leads him to a mysterious figure known as the Water Man. Sensing from fractured bits of folklore that the Water Man may have supernatural gifts to extend life, if not revive it, Gunner tracks down the scholar-undertaker Jim Bussey (Alfred Molina) to help him unravel the secret behind the Water Man's miracle cure.

Bussey explains that, years ago, the Water Man was once an ordinary miner named Edward Schaal. Schaal stumbled upon a glittering rock vein that seemed far more precious than the igneous rocks that mountain mines usually threw up. On the night of Schaal's discovery, the town's dam broke; the flood killed everyone, including Schaal's wife. With a glowing stone clutched to his chest as he lay sleeping, Schaal alone survived that watery grave and was promptly christened "Water Man."

Bussey tells a mystified Gunner that some townsfolk believe that Schaal is still alive, wandering the deep woods, healing dead or dying animals, looking for his wife's body so that he may rejuvenate her too.

That's all the folklore Gunner needs to start

hunting down the Water Man in all seriousness. He packs a bag and seeks out Josephine Riley (Amiah Miller), who claims to have seen the Water Man. She promises to introduce Gunner to him, and together they set off into the woods on an adventure that will surprise them both.

Special Relationships, Not Special Effects

The film marks Oyelowo's directorial debut and it is assured, if a little lagging in rhythm and pace. Oyelowo is less concerned with adrenalin-pumped on-screen thrills or special effects and more with conveying Gunner's love for his mom and Amos's love for his son. Gunner's dad, Amos (David Oyelowo), a U.S. Marine, tries to connect with his son, yet the boy prefers to see less of him, or not at all. Gunner keeps misreading Amos's clumsy and often rushed attempts at bonding as expressions of contempt rather than care.

Oyelowo lavishes his camera on Gunner's confusion around a disease he can't understand. One touching scene has the boy advising the home-nurse to change the medication protocol for his mom because his own research has convinced him of better medicines.

Oyelowo uses Bussey's words as a voiceover while a haunting, two-minute-long graphic-novel, animation-style narrative tells the Water Man's backstory.

Mary, weakened by cancer, tries to be a soft-hearted mediator between dad and son. Conscious that Amos is so rarely at home that he has little chance to build a decent connection with his child, Mary wants Gunner to show his father the same affection he shows his mother. And she wants Amos to learn that there's more to his son than a craze for comic art.

A Film for Families

Young Chavis as Gunner is curious, compassionate, committed. He conveys helplessness as he watches his mom wage a losing battle against cancer. Then he's cautiously hopeful that his bravery in seeking out the elusive Water Man might just save her life. Oyelowo subtly conveys the anguish of a father trying



MOVIESTILLSDB
The Boone family: (L-R) young Gunner (Lonnie Chavis), who hopes his mother will be cured, with his father Amos (David Oyelowo) and mother Mary (Rosario Dawson), in 2021's "The Water Man."

'The Water Man'

Director
David Oyelowo

Starring
Lonnie Chavis,
Rosario Dawson,
David Oyelowo,
Amiah Miller

Running Time
1 hour, 32 minutes

MPAA Rating
PG

Release Date
May 7, 2021

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

to get through to his son, and Dawson portrays a mother weighed down by disease; she herself performs one of the film's songs ("Caleb's Lullaby").

Emma Needell's sensitive screenplay hits some right notes, even if it lacks sufficient emotional breadth and depth. Still, middle-schoolers and their families may enjoy this film, especially parents keen to show their growing kids how relationships matter more than hobbies, and how persistent, thoughtful communication can fill gaps in family ties, no matter how wide they seem.

Rudolph Lambert Fernandez is an independent writer who writes on pop culture. He may be reached at Twitter: @RudolphFernandez

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