

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2023

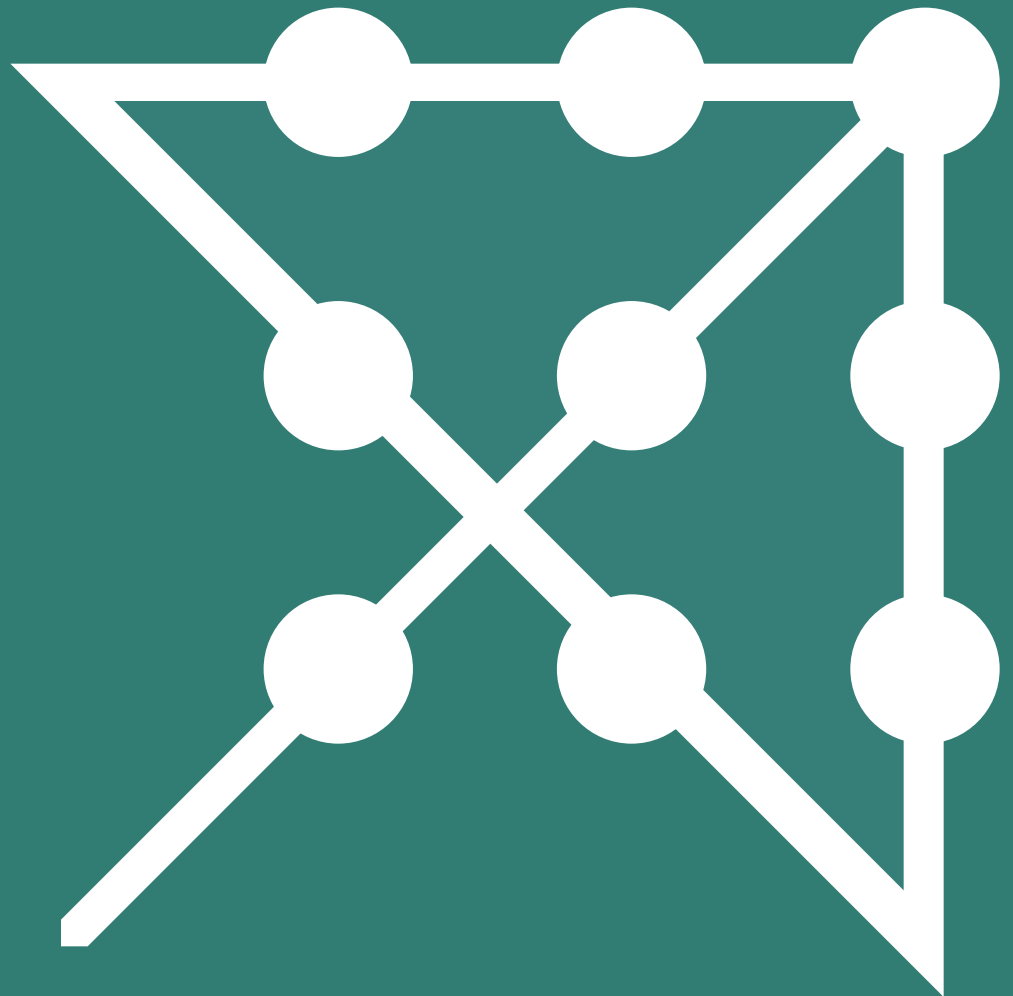
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thinking outside the box

“A Good Person” (+ +) is about dysfunctional people dealing with the adversities that life can deliver. There’s a terrible car accident, alcohol and drug addiction, and abusive fathers. So the movie is depressing, though it might be uplifting to be reminded that things aren’t all that bad in our own lives compared to the miserable fate that others suffer. The movie is slow and a bit long, but the acting performances of Florence Pugh and Morgan Freeman are superb and worthy of Oscars.

“A Spy Among Friends” (+ + +) is a fascinating docudrama about Kim Philby, the British double agent who defected to the Soviet Union in 1963 after spying for the KGB in London and Washington since World War II. His close friend and colleague was Nicholas Elliott, who was aghast to learn that Philby was a traitor for so many years. The two of them were members of an elite group of spies who worked for MI6. Elliott, played flawlessly by Damian Lewis, is determined to protect his old-boy network of British spies while also punishing his friend for his duplicity.

“After Waco” (+ + +) is an excellent docudrama series about how Waco led to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. The series, a chilling reminder about the threat of homegrown terrorism, is a sequel to “Waco,” which recounted the tragedy and the events that led up to it.

“Air” (+ +) is about Nike’s incredible success in pursuing a partnership with then-basketball-rookie Michael Jordan, among the greatest competitors in any sport of all time. Nike designed sneakers especially for Jordan and named them after the high-flying athlete. The marketing campaign worked brilliantly, enriching all concerned. The movie is focused on Sonny Vaccaro, who closed the deal with Jordan’s mother; she negotiated an amazingly lucrative contract on her son’s behalf, which ended up revolutionizing the world of sports.

“Argentina 1985” (+ + +) is an excellent docudrama about the prosecution of the military leaders who led the bloody military junta that terrorized Argentina during the early 1980s. It is based on the true story of Julio Strassera, Luis Moreno Ocampo, and their young legal team of unlikely prosecutors. In his closing statement, Strassera said, “I wish to waive any claim to originality in closing this indictment. I wish to use a phrase that is not my own, because it already belongs to all the Argentine people. Your Honors: Nunca más!”

“Barbie” (+) is a warm-hearted nostalgia movie for mothers and their daughters. My 22-year-old daughter saw it with her girlfriends and loved it. She wanted to see it a second time and convinced her mom and dad to join her. Barbie was created by Ruth Handler and launched by Mattel in 1959. The doll has become a cultural icon. Barbie has kept up with the times. She started as a teenage fashion model, but over the years had lots of interesting careers from astronaut to surgeon. After Barbie’s debut on store shelves, little girls no longer were limited to playing with baby dolls and imagining being a mother but now could imagine being as successful as Barbie in whatever career they chose. She was aspirational. The History Channel featured Barbie in an excellent docudrama series titled “The Toys That Built America.”

“Beef” (+ +) is a Netflix mini-series about the many potential adverse consequences of getting into a road-rage beef with another driver. In this case, the altercating male and female drivers have lots of homegrown frustrations that inflame their anger on the road. In other words, they have much in common. Needless to say, their hostile incident only worsens their personal woes. The moral of the story is: Deal with your rage at home. Don’t take it on the road. If you do, you run the risk of instigating a fight with someone as nuts as you are. This series is reminiscent of “Falling Down” (1993), another road rage movie starring Michael Douglas.

“BlackBerry” (+ + +) is a fascinating and fast-paced docudrama about the very rapid rise and fall of Research In Motion, the Canadian tech company that invented the BlackBerry cell phone. This film is part of a new genre of movies about the development and marketing of new products. “Air” is about Nike’s launch of its Air Jordan sneakers. “Tetris” is about a new game introduced by Nintendo. A few I reviewed last year are “WeCrashed” (about WeWork), “The Dropout” (Theranos), and “SuperPumped” (Uber). They all are interesting depictions of how free market capitalism works. The entrepreneurs behind these inventions are all driven by the profit motive to produce the next New New Thing that will be a big hit with consumers. While some of the entrepreneurs have remained successful, others have crashed, often when competitors came up with a better product; in a few instances, they broke the law. BlackBerry was buried by Apple’s iPhone. Capitalism’s most consistent winners are consumers.

“Boston Strangler” (+) is yet another serial killer movie, reminding us that there are too many psychos out there. In recent years, many psychos have opted for mass shootings. While there is a big debate about banning assault rifles, it’s clear that our society isn’t spending enough on taking care of the mentally ill among us. The movie is a docudrama about the two female reporters at a Boston tabloid who pursued the leads more diligently than did the police despite the dangers of doing so and the negative impact on their personal lives. One of them says, “Our job is to report the news, not to make it.” Too bad so many journalists have lost sight of that approach to their jobs.

“Breaking” (+ +) is based on the 2017 real-life story of the late Brian Brown-Easley, a decorated Marine Corps veteran who walked into a Wells Fargo bank and claimed to have a bomb in his backpack. He didn’t want to rob the bank. Rather, he wanted the regional office of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to give him his benefits check for \$892. The VA used the money to reduce the balance on his outstanding student loan instead. It’s a very sad story, suggesting that we need to do much more to help our veterans after they’ve bravely served our country.

“Causeway” (+) is a slow-paced movie about Lynsey, a US soldier played by Jennifer Lawrence who struggles to adjust to life back home after suffering a traumatic brain injury while serving in Afghanistan. Lynsey befriends James, an auto mechanic played by Brian Tyree Henry. He also has experienced trauma in his life, because of an auto accident. Their friendship helps them to heal some of their wounds. Both actors provide heartfelt performances and will probably be nominated for acting awards.

“Cocaine Bear” (-) isn’t a must-see movie. My wife and I expected a comedy based on true events. So we couldn’t understand why all the trailers were for horror flicks. The movie was funny in some parts, but it was mostly grisly as the coke-snorting grizzly bear ripped off the limbs of various goofy characters. By the way, my favorite story about a bear was told by Dolly Parton to Jimmy Fallon. It’s a must-hear for sure.

“FDR” (+ + +) is a three-part miniseries portrait of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the History channel. It was produced by presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and Bradley Cooper. It’s mostly a glowing account from a liberal perspective and fails to address any of the conservative critiques of FDR’s three terms in the White House. He clearly was a Progressive who believed that big government is the answer to most of our national problems. Nevertheless, it is well worth watching for a refresher course on the Great Depression and World War II.

“Ghosts of Beirut” (+ + +) is an excellent docudrama about the efforts of the CIA and Mossad over several years to kill Imad Mughniyey, alias al-Hajj Radwan. He was the founding member of Lebanon’s Islamic Jihad Organization and number two in Hezbollah’s command. He was often referred to as an “untraceable ghost.” US and Israeli officials accused him of orchestrating numerous terrorist attacks including the Beirut barracks bombing and US embassy bombings, both of which took place in 1983 and killed over 350, as well as the kidnapping of dozens of foreigners in Lebanon in the 1980s. He was indicted in Argentina for his alleged role in the 1992 Israeli embassy attack in Buenos Aires. He was accused of killing more US citizens than any other man prior to the September 11 attacks.

“Godfather of Harlem” (+ + +) is a very entertaining and informative television series about the turmoil in Harlem during the 1960s. It is based on the true story of infamous crime boss Bumpy Johnson, played by Forest Whitaker. He had a very bumpy relationship with the Italian crime bosses as they vied to control the drug trade in Harlem. The docudrama also covers the civil rights movement during that turbulent period. It is as much about the struggles of Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. against discrimination as about Bumpy.

“Golda” (+ + +) is a docudrama about Golda Meir, when she led Israel as prime minister during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Helen Mirren does an incredibly good job in the lead role. The movie depicts Israel’s existential crisis attributable to the war and Golda’s adroit management of the near calamity. Israel succeeded in winning the war, which started with a surprise attack by a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria. Golda agreed to a ceasefire with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. She lived to see the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978. It was the first formal peace agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

“Living” (+) is about the meaning of life, especially when one finds out that life is short, i.e., lasting just another six months due to a terminal illness. That’s the fate of Mr. Williams, a civil servant played by Bill Nighy. At first, he tries living a new friend’s idea of a good life—involving a wild nightlife—but he’s just not into it. Instead, he finds solace by overseeing the building of a playground as a legacy for the next generation. The world would be a much better place if we all lived to make a better world for our children and grandchildren. Instead, we are racking up bigger debts to accommodate our current needs at the expense of future generations. Greta: Climate change is just one of many messes we are leaving you to deal with.

“Mr. Jones” (+ + +) is a 2019 film based on real events. Gareth Jones was a Welsh investigative reporter who visited the Soviet Union and surreptitiously traveled to Soviet Ukraine, where he witnessed the Holodomor, a man-made famine in the grain-growing region from 1932 to 1933 that killed as many as five million Ukrainians. Stalin subjected them to collectivization and unreasonably high grain quotas, which caused the famine. “Holodomor” literally translated from Ukrainian means “death by hunger.” The film also focuses on Walter Duranty, who was The New York Times’ man in Moscow at the time. He won the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for 13 articles written in 1931 analyzing the Soviet Union under Stalin. His reporting was mostly favorable, taking Soviet propaganda at face value. He wrote glowing reports of Stalin’s harsh plans for Ukraine and sought to discredit the reporting by Jones. “He was not only the greatest liar among the journalists in Moscow, but he was the greatest liar of any journalist that I ever met in 50 years of journalism,” said the late Malcolm Muggeridge in 1982. George Orwell was inspired by Jones to write *Animal Farm*.

“NYAD” (+) is a Netflix biopic about 64-year-old marathon swimmer Diana Nyad, who became the first person ever to swim from Cuba to Florida without the aid of a shark cage. After several tries during her career, she finally succeeds in 2013, completing the 110-mile swim in 53 hours. The only problem is that her feat wasn’t independently verified. So her controversial achievement was not ratified by the World Open Water Swimming Association or the Guinness World Book of Records. The movie stars Annette Bening as the eponymous American swimmer, while Jodie Foster plays her coach.

“Oppenheimer” (+ + +) is an excellent biopic and docudrama about Robert Oppenheimer, who directed the secret Manhattan Project, which developed and built the two atom bombs that were dropped on Japan and ended World War II. The cast is outstanding, starring Cillian Murphy in the title role. Standout performances were also delivered by Robert Downey Jr. as Lewis Strauss and Matt Damon as Lt. Gen. Leslie Groves Jr. Director Christopher Nolan’s achievement is to look beyond the bomb at the man behind it as well as the national and geopolitical implications of the bomb. Also considered are the implications for humanity of creating a weapon of mass destruction that could wipe out creation itself.

“Painkiller” (+) is another miniseries about how the Sackler family made a fortune selling OxyContin produced by their company, Purdue Pharmaceuticals. They were essentially drug dealers assisted by the do-nothing US Food and Drug Administration. This series was produced by Netflix and isn’t as good as Hulu’s “Dopesick,” which was released in 2021. The latest series is like a fast-paced caricature of the earlier one and stars Matthew Broderick in the lead role of Dr. Richard Sackler. His performance pales in comparison to Michael Stuhlbarg’s portrayal of Sackler in the original. In any case, both series clearly depict the deadly OxyContin crisis that killed so many people and shattered so many families. Even more deadly today is the fentanyl crisis. The government may be assisting this one too, by failing to keep this narcotic from pouring across the Rio Grande.

“Past Lives” (+) is a romantic story but a realistic one. That’s because love doesn’t always conquer all. There are lots of extenuating circumstances in any relationship. This movie follows the relationship of childhood sweethearts in South Korea. They are separated when one of them moves to Canada and then to the US. Nevertheless, they still have feelings for one another when they are young adults. Will they or won’t they reconnect and surmount new obstacles? In other words, this is a realistic romantic suspense movie. That might be a new genre.

“Reptile” (+) stars Benicio Monserrate Rafael del Toro Sánchez in this crime drama, which is almost as long as his name. The plot is interesting but is a bit too slow paced. Then again, Del Toro is always fun to watch. His understated intensity is ever-present in the roles he plays. This movie is about a murder, real estate agents, drugs, and cops. Alicia Silverstone and Justin Timberlake have parts, but they don’t add much to the movie.

“Somewhere in Queens” (+) was written and directed by Ray Romano about an Italian family living in Queens. Ray stars as Leo Russo, the father. He works for his father’s construction company. It’s a family business, and Leo’s large extended family is in everybody else’s business. They regularly get together at the local catering hall for family events. Leo is obsessed with helping his son overcome his social awkwardness by pushing him to succeed on his high school basketball team, which he does. Leo pushes a bit too hard to get his son a college basketball scholarship and causes a family crisis as a result. It’s a warm-hearted film about the importance of *famiglia* in our lives.

“Tár” (+) is a biopic about a famous but fictional orchestra conductor played by Cate Blanchett. She is at the top of her career and about to record an album with the Berlin Philharmonic. However, her life quickly spins out of control as her current and past misdeeds are revealed. Blanchett’s performance is Oscar-worthy. The movie is a bit long, but the insights into Western classic music are interesting.

“Tetris” (+ + +) is a fascinating docudrama about the fourth best-selling video game for Nintendo Entertainment Systems. It was released in November 1989 and sold more than 8 million copies. It was invented by a Russian programmer. The movie is about the free-for-all attempts by various competitors to get the worldwide distribution rights for the game, including for Game Boy, Nintendo’s game-changing device. Among the interested parties was Robert Maxwell, who needed a big hit to bail out his media company after he had stolen millions of pounds from its employee retirement fund. He lost his bid and his life when he drowned after apparently falling off his yacht, the Lady Ghislaine, named after his now infamous daughter.

“The Banshees of Inisherin” (+) is a quirky movie with quirky characters that takes place on a quirky remote mythical island off the coast of Ireland. It a darkly comic allegory for the Irish Civil War. It has a fine cast led by Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson in Oscar-worthy performances. Their characters have been friends for a long time until one of them decides he no longer wants to remain friends. The movie also includes a memorable performance by Jenny, a miniature donkey, and a “scene stealer” according to Farrell.

“The Beanie Bubble” (+ + +) is a very colorful and entertaining flick about yet another bubble, the 1990s Beanie Babies craze. So it is another toy story movie similar in some ways to the recently released “Barbie.” Both appeal to the audience’s nostalgia for the toys they played with growing up. But it is also another cautionary tale about speculative excess and corporate hubris. The Ty company that sold the toys created “artificial scarcity” for them by regularly discontinuing certain babies and even producing a few with defects. The company was also among the first to have a website and to use social media to boost sales. Interestingly, eBay owes its early success to Beanie Babies auctions, as collectors flocked to acquire the limited editions, with some going for thousands of dollars. Sales were so big that eBay was required by the SEC to list the babies as a “risk factor” when they went public in 1998. The Beanie bubble burst in 1999.

“The Crowded Room” (+), an Apple TV + series, is a slow-paced psychological thriller. So it isn’t very thrilling and is only mildly entertaining. Tom Holland plays the lead role of a young man dealing with some major childhood trauma. His psychologist is played by Amanda Seyfried. Previously, he starred in a couple of Spiderman flicks, and she played scamstress Elizabeth Holmes in “The Dropout.” This series failed to provide either actor with a good script to show off their talents.

“The Diplomat” (+ +) is an eight-part mini-series on Netflix starring Keri Russell, who plays a career diplomat sent to London to be the US ambassador to the United Kingdom during an international crisis. Her husband, played by Rufus Sewell, is a retired high-profile diplomat in his own right, but is the ambassador’s “wife,” who is constantly meddling in her professional affairs. The series starts off slowly but picks up steam by the third episode.

“The Holdovers” (+) is about a curmudgeonly instructor of ancient history at a New England all-boys prep school. Much to his chagrin, he is picked by the school’s headmaster to watch over a few of the students who have nowhere to go during the Christmas break. The teacher, played to perfection by Paul Giamatti, and one of the students get to know and understand one another and themselves better. The message is that some people aren’t as bad as they seem once you are forced to spend some time with them.

“The Man Who Saved the Game” (+ + +) is a warm-hearted movie about Roger Sharpe, the man who saved the pinball machine from decades of prohibition in many states around the country, including New York. It was widely deemed to be a gambling game controlled by the mob. Sharpe successfully convinced the powers-that-be in New York that pinball is a game of skill and provides lots of entertainment. What’s heart-warming about the movie is Roger’s relationship with his girlfriend, Ellen, and her son, who help him along the way. It’s nostalgia time for those of us who were pinball wizards! Don’t forget to listen to “Pinball Wizard” by the Who after you see the movie.

“The Menu” (+ + +) is a pretentious movie about pretentious people, i.e., the connoisseurs of haute cuisine. It is very clever, funny, and wickedly entertaining. Imagine being stuck on an island with Gordon Ramsey, who vents his temper on you and the other dinner guests at his restaurant rather than at his subservient staff. Ralph Fiennes plays the lead masterfully. He does most of the talking, leaving little room for anyone else to say much more than “Yes, Chef!”

“The Sixth Commandment” (+ +) is a British docudrama series based on the murders of Peter Farquhar and Ann Moore-Martin by Ben Field. Field was a fiend who preyed on two lonely elderly people by pretending to be in love with them. His motive was to get them to rewrite their wills to his benefit. He pretended to be a religious and caring young poet but was actually a cold-blooded embodiment of Hannah Arandt’s concept of the “banality of evil.”

“The Whale” (+ + +) is an outstanding film with an outstanding cast of characters played by outstanding actors. Charlie, played by Brendan Fraser, suffers from obesity that started when his partner died, causing him to eat obsessively to deal with the pain. The result is that his health is poor, he can barely walk, and he never leaves his apartment. He works from home as an English professor who teaches online college writing courses. Charlie works on reconnecting with his estranged teenage daughter during most of the film. The novel Moby Dick is mentioned several times as a lesson in what not to do in life.

“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.

“Till” (+ + +) is an outstanding docudrama with an outstanding performance by Danielle Deadwyler as Mamie Till-Bradley. She was an educator and a civil rights activist who fought for justice after her 14-year-old son Emmett was lynched in August 1955 in Money, Mississippi. The murder sparked national and international outrage after photos of his mutilated corpse were published. In 2022, Congress passed and President Joe Biden signed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, which makes lynching a federal hate crime. A lot of progress has been made in improving civil rights in the US, but more needs to be done.

“To Leslie” (+ +) is about Leslie Rowland, a single mother living in Texas who wins the lottery. It’s mostly downhill from there through most of the film until she tries to save herself from her dependence on alcohol in an effort to reconnect with her estranged 20-year-old son. Andrea Riseborough plays the lead role. Her performance is intense and impressive. The rest of the cast is also very good. The underlying theme of the movie is that personal redemption is difficult, but if there’s a will, there’s a way.

“Vikings: Valhalla: Season 2” (+ + +) in many ways could have been titled “The Life & Times of Leif Erikson.” The only problem is that there’s no mention of any of Leif’s exploits in the Wikipedia account that matches his adventures in the Netflix series. It’s all good fun, with lots of intrigue and sword fights between Christians and pagans and between kings and would-be kings. It reminds us that eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Noble Savage really was a warmongering, blood-thirsty, insecure savage rather than his romanticized ideal of a virtuous, peace-loving denizen of our planet living a life of natural simplicity and harmony until corrupted by society.