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ARTS & CULTURE

GERARD MALIE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

▲ A West Berliner carries a Federal Republic of Germany flag to hand to an East German through a portion of the fallen Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate on Nov. 11, 1989. Three leaders were instrumental in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War: U.S. President Ronald Reagan, English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Polish Pope John Paul II.

HISTORY

The Unlikely Trio Who Helped Undermine Soviet Russia

Heroes of the late 20th century: Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II

By Jeff Minick

In the introduction to his book "Heroes," historian Paul Johnson remarks on the difficulties inherent in defining a hero. He finally concludes that "heroic behavior is to be found in every age and in all kinds of places. The chief criterion is the verdict of the public and this, being arbitrary, eccentric and often irrational (as well as changeable), gives a salty flavor to the business."

Americans have tasted this salt in the 21st century. Academics, politicians, and a mob of followers have assailed icons of history like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Robert E. Lee, going so far as to deface or tear down their statues because of their connections to slavery. Christopher Columbus, Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, and others have also come under attack, all for a variety of reasons.

Yet we humans certainly crave our heroes, as may be evidenced by the adulation their admirers have paid to Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Others choose celebrities—athletes, film stars, musicians—to raise up on a pedestal.

Johnson's book itself displays some of these ambiguities. Here are those we might expect to find—Julius Caesar,

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▲ French leader Philippe Pétain (L) believed that his pact with Hitler was the only way to save his country's people.

BOOK REVIEW

A Brilliant History That Poses Complicated Questions

Looking afresh at Vichy France and Marshal Pétain

By Dustin Bass

"It was more complicated than that." That phrase is often repeated in Julian Jackson's new book, "France on Trial: The Case of Marshal Pétain," and it is indicative of the subject. This is not to suggest that Jackson's book is difficult to follow; rather, he has approached the subject with the same complexity as that which surrounded the man on trial in July of 1945.

This complexity centers around whether or not Marshal Philippe Pétain, leader of the Vichy government, betrayed France by signing an armistice with Nazi Germany. It would be easy to nod in the affirmative because it was the Nazis, after all, and how could one collaborate with them? But that is the knee-jerk reaction. That is the response given when one wishes to ignore the details, the facts, and the difficulties behind making impossible choices. That is the substance of show trials. Furthermore, as Jackson's title suggests, Pétain wasn't the only one on trial; France was on trial.

Life or Honor

This trial became an attempt to retrieve the soul of the nation. As the author describes in his book, the French, Parisians in particular, felt that the armistice signed with the Germans left France, especially Paris, intact, but the nation soulless. And this is arguably the great question of the book: What takes precedence? The honor of a nation or the lives of its people? It is a debate referenced at the end of the book between Pétain and Charles de Gaulle: Pétain believed that life was more important than honor; de Gaulle believed otherwise.

After his military exploits at Verdun during World War I, Pétain became the embodiment of courage, leadership, and honor. He had been, as he stated to his countrymen at the time of signing the armistice, the nation's "sword." With the signing of the armistice, he was now the nation's "shield." The armistice appeared to replace honor with preservation. To his critics, none more vocal than the communists, he had also abandoned courage and leadership. The marshal, however, refused to believe he had done so. If honor had been sacrificed, it had been his own on the altar of national preservation.

His trial had been scheduled to be conducted *in absentia*, but Pétain wished to stand trial in person (proving that perhaps his courage was still very much intact). Jackson notes that the octogenarian remained silent almost entirely for the three-week trial but did offer some words to the court at the onset, now known as the Pétain Declaration:

"History will reveal all that I spared you while my adversaries only think of blaming me for what was unavoidable. ... What would have been gained in liberating a France in ruins, a France of cemeteries?"

Jackson, I don't believe, is presenting Pétain's case as mere history. I believe he is presenting it as a timeless question, and one that no leader ever wishes to be presented with. What must be preserved: honor or lives? In a sense, as the verdict showed, there is no answer. What good is a nation's honor if the preservation of its people is contingent on a deal with the devil? What good is the preservation of its people if they are left with no honor? Lastly, how can there be national honor if that nation is destroyed?

Historical and Metaphysical

As the author courses through the details of the trial and the history of the Vichy era (1940–1944), he consistently reflects on the overarching theme of the moment. "The trial of Marshal Pétain is not 'historical' but 'metaphysical,'" Jackson writes, quoting the French journalist Maurice Clavel. "That is the source of the anguish that grips us and divides us all."

There is a sense of uncertainty about how to view Pétain.

Jackson balances these two elements: the historical and the metaphysical. But even these two elements are broken into parts. There is the historical aspect of what Pétain did and didn't do, and what the Vichy, under his authority, did and didn't do, including its treatment of resistors, communists, and Jews; there's also Pétain's perplexing resistance to joining the Allies after the Americans landed in North Africa. The metaphysical aspect is why Pétain and his regime chose to do what they did—from the extent they collaborated with the Nazis to the extent they resisted some of their demands.

"France on Trial" compiles the voices of the prosecution and defense, the witnesses and jurors, the journalists and ideologues, resistors and collaborators, all of whom believed they were right. But if they were all right, then indeed they must all be wrong. According to Jackson, this was the defense's perspective. Jacques Isorni, one of Pétain's attorneys, believed "that the faith that had led the entire political class to shelter under [Pétain's] myth in 1940 had left deep traces; that if he was guilty, so was all of France." Isorni, quoted in his final words of the trial, referenced both the historical and metaphysical elements of France by intertwining them into the fabric of the man who was both "sword" and "shield," suggesting to the jury, and indeed to all of France: "When have we ever opposed Saint Geneviève, protector of the city of Paris, against Saint Jeanne who liberated our land?"

An Uncertainty

Jackson has woven a story so rich in both the historical and the metaphysical that it leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty about how to view Pétain. But we are in good company, as it appears France itself possessed this sense. Pétain was given a verdict that echoed the sentiments of both the prosecution and the defense, the critics and the supporters. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but with the request that due to his age the sentence not be carried out.

It seems, however, that deferring the sentence to life imprisonment was less about age and more about that uncertainty—the uncertainty that Isorni might have been right: we are all guilty; the uncertainty because Pétain was juggling both the historical and the metaphysical; the uncertainty between Pétain's and de Gaulle's view of life and honor. Indeed, this uncertainty continues today as French polling consistently shows that a majority believe Pétain acted in the best of the country, while simultaneously believing the court arrived at the right verdict.

Jackson demonstrates to near perfection that history is not always black and white. Indeed, it rarely is. Sometimes it is "metaphysical." It leaves us with questions we can't answer and with the overwhelming temptation to make assumptions that we shouldn't. People today, just like those who watched the trial in 1945, wish for history to provide a narrative that follows a straight line. But history doesn't do that. It can't do that. It's more complicated than that.

Dustin Bass is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast. He also writes two weekly series for The Epoch Times: Profiles in History and This Week in History.

'FRANCE ON TRIAL: THE CASE OF MARSHAL PETAIN'

By Julian Jackson
Belknap Press
Aug. 22, 2023
Hardcover
480 pages

LITERATURE

A Soul Refreshed

Nathaniel Hawthorne's essay on renewing oneself by solitude

By Kate Vidimos

In a busy, booming world, we can easily lose our individuality in a vast crowd. Yet in his memoir of one experience, "Footprints on the Seashore," Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests a solitary walk along the seashore as a remedy, for it restores our connection with nature and our individuality in a world full of people.

Hawthorne seeks the solitude and solace of the sea, sky, and seashore on a September morning. He avoids all society to better enjoy his surroundings.

'Footprints on the Seashore'

Upon reaching the shore, his heart swells and leaps. The immense sea, the loud roar of the waves, the expanse of the shore awaken his heart and "enlarge its sense of being." Away from the rest of humanity and exposed to nature's raw power, Hawthorne's individual soul stretches to its full capacity in the solitude of nature.

▲ A walk along the seashore reminds Nathaniel Hawthorne of his individuality and uniqueness in "Footprints on the Seashore."

ALEKSANDR OZEROV/SHUTTERSTOCK

Stepping in the sand, it is almost as if he sees the impact of his soul on the surrounding landscape. How long these footprints will stay is uncertain, but the thoughts and feelings of his soul impress themselves in the sand with each step.

And as he retraces his steps, his tracks reveal his "every unconscious wandering of thought and fancy." The tracks show where he grabbed a shell, or how far he dragged a piece of seaweed, or where he dug among the pebbles. The course of his footprints shows the course and nature of his soul and its dreams.

Even by simply writing his name in the sand, Hawthorne gives fulfillment to his individuality. No matter how large he makes the letters or when they wash away, his hand gives utterance to his soul.

Remembrance and Recognition

The shore not only allows his soul a space to imprint itself in the sand, but it also gives him a view of the past—and not just a recollection and reflection of his past, but also of the immense, mysterious past of the sea.

The roar of the waves has been consistent and continual for ages. As he listens, with sagely wisdom it "warn[s] the listener to withdraw his interest from mortal vicissitudes and let the infinite idea of eternity pervade his soul." The waves call his attention to the infinite sea that resembles eternity. His soul is humbled, but not lost.

As dusk falls and Hawthorne heads home, he does not feel sad. Rather, he feels enlightened about his individuality and humanity in the grand scale of eternity. He returns to the rest of humanity revived. He will be happier and kinder to those around him, for the sea brings him back to himself.

Through this story, Hawthorne brings us to the edge of the sea, where we dip our toes in the water of its infinite wisdom. He sings praises of solitude and the great joy and solace it brings.

And yet, he does not encourage us to shirk mankind forever. Rather, he shows, as Ralph Waldo Emerson says in "Self-Reliance": "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

Nature is a retreat where we can find ourselves by baring our souls to its deep wisdom. It reminds us that even though we are many, we are individuals with minds and souls of our own in the expanse of eternity. And just like a single pebble in the sea, our influence will ripple across eternity.

Kate Vidimos is a 2020 graduate from the liberal arts college at the University of Dallas, where she received her bachelor's degree in English. She plans on pursuing all forms of storytelling (specifically film) and is currently working on finishing and illustrating a children's book.

HISTORY

The Unlikely Trio Who Helped Undermine Soviet Russia

Continued from Page 1

Elizabeth I, Lord Nelson, and more—but here, too, are actresses Mae West and Marilyn Monroe. We can probably safely guess that Monroe in particular, whatever her virtues and flaws, appears in few other books or articles touting her as heroic, though Johnson makes that case.

Late 20th-Century Lionhearts

In the book's final chapter, Johnson offers readers "The Heroic Trinity Who Tamed the Bear: Reagan, Thatcher and John Paul II."

The "Bear" to which Johnson refers is, of course, the Soviet Union, brought to a collapse, in part, because of the many failures of communism but also because an American president, an English prime minister, and a Polish pope exerted enormous political pressure on what Reagan had once called an "evil empire."

In addition, often acting against stiff resistance and harsh criticism, Thatcher, Reagan, and John Paul II changed the course of events in their own spheres of influence. Thatcher defeated out-of-control labor unions, Reagan restored American pride and the economy after the dreary presidency of Jimmy Carter, and John Paul II steered the barque of Peter away from the radical reforms that sprang up in the wake of Vatican II.

John Paul II became pope in 1978, Margaret Thatcher prime minister in 1979, and Ronald Reagan president in 1981. That three such vigorous and powerful leaders of the free world should take high office almost simultaneously at a crucial time in history seems inexplicable except by dint of providence, fate, or fortune. That a professional politician, an actor, and a man of the cloth should also share a common vision of liberty and the human spirit is equally mystifying. Their collaboration came into play in part because of the Cold War and the times in which they lived, but this trio also shared some commonalities of adolescence and youth that perhaps opened the doors to camaraderie.

Their Early Days

Of the three, Margaret Hilda Roberts (1925–2013) had the most stable childhood and adolescence. She grew up in the town of Grantham, in Lincolnshire, England, where her parents were pious Methodists and middle-class shopkeepers. Like her American and Polish contemporaries, she was taught thriftiness at home by word and example. Her revered father, Alfred, served as an alderman and later mayor of the town, sparking her early interest in politics. She worked hard in school, where one of her teachers, Miss Kay, inspired an interest in chemistry. Later, she took her degree in that subject at the University of Oxford.

Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) grew up in the small town of Dixon, Illinois. His father was an alcoholic and a salesman who had trouble supporting his family, but his mother, Nelle, deeply influenced their son. Nelle was a devout Christian, fiercely opposed the racism of her day, and even in those tough times, spent countless hours helping the less fortunate. From her, Reagan absorbed the idea of giving the poor a hand up rather than a "handout." He excelled in sports, performed in dramas organized by Nelle and in school plays, and became president of his high school student body. Later, while attending Eureka College, he continued these activities, meanwhile working to pay his way through school and sending money home at times to his family.

Karol Wojtyla (1920–2005) spent his childhood and adolescence in Wadowice, Poland. His mother died when he was 8. Four years later, his beloved brother, a newly minted physician, died as well. From his father, a soldier who devoted himself to the well-being of his surviving son, Wojtyla learned to treasure his Catholic faith in what he later called his "domestic church." An avid skier and football player, he also showed a passion for theater. When he attended university in Krakow—his father moved there as well—he continued his acting for a time even after the Nazis had closed the university, forcing him and others to work at manual labor. In 1942, he began studying for the priesthood in an underground seminary run by the city's archbishop.

Middle Years

As they matured, these three individuals set out on vastly different journeys. By the early 1950s, Thatcher had left the field of chemistry, studied and was practicing law, and immersed herself in politics. In 1959, she became a member of Parliament. By then, Reagan had already made a name for himself in Hollywood as a B-movie actor and was a presence on television. Meanwhile, Wojtyla became a priest and in 1958 was ordained a bishop.

Meanwhile, the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union continued unabated. To predict at the time that these three people, strangers one to the other, would in 20 years form an alliance that would end both that war and the Soviet Union itself would have been beyond the power of any Nostradamus.

Courage Under Fire

In the last paragraph of "Heroes," Johnson asks how we might recognize contemporary heroes. He then lists four qualifications that work for him: Heroes, he writes, possess "absolute independence of mind," followed by the ability and willpower to act on those thoughts "resolutely and consistently." They slough off the criticisms of the media provided they "remain convinced" they are doing right." Finally, heroes "act with personal courage at all times, regardless of the consequences" to themselves.

Thatcher, Reagan, and John Paul II demonstrated these qualities throughout their long stint in the public arena. In his discussion of the pope and Church affairs, for instance, Johnson writes that "he never allowed himself to be deflected from his restorative program, which he pursued steadily and tenaciously throughout his long pontificate." Adjusted for circumstances, that same stamp of endurance and courage applies to Thatcher and Reagan.

Clearly, all of them whetted these abilities in the years before they became international figures. Those 20 years that Thatcher served in Parliament before becoming prime minister accustomed her to the rough and tumble of politics and factionalism. Reagan's career in radio, film, and television created the talents for speaking and the charisma that carried him into the California governor's office and then into the White House. John Paul's five decades of dealing with totalitarian governments sharpened the skills and know-how needed to battle and defeat communism.

Building Champions of Virtue

A lack of space doubtless prevented Johnson from exploring the childhoods of Thatcher, Reagan, and Wojtyla. If we look to those younger years, however, we find the roots that gave blossom to their courage and fortitude. Each one of them came of age in communities that nurtured them and gave them room to develop their talents. Each one was raised and formed by loving, encouraging parents who taught them virtue. Each grew up in a home where religious faith was strong rather than perfunctory. Each learned early the necessity and value of hard work, individual effort, and righteous ambition.

These are the soil, water, and sunshine that produce not only heroes but also good men and good women. No matter the era and no matter their station in life, such people are always in short supply in any society. The lives of Thatcher, Reagan, and John Paul should remind us all, especially parents, that character formation—the creation of goodness and heroism—begins with the lessons taught in childhood.

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

ALL PHOTOS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

▲ President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the South Lawn during her arrival ceremony in February 1981. National Archives and Records Administration.

◀ President Ronald Reagan met with Pope John Paul II at the Vizcaya Museum in Miami, in September 1987. White House Photographic Collection.

The three shared a common vision of liberty and the human spirit.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF GARETH GARDENER

▲ In his Drawing Office, English architect Sir John Soane surrounded himself with plaster casts taken from great ancient buildings. Each cast inspired his work and that of his draftsmen and pupils.

ARCHITECTURE

Discover an Architect's Treasure Trove

Sir John Soane's Drawing Office

By Lorraine Ferrier

From bricklayer's son to eminent 18th-century architect, Sir John Soane cemented his legacy by fastidiously studying works of his architectural forefathers. The Englishman's most notable works are both in London: the world's first purpose-built art gallery, Dulwich Picture Gallery, and the Bank of England building, which took 45 years to complete.

As professor of architecture at the Royal Academy Schools in London, Soane passed his passion for architecture on to future generations. In his inaugural lecture, he emphasized the importance of studying ancient architecture: "Let us therefore profit from the labors and zeal of those who have endeavored to preserve and make us acquainted with the precious fragments of antiquity; let us tread in their paths; let us from their labors endeavor to discover the principles that directed the great artists of antiquity; and when we have no remains of their splendid and glorious works to direct our studies, and to animate our minds to exertion, let us consult the poets, historians, and orators, wrecks of whose works have happily reached us."

Soane practiced what he preached. He filled his home and his Drawing Office with Greek and Roman classics, poetry, painting, sculpture, history, music, and architecture. He knew that by immersing himself in the arts, he could hone his architectural skills and inspire his draftsmen and pupils too.

Soane bequeathed his home and office to the nation with the express wish that it be left as it was when he died, and that entry be free, to inspire and educate everyone.

The Sir John Soane Museum in London is an architectural treasure trove. For the first time in its history, the museum is offering visitors a tour of the architect's Drawing Office, where Soane educated his apprentices in the "art, business, and profession of architecture," as explained by the museum's deputy director and inspectress Helen Dorey in a video on the museum's website. Visitors can see where his pupils worked for 12 hours a day, six days a week to become proficient in their profession.

Museum conservators took a year to restore over 250 works. They meticulously researched how the Drawing Office appeared in Soane's day. For instance, they discovered that he often placed models of his own designs next to models of the ancient ruins that inspired them. The conservators realigned columns, rejuvenated the desks and paintwork, and reinstated bookcases and stained glass. Some of the casts have hung in Soane's office for some 200 years, and conservators rehung those works after restoring them with original fixtures, as much as possible, such as timber with long, hand-forged nails.

Conservators at the Sir John Soane Museum in London often worked in cramped and challenging conditions while restoring Soane's Drawing Room. The 18th-century architect hung architectural plaster casts up high and on every surface, including the ceiling, making accessing the casts an almost acrobatic affair.

Visitors can now see the Drawing Office hung high with the artworks and architectural casts that inspired Soane, his draftsmen, and pupils. Maybe visitors will be inspired by the noble, enduring traditions of architecture echoed in Soane's first lecture, when he reiterated the importance of looking to beauty and tradition to inform our progress: "If we have industry and application, to make us acquainted with the grand, sublime, and beautiful in architecture; enough yet remains to enable us to restore the art to at least a large portion of its ancient glory."

To find out more about Sir John Soane's Drawing Office, visit DrawingOffice.Soane.org

▲ A plaster model of Sir John Soane's 1804 design for the northwest corner of the Bank of England building sits on a desk in his Drawing Office. Experts see the Bank of England building as Soane's greatest design, but unfortunately most of the building was demolished in the 1920s and only the façade of his design survives.

"A Reading From Homer," 1885, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Oil on canvas; 36.1 inches by 72.2 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

The Great Poet of the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' in Art

Artists of the 18th and 19th centuries bring the poet Homer and his works to life

By Michelle Plastrik

For millennia, the ancient Greek epic poems the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" have profoundly influenced readers, scholars, authors, and artists, and they are universally regarded as two of Western civilization's foundational literary texts. The basis of both stories is the Trojan War, which was precipitated by Helen, queen of the Greek city-state of Sparta, leaving her husband and taking refuge in Troy with Paris, a prince of that city.

The "Iliad" is set in the 10th year of the resultant war between Troy and the Greek city-states. The war ends with the siege of Troy by the Greeks. The "Odyssey" follows the turbulent journey of one of the war's Greek heroes, Odysseus, King of Ithaca, on his voyage home. It takes Odysseus another 10 years to return to Ithaca as he craftily contends with various impediments. In the meantime, his queen, Penelope, uses her own guile to avoid remarriage, hopeful that her husband will one day return. In both of these poems, characters, relationships, and scenes of honor, danger, and temptation are masterfully brought to life by their poet, the legendary Homer.

For centuries, scholars have tried to tease out the truth about Homer: Was there such a man; if so, did he compose the famous tales; is there historical truth to his mythical storytelling? While it remains open to debate whether the poems are the result of one man's creativity or an accumulation of different authors' source material, it is agreed that the poems were originally composed and passed down orally sometime in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C. before the widespread development of writing in Greece.

JOHN R. GLEMBIN/MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

"Homer and His Guide," 1874, by William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Oil on canvas; 82.25 inches by 56.25 inches. Gift of Frederick Layton, Milwaukee Art Museum.

'A Reading From Homer'

The painting "A Reading From Homer," by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), a leading 19th-century artist in Britain who specialized in classical scenes in the academic style, shows a semi-historically accurate scene set toward the end of the seventh century B.C. By then, Homer's words would have been committed to scroll, and in the artwork a young poet crowned with a laurel wreath reads aloud Homer's verse to an audience attired for a festival.

In ancient Greece, Homer's poetry would have been sung by bards to the accompaniment of a lyre. Alma-Tadema included an ancient stringed instrument similar to a lyre, called a cithara, on the left-hand side of the painting. Greek letters inscribed in a marble wall on the right-hand side spell Homer's name and denote that Alma-Tadema's imagined architectural setting overlooking the Mediterranean is dedicated to the poet.

"A Reading From Homer" is considered one of Alma-Tadema's best works, all the more astonishing for his having completed it in only two months, given its luminous and harmonious colors, perfectly modeled figures, and theatrical composition. Significantly, the most commanding figure is the poet: The papyrus scroll extends from his outstretched arm to his lap, and he leans forward with intent and vim, thus keeping the viewer's focus on this tribute to Homer.

'Homer and His Guide'

The main attribute associated with Homer is his blindness. Historian and writer Daisy Dunn writes, in an essay for the British Museum: "Ancient writers had various ideas about what Homer looked like. The word 'homeros' could mean 'hostage' in Greek, so some imagined that he was a captive. But 'homeros' could also mean 'blind,' and the image of a blind bard proved particularly compelling."

The prominent French academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) created "Homer and His Guide" in 1874 at a time when classical painting was coming into conflict with a new style of art; this movement became known as impressionism. Some scholars believe Bouguereau painted this work specifically to show the merits of traditional painting and as a rebuttal to the new movement.

Bougereau's painting shows a young shepherd helping the blind Homer navigate a hilly, rocky landscape set under a cloudless, azure sky. The artist depicted Homer with another characteristic attribute, a lyre, and modeled Homer's head after a cast of an antique bust of the poet housed in a Neapolitan archaeological museum. The highly detailed, lifelike composition of landscape, figures, drapery, and dog is made up of multiple thin layers of paint that create a smooth finish without distinguishable brushstrokes.

Bougereau painted this work specifically to show the merits of traditional painting.

The Beauty of the Ages

Scenes from the poems themselves have been imagined in a plethora of paintings and sculptures, from ancient Greek vases to Roman frescos to 19th-century paintings. Helen of Troy, the subject of Sir Edward John Poynter's painting "Helen," is popularly known as "the face that launch'd a thousand ships," a line from a Christopher Marlowe play. She was the great beauty of the ancient world. Poynter (1836–1919) used actress Lillie Langtry, one of the great beauties of his day, as the model for "Helen."

Poynter was an academic painter known for his classically themed artworks. He made a series of oil paintings and watercolors with the subject of heroines from antiquity in half-length poses. This type of composition can be seen in "Helen."

Helen of Troy was the daughter of Zeus, king of the gods, and Leda, queen of Sparta, with Sparta being a city in southern Greece. Many suitors were eager for her hand in marriage, but before she married Menelaus, who became king of Sparta, all who had vied for her swore an oath to provide military assistance to Menelaus if Helen was ever taken from him. Hence, when she absconded with Paris to Troy, nearly 1,200 Greek ships sailed to Troy to wage war as detailed in the "Iliad."

In Poynter's rendition of Helen, she is framed by architectural features. She has one hand placed over her chest while the other holds her robe. This protective gesture is the only hint of emotion suggested as the city of Troy, just visible to the left of the column, is being burned to the ground by the invading Greeks. Helen's large blue eyes stare expressionlessly at something beyond the picture frame, and the rest of her face is as immobile as that of a statue. She wears two distinctive necklaces that were the artist's own creation and, in fact, were brought to life by a 19th-century jeweler, Carlo Giuliano, who specialized in archeological revivalist styles.

Outwitting the Cyclops

One of the most famous escapades in the "Odyssey" is in Book IX when Ulysses, the Latinized version of Odysseus, outwits and escapes the cyclops Polyphemus, who has been keeping him and his men captive in a cave. The painting "Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus–Homer's Odyssey" by the English Romantic artist J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) is considered one of the great pictures of Turner's oeuvre.

Turner based his painting on Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's poem. He was particularly inspired by Pope's description of Polyphemus, whose blinded one-eyed visage is barely visible in the skyline among the clouds on the left, as resembling a monstrous growth on a mountain. In the painting, Ulysses raises his arms victoriously as he holds the flaming torch with which he has blinded the cyclops. He stands on his ship dressed in red under a similarly colored banner.

When "Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus–Homer's Odyssey" was on exhibit at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008, the museum described how "the painting reveals Turner's preoccupation with light—from the smoking glow of the volcanic fire to the marine phosphorescence at the prow of Ulysses's ship and the celestial light of the sun, as symbolized by Apollo's chariot." The chariot's horses were modeled partially after horses on the Parthenon frieze, which had gone on display at the British Museum 12 years before Turner created this work. This painting, with its varied rich colors including cobalt, reds, pinks, greens and yellows, marked a turning point in Turner's increasingly vigorous investigation of color and light in historical landscapes.

Penelope's Plight

"The Odyssey" recounts that while Odysseus is tangling with cyclops on one island and sorcery on another, his wife, Penelope (Helen's cousin), is besieged herself—not by mythical monsters but by eager male suitors. They presume that Odysseus is dead, as all other survivors of the Trojan War have returned to their families. Loyal Penelope believes that Odysseus is still alive. To stall the suitors, she declares that she will take a new husband only when she has completed weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. In secret, she unravels her work every night.

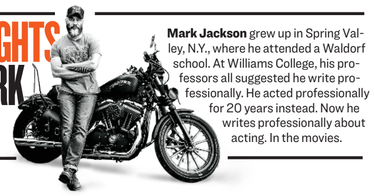
In the painting "Penelope and the Suitors" by John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), Penelope is at the center of the scene, working by day under watchful eyes. Waterhouse began his career as an academic painter before transitioning to a Pre-Raphaelite style and pursuing literary themes with naturalistic details, rich tonal palettes, and beautiful female subjects, all of which can be seen in this large painting. The Aberdeen Art Gallery commissioned this work from the artist in the early 20th century, when the heyday of Pre-Raphaelitism had long since passed. The art world was looking to more modern styles, such as cubism, reflecting a tension similar to that between Bouguereau and impressionism.

"Penelope and the Suitors" is a major painting from Waterhouse's late career. Its complex composition is rendered with realistic and colorful details in its portrayal of patterns, materials, and textiles. Penelope is shown in profile and in action. A thread in her mouth and a shuttle in her raised left hand creates a seemingly industrious tableau. On the left, two maids with their flowing dresses assist with the shroud weaving. On the right, four suitors on the exterior of Penelope's room vie for her attention, though she has her back to them.

Jewelry and a lyre, as is prominent in other paintings discussed here, are used in this context to coax a response from her. A portion of the wall below the suitors has a decorative frieze showing a battle scene, perhaps a foreshadowing of how Odysseus will return and defeat his would-be replacements.

Homer and his poems speak across a chasm of nearly 3,000 years to reach a still-receptive readership. These exemplary artworks from the 18th to 20th centuries, which are also preserved pieces of history, vividly and tangibly bring to life Homer and his ancient tales.

Michelle Plastrik is an art advisor living in New York City. She writes on a range of topics, including art history, the art market, museums, art fairs, and special exhibitions.



FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Almost an Instant Baseball-Movie Classic

Faith and sports pack a one-two punch

By Mark Jackson

"The Hill" had three writers who collectively wrote the sports movie classics "Rudy," "Hoosiers," and "When the Game Stands Tall." It's the second baseball movie that Dennis Quaid ("The Rookie") has starred in. And flinty ex-Marine Scott Glenn—always good in sports and military stories—brings the flintiness. Meaning, "The Hill" has got to be a good sports movie, right?

Pretty much. Religion and politics don't (or shouldn't) mix, but religion and sports is always a match made in movie heaven, especially in America.

Not to mention the fact that "The Hill" chalks up yet another ridiculous Rotten Tomatoes percentage skew: as of this writing, 39 percent critics, 97 percent audience. What's that tell you? That movie critics don't like any religion in their movies these days. Well, I'm here to tell ya: I generally swim upstream against the critic current, and I found "The Hill" to be an exceptionally good family movie.

'The Hill'

"The Hill" tells the true-life and very inspirational story of baseball player Rickey Hill and how he struggled to overcome a degenerative spinal disease. It's a thoroughly enjoyable slice of Americana, like a series of Norman Rockwell paintings come to life. Actually, it's pretty much a baseball version of the 1984 dance movie "Footloose," with Dennis Quaid in the John Lithgow role of the fire-and-brimstone-preaching pastor.

Rickey Hill (played by the very talented child actor Jesse Berry in the earlier scenes) was born with said medical issue in the late '50s and wore leg braces into his early teens. However, his passion and bliss was swatting stones with sticks, obsessively, and could knock stones clear across fields, over trees, to shatter the windshield of a neighbor's truck. He became a Texas high school batting phenom.

His dad, James Hill (a craggy Dennis Quaid, 69), is the epitome of a Southern hardscrabble preacher in impoverished, rural Texas, with a serious need to control his son's dreams of baseball glory. James tells himself that he was just looking out for and protecting his son, who, with those braces on his legs, could *clearly* never play baseball.

And so, the preacher preaches faith-in-the-Almighty to his flock, but has, himself, no faith that his son's dreams (backed by his son's unshakable faith in the Almighty) can transcend the illusion of this earthly realm. James painstakingly squelches young Mickey Mantle-obsessed Rickey's dreams, insisting instead that Ricky follow in his footsteps as a pastor.

When James apprehends Rickey and Rickey's older brother (Mason Gillett) delighting, as boys will, in baseball cards, he confiscates the contraband to purge "the worship of false idols." This bit of drama creates a nice dissonance for the audience to root for Rickey.

What, ostensibly, the critics are opposed to is the (to them) floridly religious dialogue, such as when 19-year-old Rickey (Colin Ford), desperate to get his foot in the baseball door, tells dad: "When I swing that bat, I ain't crippled no more. I am David taking down Goliath." And James's response, which is to warn his son that he's got to choose "*God's* will ... or *your* will."

The critics also probably don't appreciate the fact that little Rickey demonstrates God's plan to his father by drawing a diagram of a baseball diamond with a line from home plate to second base, and another line going from first base to third. Rickey draws this cross in the dirt whenever he steps up to bat, and whether critics like that or not, there's the irrefutable fact that it worked like gangbusters for Rickey.

Despite the father-son tension, "The Hill" has lots of warmth. It's a heartwarming tale of exceptional forbearance: Troubles rain down upon young Rickey, including an ankle fracture that shreds tendons and ligaments, resulting in his doctor declaring that he will never play again.

Almost a Classic

"The Hill" is probably too long, but that clearly hasn't bothered audiences. Didn't bother me either—the old-school Americana of small-town USA denizens rooting for each other is always a breath of fresh air.

The casting of the kids as adults, even the lead, feels like it was a bit rushed. Had they absolutely nailed the casting, the magic that's mostly in the beginning of the film would have carried over into the latter half, and "The Hill" would have been an instantaneous baseball-movie classic. However, Rickey's forbearance and stubbornness, born from some inborn certainty, is what carries the film throughout (even in the older Rickey's performance) and is why, I'm guessing, audiences appreciate it so much.

This is a real hero story. I personally can't get enough of scenes such as the climactic sequence where Rickey faces down his pain while going up against his first alpha-dog, blazing-fastball big-league pitcher, as his own talent pays off in highly satisfying ways. You can't beat that with a baseball bat.

'The Hill'

Director
Jeff Celentano

Starring
Dennis Quaid, Colin Ford, Joelle Carter, Randy Houser, Jesse Berry, Bonnie Bedelia, Scott Glenn

Running Time
2 hour, 6 minutes

MPAA Rating
PG

Release Date
Aug. 25, 2023

★★★½☆

BRIARCLIFF ENTERTAINMENT

Rickey Hill (Jesse Berry, front and center in overalls) and big brother Robert Hill (Mason Gillett, to Rickey's left) play baseball with a group of boys in a new neighborhood they don't know yet, in "The Hill."

DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

Volunteer Firefighters Serve America's Heartland

Uneven documentary honors volunteer firefighters

By Michael Clark

Shot in seven small towns across the country, the documentary "Odd Hours, No Pay, Cool Hat" ("Cool Hat") could easily be pegged as something targeted mostly at rural audiences, since people living in those areas can easily relate to the relaxed, no-frills content steeped heavily in hearty Americana.

Jointly financed by the John Deere Company and the National Volunteer Fire Council, "Cool Hat" displays levels of commitment, sacrifice, selflessness, collective intestinal fortitude, and old-fashioned small-town values that are virtually absent on both coasts and in most big cities.

The Tubbs Fire

The movie opens in Santa Rosa, California, with future firefighter volunteer Jenna Dunbar revisiting the site of the 2017 Tubbs Fire, which destroyed over 5,500 homes (including hers) and claimed nearly 22 lives. Even years after the event, the earth there remains scorched, and rebuilding is still in its infancy stages.

Ms. Dunbar's backstory, not addressed until the final third of the movie, is beyond impressive. She could have easily become a professional athlete in a multitude of sports, yet chose to go the route of non-compensated firefighting.

First-time co-directors Gary Matoso and Cameron Zohoori present a number of impressive firefighting factoids along the way.

SUB-GENRE FILMS

Trainees in North Bend, Wash., in "Odd Hours, No Pay, Cool Hat."

Ben Franklin

U.S. volunteer fire companies are older than the country itself, with the first—the Union Fire Company—being founded in 1736 by none other than Benjamin Franklin, who founded the first firefighting company.

There are over 700,000 volunteer firefighters in over 75 percent of the United States, with the remainder covered by paid professionals. The need for volunteers has never been greater than now, as their numbers have dropped some 27 percent over the last decade. This is due in part to the retirement of those no longer physically able to do the job, and a lack of qualifying volunteers—and there is the rub.

Based on what is presented in the film, virtually anyone can become a volunteer in some capacity, whether it is interior fighting (the most physically demanding), exterior (water hose, crowd control, and EMT coordination), administration, or local fundraising.

Of the latter, residents in Rixeyville, Virginia, capitalize on the large local population of horses by offering for-fee horse trail rides with the profits given to their firehouse. In the heavily Hasidic-populated Monsey, New York, volunteers are relegated to exterior work because interior fighters cannot have facial hair, and Hasidic Jews are strictly forbidden to shave their beards.

Training Days

In another segment taking place in North Bend, Washington, we witness a dozen or so hopeful recruits, all from different walks of life, undergoing a rigorous, 12-week training program that depicts in great detail the level of tactical acumen and the physical demands required to perform interior firefighting.

For me, the most impressive and moving portion of the movie is the part dedicated to Alan Michl living in Exeter, Nebraska, population of 516 as of the 2020 census.

For over a quarter century, Mr. Michl has been not only a volunteer firefighter but also a school bus driver and has served as mayor. Shari, Mr. Michl's wife of 41 years, is also a volunteer firefighter.

In Wheaton, Maryland, the largest populated city shown here (over 52,000), we get an idea of the number of calls—over 30,000 per year—handled by just two firehouses and the toll it takes on volunteers. Oddly enough, it is during the Wheaton segments where any actual "in the field" work is shown, and it is not firefighting but rather performing EMT duties during a traffic accident. This is where the filmmakers miss the boat.

Where's the Fire?

Making a movie about the finer points of firefighting without any actual depicted firefighting is problematic. It's like watching football players practicing on the field before a game without ever seeing any of the game.

Mr. Matoso and Mr. Zohoori slip up a bit when profiling a multigenerational firefighting family based in Beeville, Texas, by drifting away from the narrative at hand and including melodramatic details of their personal lives.

It is also during the Beeville portion where an official attributes the increase in recent fires to "climate change" without providing any form of scientific data to back up his claims. On the upside, the official doesn't use the term "global warming."

On the whole, "Cool Hat" is an inspirational and uplifting film profiling salt-of-the-earth Americans of every race, creed, and gender working together to protect us 24/7 without any desire for monetary reward.

Their service should be praised and acknowledged by all of us in perpetuity.

Released in a handful of theaters on July 7, "Odd Hours, No Pay, Cool Hat" can be viewed on home video and Prime Video. The film's website also includes screenings hosted by various fire departments.

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.

'Odd Hours, No Pay, Cool Hat'

Documentary

Directors
Gary Matoso, Cameron Zohoori

Running Time
1 hour, 31 minutes

MPAA Rating
Not Rated

Release Date
July 7, 2023

★★★½☆

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Only Love and Care Can Heal a Wounded Veteran

A shell-shocked veteran forgets the love he once had

By Ian Kane

Before Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was finally categorized, many war veterans with issues were simply misunderstood or their actions were attributed to the old catchall phrase "shell-shocked."

One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in the excellent 1938 war drama "The Dawn Patrol" (starring Errol Flynn), in which British airmen faced tremendous casualties while fighting the Germans in the skies during World War I, casualties that weren't only physical but also mental.

The 1942 film "Random Harvest" focuses on what happens to a World War I veteran once he returns to England from the muddy trenches of France. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, this film is based on a book of the same name published in 1941 by author James Hilton.

Things begin at an asylum in the English Midlands. A British officer (played by the great Ronald Colman) is under lock and key at the forlorn place since he lost his memory after he was gassed in the trenches during the war. Although he is grateful to still be alive, not only has the trauma rendered him an amnesiac, but he also can't string more than a couple of words together.

An elderly couple stops by one day and thinks that the officer, called "John Smith" or "Smithy" by the asylum workers, might just be their son who has been reported as missing in action. Both the couple and the officer get their hopes up. However, those hopes are dashed when the two meet him and see that he is not their son.

Later, while out strolling the gloomy, fog-laden grounds of the asylum, the gate guards desert their posts and run off to Melbridge, a local town that is celebrating the defeat of the Germans. This affords the officer the chance to walk straight out of the place and into the town as well.

The loud party-like atmosphere is rough for the officer's war-weary senses, and he seems to be experiencing PTSD as fireworks boom and people screech and howl all around him. This forces him to seek shelter in a random shop, where he encounters a beautiful music hall performer named Paula Ridgeway (Greer Garson). Paula notices that something is off with the officer, but she senses that he's a good man. She assumes a protective role and takes him traveling with her while she performs with her theatrical group.

Eventually, the two wind up in an isolated village in South West England, where Paula helps the officer start a new life with new memories. The two fall in love and tie the knot, and a baby is soon on the way.

Smithy discovers that he has a latent talent for writing, and when a newspaper in Liverpool offers him a job interview, he jumps at the chance, since he wants to be independent and also provide for his new wife and infant son.

I was rooting for Smithy (later revealed to be named Charles Rainier) and his compassionate wife to live happily ever after. However, I figured that something dramatic was going to happen, and indeed it does, halfway through the movie. Without spoiling anything, I can reveal that,while Paula stays at home with their baby, Smithy travels to Liverpool and something tragic happens that complicates their hopes for happiness.

Wonderful Performances

Greer Garson is captivating as Paula, a bighearted woman who not only helps Smithy but actually saves him from being captured by the authorities and sent back to the asylum. In a heartfelt, somewhat melodramatic scene, she later tells Rainier that she fell for Smithy when she first laid eyes on him. Her subsequent struggles are painful to watch, but worth it in the end.

Ronald Colman affects a piteous countenance so convincingly during the first half of the film that I truly felt sorry for Smithy as he meanders around with an innocent, dazed look on his face. As he struggles with flashes of different memories that whisper into his head and then disappear just as quickly, you can see the frustration he's experiencing and wonder if and when he'll ever remember anything substantively.

Although this film moves along at a leisurely pace, it never feels dull. If anything, the slower scenes allow us to invest in the characters since we are able to learn more about their motivations and struggles. Compared to today's films, which feature constant go-go-go breakneck pacing, it's quite refreshing.

"Random Harvest" will evoke several emotional states in viewers: everything from sad and tragic to heartwarming and hopeful. It's a charming love story that delivers a satisfying ending and is a must-see for romance fans.

"Random Harvest" is available on Apple TV, Amazon, and Vudu.

Ian Kane is an U.S. Army veteran, author, filmmaker, and actor. He is dedicated to the development and production of innovative, thought-provoking, character-driven films and books of the highest quality.

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

Paula Ridgeway (Greer Garson) and Charles Rainier (Ronald Colman), in "Random Harvest."

'Random Harvest'

Director
Mervyn LeRoy

Starring
Ronald Colman, Greer Garson, Philip Dorn

Running Time
2 hours, 6 minutes

Not Rated

Release Date
Aug. 31, 1943

★★★★★