

# Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2022

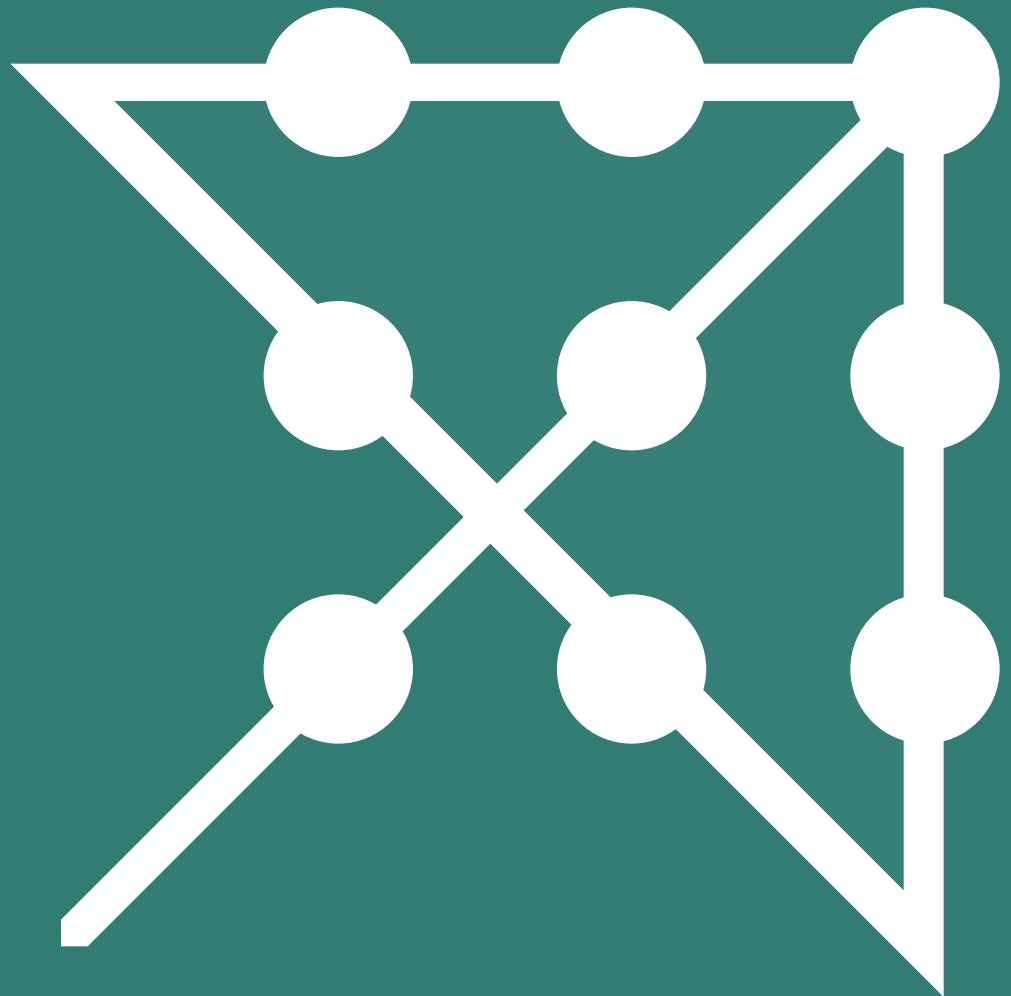
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*thinking outside the box*

**“Against the Ice” (+ + +)** is a docudrama about a remarkable pair of Danish explorers who were sent by the Danish government in 1909 to prove that Greenland was only one island owned by Denmark, to settle a territorial dispute with America, which had claimed rights to what it thought was a second island. One critic described the film as “a good-looking but glacial trudge through a snowbound true story.” For me, much more interesting than the story itself was seeing the courage and survival skills necessary for the explorers to accept the challenge.

**“All Quiet on the Western Front” (+ + +)** is a German production on Netflix of the Erich Maria Remarque’s book of the same name about the horrors experienced by a young German soldier fighting in the trenches during World War I. There is no glory in this anti-war movie. Wars have horrible consequences. The WSJ review observed that “the military high command on both sides ... had 20th-century armaments and 19th-century thinking.” Unfortunately, we are seeing a similar disaster today in real time playing out in Ukraine. The weapons are much more destructive today and the thinking is just as primitive. The acting and the cinematography are superb.

**“Being the Ricardos” (+ +)** is about one week in the life of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, whose sitcom *I Love Lucy* aired on CBS for six years from 1951 to 1957. It was the most-watched show in the US in four of its six seasons. Their company Desilu Productions also produced *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Untouchables*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Star Trek*. However, their marriage was tumultuous, and they split in 1960. They managed their business much better than their marriage. Ironically, Lucy was falsely accused of being a communist even though she was married to Desi, who was a fierce anti-Marxist after communists forced his aristocratic family to flee Cuba. Nicole Kidman is great as Lucy; her performance should earn her an Oscar nomination. Javier Bardem does a good job of playing Desi.

**“Belfast” (+ +)** is based on the childhood experiences of Kenneth Branagh, who both wrote and directed the film. He grew up in Belfast during the 1960s, when the town was bitterly and often violently divided between Catholics and Protestants. Nevertheless, the plot focuses on the ability of children to be children despite the conflict around them and no matter how it distresses their parents and other older family members. The cast is superb, but the plot may be overly sentimental, mostly ignoring the dangerous social and religious divisions of the time.

**“Benjamin Franklin” (+ + +)** is an outstanding two-part, four-hour documentary produced by Ken Burns. Franklin was a self-taught entrepreneur who made revolutionary contributions in science, philosophy, politics, and diplomacy. Of course, he himself was one of America’s foremost revolutionaries and founders. The documentary explains how America’s war for independence from Britain was won to an important extent by his diplomatic efforts in obtaining French financial and military support. Also interesting is to see how Franklin was transformed from an Englishman into an American. He excelled at creating fake news to promote the cause of the American revolutionaries. His big failing was as a husband and a father. He was too busy being a Founding Father.

**“Blackbird” (+ +)** is a disturbing TV series docudrama about Larry Hall, a serial killer who is in prison but might be set free on appeal because the evidence used to incarcerate him wasn’t sufficiently compelling. So the FBI cuts a deal with another prisoner to befriend Hall and get him to provide incriminating details about his murder spree. The acting is top-notch; Paul Walter Hauser does a great job of playing creepy Larry.

**“Blonde” (+)** is a very painful movie to watch about Marilyn Monroe’s often painful life. It isn’t really a docudrama since quite a bit of it isn’t historically accurate. It’s been at the top of Netflix’s movie chart but has been widely criticized as “sexist” and “cruel” even though it received a 14-minute standing ovation at the Venice Film Festival. It’s worth seeing just for the remarkable performance of Ana de Armas as Marilyn. However, she had to cry during almost every scene. The film in many ways is an American tragedy about an iconic personality.

**“Candy” (+ + +)** is a TV mini-series docudrama about Candy Montgomery, a 1980s housewife and mother. She had it all, including a loving husband with a good job at Texas Instruments, two well behaved children, a nice house in a Texas suburb, and plenty of friends. But one day, something snapped, and she crossed a moral line. In many ways, this mini-series is like a typical crime show such as Dateline on NBC. The differences are the compelling and quirky performance of Jessica Biel as Candy, and the suspenseful editing.

**“CODA” (+)** is a feel-good, coming-of-age story about a teenaged girl who is the child of deaf adults (CODA) and sister of a deaf older brother. She feels a strong sense of obligation to stay home and work in her family’s fishing business rather than go away to a music school to pursue her dream of being a singer. The film is all about rising to life’s challenges and overcoming adversity. Life certainly has been more challenging for more people recently.

**“Don’t Worry Darling” (+ +)** is a film that Mark Zuckerberg should see and study. It’s about the dark downside of virtual reality. It might convince him to get out of this dream world that can easily turn into a world of nightmares, as it has so far for his company, Meta. Life is idyllic in a 1950s-styled neighborhood of the company town of Victory, California. The men go to their top-secret jobs every morning at Victor Headquarters, while their wives clean the house, socialize with the other wives, and make dinner. But something is not quite right, as two of the wives soon discover. The film is a genre film that channels such classics as “The Stepford Wives,” “Get Out,” “Pleasantville,” and “The Truman Show.” Florence Pugh shines as one of the wives. The cinematography and production design are great too.

**“Downton Abbey: A New Era” (+)** is the sequel to the 2019 film “Downton Abbey.” Both films were written by Julian Fellowes, the creator and writer of the television series Downton Abbey. The cast is getting noticeably older, like most of us. It’s also getting thinner, like some of us. I think the popularity of the Downton Abbey franchise is driven by nostalgia for 1920s Great Britain, when everybody knew their place and occupied it with pride. The films are also nostalgic for those of us who watched the television series from 2010 through 2015.

**“Eiffel” (+)** is a very interesting docudrama about Gustave Eiffel. He was a remarkable French engineer. After he finished his work on the Statue of Liberty, the French government commissioned him to design something spectacular for the 1889 Paris World Fair. The result was the 300-meters-tall Eiffel Tower, which was completed in just over two years. The movie includes a romantic subplot that is pure fiction and doesn’t add much to the story.

**“Elvis” (+ + +)** is a long movie about the all-too-short life of Elvis Presley and his convoluted relationship with his manager, Colonel Tom Parker. Austin Butler plays Elvis brilliantly. Tom Hanks’ performance as the Colonel is a bit annoying, but that’s the way the Colonel was apparently. During the 1950s, Elvis started a musical revolution by popularizing traditional genres such as blues, country, and bluegrass. His vocal energy and then-scandalous hip swings and body contortions drove his concert audiences into a frenzy. He was without a doubt “The King of Rock & Roll.”

**“Five Days at Memorial” (+ + +)** is a remarkable TV miniseries docudrama about the struggle of doctors, nurses, and staff at Memorial Hospital in New Orleans to care for their patients during Hurricane Katrina, when the facility was without power for five days with very little food or water in oppressive heat. It quickly turns into a life-and-death dilemma for several of the patients, especially once everyone is ordered to evacuate the hospital with several patients not able to do so. The situation raises lots of ethical questions that aren’t easy to answer during such an emergency, especially when the government fails to do its number-one job of protecting its citizens. The cast is superb, and the story is all the more incredible because it’s true.

**“Gaslit” (+ + +)** is an engrossing docudrama about the Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration. The story centers on Martha Mitchell, an outspoken socialite from Arkansas and the wife of Nixon’s loyal Attorney General, John N. Mitchell. She publicly claimed that President Nixon must have been involved in the scandal. That forced her husband to choose sides, and he chose Nixon. Their marriage fell apart as the administration sought to silence her by discrediting her as a drunk and crazy person. Nixon subsequently claimed that “there would have been no Watergate” if Martha’s emotional problems hadn’t distracted her husband from doing a better job of managing his reelection campaign. Julia Roberts shows off her acting skills as Martha Mitchell. Sean Penn is also good as her husband. Best of all is Shea Whigham who plays G. Gordon Liddy, one of the unhinged—and truly scary—“masterminds” behind the plot.

**“Help” (+ + +)** is a 2021 British television drama film about the Covid-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. Jodie Comer does an incredible job of portraying Sarah, who finds work in a Liverpool care facility for people suffering from dementia. Then in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hits. She does the best she can to protect the patients, but several die as she tries without success to get the National Health Service to send ambulances to take them to hospitals. In the US, many people died in nursing homes because the proper care either couldn't be or wasn't provided. Sadly, it isn't obvious that we have learned much about how to deal with pandemics from the current one.

**“Inventing Anna” (+ + +)** is a really interesting Netflix miniseries. The docudrama is about Anna Sorokin. Born in Russia, she came to New York in her 20s during 2013 and for four years pretended to be a German heiress by the name of “Anna Delvey.” She was a con artist who was very good at paying for long stays at fancy hotels with wire transfers that never arrived. She befriended several movers and shakers in the City's social scene, who helped her apply for multimillion-dollar loans to fund her dream of a foundation for the arts. She would have gotten away with her scheming but for the due-diligence processes of the lenders, who turned her down. She was arrested for stiffing the hotels and others. She put on a fashion show during her trial; it was a media circus. Nowadays, the media is a circus always looking for the next big act and often enabling fraudsters to flourish—until they self-destruct.

**“Jurassic World: Dominion” (- - -)** is the sixth installment in the Jurassic Park franchise. Let's hope it's the last. This one was widely panned as the worst of the lot. I agree. The acting was terrible. The story was trite. The baby dinosaurs were cute, but so was Dino in The Flintstones. The theme of this movie is that we should learn to coexist with other animals, even dinosaurs. It's simply a matter of learning to respect one another. It's time to bury this franchise. Make it extinct so that only the fossils are left. By the way, the villain looks a lot like Timothy Cook, Apple's CEO, and the headquarters of his evil enterprise sure looks the doughnut-shaped headquarters that Cook built for Apple in Cupertino, California. Go figure.

**“King Richard” (+)** is a biopic about Richard Williams, the father of tennis superstars Venus and Serena Williams. He recognized his daughters' potential for tennis greatness when they were in their teens. He trained them and mapped out a plan for their success. That included moving the family from Compton, California, where the girls trained on a public tennis court, to Florida to train with a top coach to sharpen their skills. Along the way, Williams defied convention, insisting that his daughters skip playing in the juniors and go straight to the pros, once they were old enough and ready to do so. He wanted them to enjoy their childhood. In many ways, the Williams' family story is the classic tale of the American Dream. Venus and Serena served as executive producers of the film, which stars Will Smith in the title role.

**“Munich: The Edge of War” (+ +)** is based on a historical novel about the events surrounding the Munich Agreement on September 30, 1938. Germany, the UK, France, and Italy agreed to the annexation of the Czechoslovak borderland area named the “Sudetenland,” home to more than 3 million people, mainly ethnic Germans. Adolf Hitler announced that it was his last territorial claim in Europe. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared that the deal would guarantee “peace for our time.” Most of Europe cheered the deal that was expected to avert a major war. Hitler had lied, and the rest is history. The agreement is widely viewed as a historical cautionary tale about appeasing dictators. It could be very relevant today if NATO appeases Russian President Vladimir Putin’s demands about Ukraine.

**“Nightmare Alley” (+)** is a 2021 remake of the 1947 classic *film noir* with Tyrone Power. This one stars Bradley Cooper and follows the rise and fall of Stanton Carlisle, a con man. Stan works in a seedy carnival and is attracted to the clairvoyant act performed by “Madame Zeena” and her alcoholic husband, Pete. Stan convinces a fellow performer, Molly, that he and she should take the act to night clubs. He seizes the opportunities for a couple of get-rich-quick schemes that don’t end well. The movie starts out slow but picks up along the way. Guillermo del Toro directed the film, which is very colorful even though it is still a *film noir*.

**“Operation Mincemeat” (+ +)** is a very interesting film based on a book about a British operation during WWII to trick Nazi Germany into believing that the Allies would be invading Greece rather than Sicily. Winston Churchill signed off on the plan partly because it was so absurd that he thought it might work. Ian Fleming makes an appearance in the film as a British operative involved in the deception, which probably inspired him to write James Bond novels. The romantic sub-plot is a bit of a distraction from the compelling story about the successful espionage operations.

**“Ozark” (+ + +)** is a very entertaining crime drama series streaming on Netflix. The series stars Jason Bateman and Laura Linney as Marty and Wendy Byrde, a married couple who moves their family to the Lake of the Ozarks for money laundering. The fourth and final season just ended. Marty and Wendy are your typical married American couple involved with a Mexican drug cartel, the Kansas City mob, the FBI, corrupt local politicians, and a Purdue-like drug company, while doing their best to raise their two teenage kids. Along with Wendy, there are lots of offbeat female characters (like Ruth, Darlene, and Camila) who run rings around the offbeat male characters. The series is a bit reminiscent of “The Sopranos,” but its ending is much better.

**“Ray Donovan: The Movie” (+ + +)** is the final installment of the American crime drama series Ray Donovan, with a great performance by Liev Schreiber as Donovan. In February 2020, Showtime canceled the series after seven seasons. The movie does a great job of answering open questions left by the series, much more so than the “Many Saints of Newark” did for the TV series The Sopranos. Donovan is a professional “fixer.” He uses bribes, payoffs, threats, and other illegal activities to protect his Hollywood celebrity clients. He has a very challenging relationship with his father, which helps to explain his chosen profession as well as his brooding and often violent personality. Like that of the Tony Soprano character, Donovan’s family life is full of drama.

**“Staircase” (+ +)** is an HBO Max TV mini-series inspired by the truly bizarre story of Michael Peterson, a crime novelist. He was found guilty of killing his wife Kathleen. During the trial, his defense lawyer claimed that she died falling down the back staircase at their home. The prosecution argued that her head injuries showed that she was hit several times by her husband after she might have threatened to leave him because she might have discovered that he was cheating on her. The jury sided with the prosecutors partly because Michael had had numerous affairs and a history of lying about his past. The relationships between Michael, Kathleen, and their five children both before and after her death is an interesting aspect of this crime story, which has lots of twists and turns. Colin Firth admirably plays Michael playing everyone around him. Toni Collette plays his very unhappy wife.

**“Summit of the Gods” (+ + +)** is a Netflix animated French film about mountain climbers based on a Japanese Manga comic. A photojournalist accompanies a famous climber, who has a history of triumphs and tragedies, on his attempt to climb Mt Everest. The animation captures the terror of avalanches, slips, and hanging from a rope over a ravine. It evokes the question: Why do some people pursue their passions despite obvious dangers, including the risk of death? The passion to achieve one’s dreams before dying can be a great motivator and even turn into an obsession. Indeed, for some, pursuing their passions is the only way to feel truly alive. (Hat tip to my son David for recommending the movie.)

**“Super Pumped: The Battle for Uber” (+ + +)** is a fast paced, well written docudrama about the meteoric rise and fall of Travis Kalanick, the founder of Uber. His biggest booster was his original major investor, Bill Gurley, the head of Benchmark, a major venture capital firm in Silicon Valley. He along with fellow board member Arianna Huffington did their best to keep their boy wonder from spinning out of control. But at the end, they had to participate in his downfall for the good of the company. Gurley and I briefly worked together at Deutsche Bank in the late 1990s. He was a smart gentleman back then and remained so according to the portrayal in this Showtime series by Kyle Chandler. Joseph Leonard Gordon-Levitt does a great job exuding Kalanick’s high-energy entrepreneurial spirit and disruptive persona.

**“The Dropout” (+ + +)** is a Hulu docudrama series about Elizabeth Holmes, who dropped out of Stanford University to create Theranos, a multibillion dollar startup, based on the idea that her company was developing a medical device that could quickly provide lots of life-saving medical information on people based on just one drop of their blood. It was a great idea that came to naught even though it attracted hundreds of millions of dollars from an all-star cast of investors, including Larry Ellison, George Schultz, and Rupert Murdoch. Holmes was a serial fraudster; even national pharmacy and retail chain Walgreens was duped. She convinced lots of smart people that her device would make the world a better place. Undoubtedly, they also expected to make a fortune doing so. Startups fail all the time, but it’s not often they end up as a cautionary tale as big as this one. Amanda Seyfried does an amazing job of portraying Holmes, even speaking with her baritone voice, which Holmes also faked.

**“The Fabelmans” (+)** is a semi-autobiographical movie loosely based on Steven Spielberg’s adolescence and first years as an amateur film director. He produced and directed it. It turns out that I have a lot in common with Spielberg. He makes movies, while I review them. His father moved his family to California to work at IBM in the 1960s. So did my father. On the other hand, my parents didn’t have a messy divorce, which is the focus of this movie. In many ways, it is more about Spielberg’s mother, played by Michelle Williams, who spent a lot of time playing depressing piano music and weeping about her unhappiness. She adopts a small monkey to cheer her up. She finally finds happiness by running off with her long-time friend played by Seth Rogen. Spielberg goes on to fame and fortune despite his dysfunctional family history.

**“The Offer” (+ + +)** is a wonderful Paramount+ mini-series about the making of “The Godfather.” In an 1889 essay, Oscar Wilde wrote, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” That certainly applies to this mini-series. The cast of characters involved in making the movie is just as colorful as the cast in the movie. The real-life plot behind the production of one of the greatest movies of all times is even more interesting than that of the movie. Both are full of intrigue and violence, but the live version is much funnier than the artsy one. The dialogue and acting are top notch all around too.

**“The Power of the Dog” (- -)** is a Western that takes place in Montana but looks like it was filmed in New Zealand, because that’s where it actually was filmed. The film has been widely acclaimed but seemed a bit off, not only geographically. I found it to be slow and self-absorbed, almost on purpose so that the ending would make it all worthwhile. There are some interesting character developments, but they were probably more interesting in the 1967 novel from which the film was adapted.

**“Vikings: Valhalla” (+ + +)** is a Netflix series that chronicles the legendary adventures of some of the most famous Vikings who ever lived, including Leif Eriksson, Freydís Eiríksdóttir, Harald Hardrada, and the Norman king of England William the Conqueror. The series starts in the early 11th century and reminds us that humans have a very long history of waging war on one another. The conflicts usually have been about land, scarce resources, religion, and/or power. The consequences always have been terrible and often have set the stage for the next war. Just when the world thought we had made progress toward creating a more peaceful world order, Mad Vlad reminded us that we haven’t.

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**“WeCrashed” (+ + +)** is about the rise and fall of Adam Neumann, the cofounder of WeWork, which was one of the world’s most valuable startups. It almost failed because he and his wife believed that the company was destined to save the world. They were zealots, who burned through their investors’ cash at a remarkable pace. Neumann was a great and visionary entrepreneur; he simply wasn’t qualified to be the CEO of a publicly traded company. Jared Leto is great as Neumann, and so is Anne Hathaway as his wife Rebekah. Their relationship is a fascinating part of this story. Hollywood has discovered that there’s lots of melodramatic content available in the stories of child-like entrepreneurs and their venture capitalists providing adult supervision. I also thoroughly enjoyed “Super Pumped” about Uber and “The Dropout” about Theranos.