

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews

2024

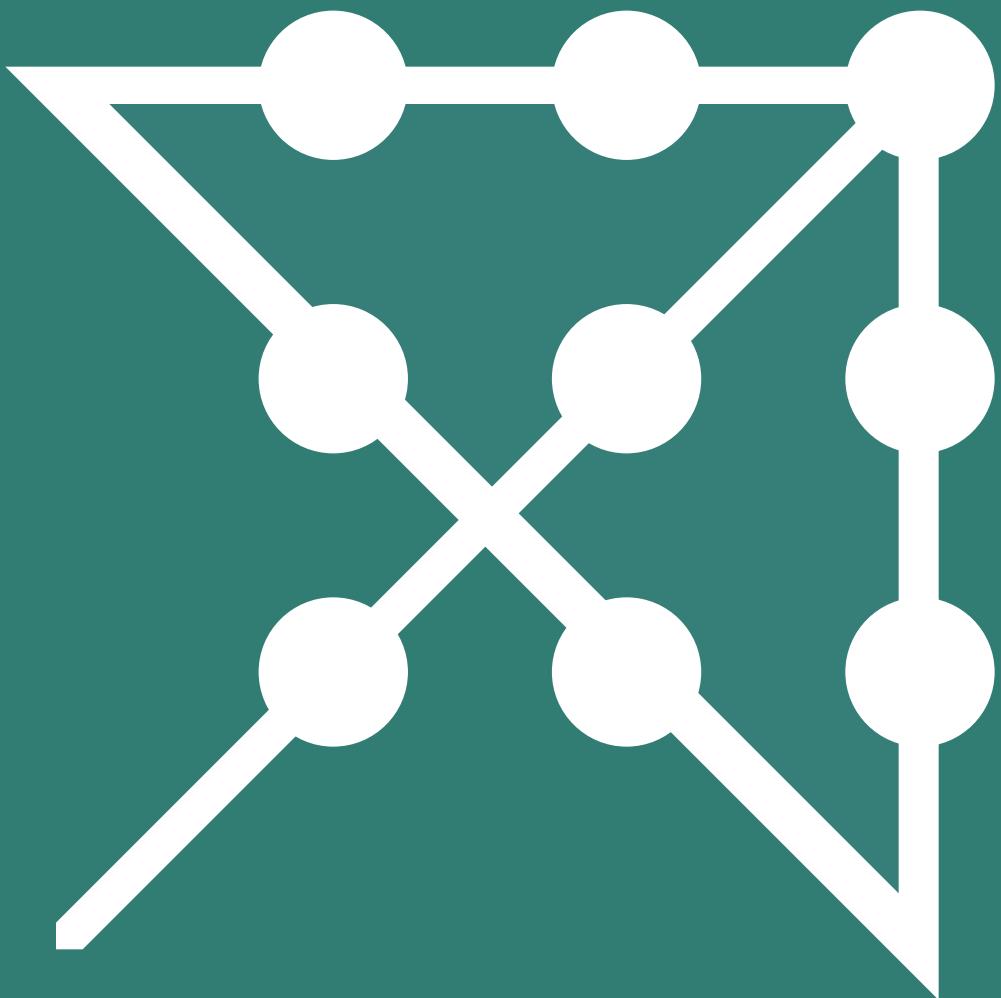
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thinking outside the box

“A Gentleman in Moscow” (+++) is a fictional tale about Count Alexander Rostov, who is stripped of his title and wealth and placed under house arrest for life in a grand Moscow hotel. This all occurs in Russia following the revolution of 1917 during which the monarchy was abolished and the government imposed socialism on its citizens. Most of the miniseries occurs during the rule of Stalin. It’s a good civics lesson, illustrating how socialism can quickly turn into tyranny. Ewan McGregor provides an outstanding performance as the Count.

“American Fiction” (+++) is one of the movies nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture. It should win, beating the other nominees, including “Oppenheimer” and “Barbie.” That’s not my prediction; it’s my opinion. It’s a movie starring Jeffrey Wright playing Monk, a frustrated African American novelist who uses a pen name to write the autobiography of a fictitious black fugitive hiding from the FBI. The book becomes an instant hit, much to the consternation of Monk, who wrote the novel as a goof on similar books pandering to stereotypes promoted by the culture warriors who practice identity politics. In their world, all of us are first and foremost members of an identity group based on nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. Individual identities are not relevant. As a result, they violate the age-old adage “Never judge a book by its cover.”

“Bob Marley: One Love” (++) is an interesting biopic about the life and music of Bob Marley. Kingsley Ben-Adir plays the lead role and does a great job of portraying the reggae star. The film itself is a rather predictable version of the genre, depicting the rise of a great talent from obscurity, poverty, and adversity to fame, fortune, and adversity. Nevertheless, it is entertaining, especially the music.

“Boys in the Boat” (++) is based on a 2013 nonfiction novel about the quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics by nine members of the JV crew team at the University of Washington in Seattle. They were the underdogs competing against the best teams from the Ivy League and then from around the world at the Olympics. The film is a classic come-from-behind tale. It’s predictable, though the races are exciting. The romantic subplot is also predictable but a refreshing throwback to sock hops and gender-segregated dorms.

“Cabrini” (+++) is a fascinating docudrama about Francesca Cabrini, an Italian immigrant who arrived in New York City in 1889. She was also a Catholic nun who was authorized by the Pope to start an orphanage in New York City. Despite numerous challenges and obstacles, some from within the church hierarchy and some from City Hall, she succeeded in creating a remarkable network of charitable orphanages and hospitals first in New York City and then around the world. She died on December 22, 1917 in Chicago and was buried on the grounds of her orphanage on the Hudson River in New York. In 1946, she was canonized a saint by Pope Pius XII in recognition of her holiness and service to mankind and was named “Patroness of Immigrants” in 1950.

“Civil War” (- - -) is a bad movie. It is very boring. The plot is nonsensical, and the acting is awful, partly because the dialogue is so trite. In this dystopian un-thriller, Kirsten Dunst stars as a photojournalist during a civil war between a secessionist movement (i.e., the “Western Forces” led by Texas and California) and an authoritarian federal government, led by a third-term president. Rather than encouraging viewers to root for either side, the movie seems to be aimed at convincing them to root for it to be over. Remarkably, the consensus reviews were much kinder to the film. The positive ones saw a reflection of our nation’s current political mess in the movie.

“Conclave” (- -) was an interesting suspense drama until it went into a woke death dive near the end. Even the fine performance of Ralph Fiennes couldn’t save it. The movie is about the intrigue behind the selection of a new pope. Secrets that could shake the foundation of the Vatican are uncovered. There’s a schism between conservative and progressive Cardinals. The tensions between Christianity and radical Islam are briefly mentioned. If you leave the theater when the bomb goes off in the movie, you’ll undoubtedly come up with a better ending for the film than the one chosen by the director.

“Disclaimer” (++) is a psychological thriller. The TV series is about a famed documentary journalist, Catherine Ravenscroft, played by Cate Blanchett, who is shocked by the lurid details revealed in a book based on a series of events that took place while she was on vacation with her husband and young son in Italy several years previously. Her husband had to return to London for his job and left the two of them at the Italian beach resort. A young man drowned saving Catherine’s son from a similar fate when she fell asleep on shore. The parents of the young man are heartbroken and seek revenge for the loss of their son. The voice-over is annoying, but the twists and turns are worth the ride.

“Feud: Capote vs the Swans” (+++) is an eight-episode limited series based on the bestselling book “Capote’s Women: A True Story of Love, Betrayal, and a Swan Song for an Era” by Laurence Leamer. It’s all about high society in New York City during the 1970s and 1980s. Truman Capote, the famous American novelist, was attracted to the ladies who dominated that society. They were attracted to him for his wit and wisdom, and he became their confidante. He destroyed his relationship with his “swans” when he published an article about them in Esquire that was a thinly veiled fictionalization of their lives and exposed their most intimate secrets. The script and the performances of all the actors are really exceptional.

“Griselda” (+++) is an intense docudrama series on Netflix. Sofia Vergara provides an amazing performance as Griselda Blanco. She is a single mom struggling to raise her three children after she murdered her husband. She escaped from Colombia with her three boys to Miami, where she became the main distributor of cocaine in that city during the 1970s and 1980s. She was ruthless. Pablo Escobar said, “The only man I was ever afraid of was a woman named ‘Griselda Blanco.’”

“I Am: Celine Dion” (+++) is an extraordinary documentary about the singer’s amazing career and her recent struggles with stiff-person syndrome, which is an autoimmune disease that affects one or two out of every 1 million people. The film graphically shows the pain she suffers during her therapy sessions. She shows remarkable bravery with her determination to sing again for audiences around the world. Nearly two years after she revealed her diagnosis and took a leave of absence from her career to recover, she made a triumphant return on Friday singing “Hymne à Lamour” at the close of the Paris Olympics’ opening ceremony from the Eiffel Tower. She certainly deserves several gold medals for her amazing performance.

“Killers of the Flower Moon” (+) is another very long movie directed by Martin Scorsese. It would have been better if it were shorter. The movie is based on a series of murders of Osage Indians in Oklahoma during the 1920s after their tribe discovered oil on their land. Leading the bad guys are characters played by Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio. Neither performance was exceptional.

“Leave the World Behind” (-) is a good movie for pessimists who hate people, like the person played by Julia Roberts in this quirky movie. The world is collapsing for some unknown reason. There are blackouts, so TVs and cellphones don’t work. The crabby lady played by Roberts along with her clueless husband (played by Ethan Hawke) and their two teenagers rent a vacation house, presumably in the Hamptons, just as the crisis begins. The landlord and his daughter show up and stay over in the guest room. The family tries to escape. But the entrance to the Long Island Expressway is full of empty white Teslas that have crashed into each other, blocking the way out. It’s all pointless, but we now know that white Teslas are an existential threat to our civilization

“Lee” (++) is a docudrama about Lee Miller. She was a fashion model in New York City during the 1920s and a photojournalist during World War II. She was a war correspondent for Vogue and covered the London Blitz and the liberation of Paris. Her most remarkable photos were taken immediately after the war, documenting the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau. One of the best known photos of Lee shows her taking a bath in Hitler’s bathtub on the same day that he committed suicide. Kate Winslet gives an admirable performance as Lee.

“Manhunt” (++) is a television miniseries about the hunt for John Wilkes Booth after he assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln’s Secretary of War and friend, Edwin Stanton leads the investigation. Tobias Menzies plays Edwin Stanton, and Anthony Boyle plays John Wilkes Booth. They both do an admirable job of recreating the protagonist and antagonist in this historical drama about the important events that followed the assassination..

“Maria” (+) is a biopic directed, written, and produced by Pablo Larrain about Maria Callas, the world’s greatest opera singer. He previously had produced “Spencer” about Lady Diana and “Jackie” about Jackie Kennedy Onassis. All are worth seeing. In this film, Angelina Jolie admirably portrays Maria during the last days of her life in 1970s Paris. There are lots of reflections on her life, including her relationship with Aristotle Onassis. Of course, the remarkable beauty and range of her operatic voice is what stands out most in her career and in this movie.

“Masters of the Air” (+++) is an excellent World War II drama, which recounts the story of the 100th Bomb Group. The miniseries is a companion to “Band of Brothers” (2001) and “The Pacific” (2010). All three are extremely well made homages to the young men and women who sacrificed so much for their country to win World War II. The latest miniseries follows the crews who flew their B-17 Flying Fortresses on extremely dangerous missions to destroy targets inside Germany. It’s good to be reminded of a time when Americans were united in our determination to win a war against fascists, and succeeded..

“Monsters” (+++) is a 2022 Netflix docudrama series about the Menendez brothers, who were convicted in 1996 of the brutal murders of their parents in their Beverly Hills mansion in 1989. It is especially relevant today because they might soon be resentenced, opening the possibility of parole instead of serving out their life sentences. The unanswered question is whether the monsters were the two brothers or their two parents. The dialogue about the abuse that the parents allegedly committed against their two sons is intensely graphic and unsettling. The actors portraying all four of the dysfunctional family members did a great job of portraying their characters as monsters. The directing and editing are superb too.

Napoleon" (- -) is an epic historical drama based on the life of Napoleon Bonaparte. It is directed by Ridley Scott and stars Joaquin Phoenix, who seems to be totally bored with the part, which makes the film totally boring. If you are looking for the crib notes on this important historical figure and don't mind some inaccuracies, then watch the movie. I did learn something I didn't know about the self-crowned French emperor. When he invaded Russia, Alexander I, the Russian emperor, burned down Moscow just before the French army arrived. There was simply no one and nothing to conquer. Between the invasion and the retreat to home, the French suffered 500,000 casualties, including 300,000 killed, mostly by the weather and disease.

"One Life" (++) is an incredible true story about the life of Sir Nicholas Winton, who organized a remarkable evacuation of 669 Jewish children by train from Prague through Nazi-occupied territory. He arranged to have them all placed with foster parents in Great Britain. He was just an "ordinary man" who saved many lives, earning Winton a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2003. His mother and a few close friends helped him organize the dangerous rescue effort. The movie features an excellent cast, with Johnny Flynn playing Winton as a young stockbroker who felt compelled to save the young refugees and Anthony Hopkins playing him later in life, well after the war.

"Pachinko" (++) is an outstanding mini-series about the challenges faced by four generations of a Korean immigrant family. It is a sweeping saga that takes place in Korea, Japan, and the US from 1915 to 1989. Tying it all together is the life of Sunja. In 1931, she leaves her home in Japanese occupied Korea to start a new life in Koreatown, located in Osaka, Japan. Life is hard for Koreans there, who suffer from discrimination and poverty. However, Sunja overcomes it all with her determination to achieve a better life for her children. The acting is superb, and so is the editing, which weaves the story of the family from one generation to the other.

"Perfect Days" (+) is a perfect vignette about the life of a public toilet caretaker in Tokyo named "Hirayama." The film is a bit repetitive like "Groundhog Day." However, unlike that movie, the main character, played to perfection by Koji Yakusho, enjoys the routine of his daily chores, meals, and bedtime as well as reading books and listening to music. He likes to inhale the fresh air when he steps outdoors to go to work and have his coffee from a vending machine. He enjoys a sandwich in the park for lunch and the company of the trees around him. At home, he has several tree saplings that he waters every morning. His routine is occasionally interrupted, but he returns to it quickly. The movie is a reminder that we all have our routines that give us a sense of stability and comfort. So try to have a perfect day every day.

"Presumed Innocent" (-) is a very slow-paced TV series. It is based on Scott Turow's courtroom thriller novel. This adaption isn't thrilling. Jake Gyllenhaal is a prosecutor accused of murdering his colleague, who also happened to be his lover. Jake and the other cast members seem to be suffering in every scene. We suffer along with them because of the long, drawn-out dramatics. So who done it? Who cares?.

“Priscilla” (+) is a biopic about Elvis Presley’s wife. He met her in 1959 when he was stationed in Germany. He was 24 years old. She was 14. They were married in 1967 after she spent several years living with the legendary rock star at Graceland, his home in Memphis, Tennessee. Elvis doesn’t spend much time with Priscilla because he is on the road most of the time and doesn’t bring her along. When they are together, they spend days in their bedroom having their meals in bed and wallowing in substance abuse. A more interesting Elvis-related movie is “Elvis & Nixon” (2016).

“Reagan” (+) is a compelling biographical film that delves into the life and legacy of Ronald Reagan. It could have been a better movie without the narration provided by a fictionalized Soviet profiler. In any event, Reagan deserves lots of credit for bringing down the Soviet empire without firing a shot. His “Tear Down This Wall” speech on June 12, 1987 certainly contributed to that outcome. So did his secret campaign to slash the Soviets’ oil revenues by lowering oil prices. His Strategic Defense Initiative also unnerved the Soviets. Of course, another decisive event was the Chernobyl disaster on April 26, 1986, though it wasn’t mentioned at all in the film. Dennis Quaid delivers a decent portrayal of the “Gipper,” who was also called “The Great Communicator.” They don’t make presidents like Reagan anymore.

“Ripley” (+) is the second remake in English of the original French 1960 movie starring Alain Delon. This version is a crime thriller series that details a story of obsession, murder, and identity theft. It is filled with lots of plot twists that make no sense. My wife was bored with it. I enjoyed it and kept telling her that it’s just a movie. We both agreed that it is the most beautifully filmed black-and-white film that either of us had ever seen. Each scene is a masterpiece of cinematographic lighting.

“Rogue Heroes” (++) is a British television series based on a book by Ben Macintyre about the creation of Britain’s famed Special Air Service Brigade during World War II. In 1941, British forces were retreating in North Africa as the tanks of German General Erwin Rommel were heading toward Egypt. Three British lieutenants assembled a force of commandos to attack key installations behind enemy lines. The commandos are a wild bunch, reminiscent of the Dirty Dozen. Their exploits are the stuff of legends and this movie, which is fast paced and action packed.

“Scoop” (+) is an interesting movie about how the BBC coaxed Prince Andrew to agree to appear in an infamous 2019 interview on the television network’s Newsnight to talk about his sordid friendship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. According to the movie, Andrew also has a strange fascination for stuffed toys. In 2022, Queen Elizabeth (“Mummy”) stripped Prince Andrew of his military titles and patronages. Incidentally, it’s very odd that Epstein managed to hang himself in jail even though he was under watch. Also odd is that none of Epstein’s other celebrity pals have been implicated in participating in his criminal activities.

“The Crown” (+++) is a six-season TV docudrama about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. The final season is the best of the lot, which all are top-notch. Her royal highness almost always rose to the occasion even in the face of numerous challenges and scandals. She worked with 15 prime ministers and usually offered them sound advice on dealing with various issues. She sacrificed a great deal in her personal life for the good of her country. May she rest in peace. The script for the final season was particularly well written with splendid performances by all the major actors..

“The Last Rifleman” (++) is a heartwarming true story about an Irish soldier who survived the Normandy invasion. Pierce Brosnan ably plays Artie Crawford, the World War II vet who lives in a nursing home in Northern Ireland. After his wife passes away, he sets off by himself to France to attend the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landing. Along the way, he finds some peace of mind as he comes to terms with his traumatic experience..

“The Perfect Couple” (+) is an entertaining who-done-it miniseries on Netflix starring Nicole Kidman and Liev Schreiber as the not-so-perfect couple. It is based on the 2018 novel of the same name by Elin Hilderbrand, who writes mostly romance novels and has been described as “the queen of beach reads.” She resides on Nantucket, where most of her novels are set. A day before a lavish wedding at the couple’s Nantucket mansion, which is situated on the sea, the maid of honor is murdered by drowning and everyone is a suspect. See if you can catch the one clue early in the series.

“The Tourist” (+) is a Netflix series about Elliot, a man who wakes up one day in a hospital in Australia’s Outback after he is nearly killed when a huge truck rams his car. During the first season, he loses his memory and tries to find out who he is. He finds comfort and some help from local cop Helen Chambers. The plot has plenty of bad guys working for Kosta, a Greek drug lord, who is on LSD. Elliot is a good guy without his memory, but he might have been a bad guy when he had it. This all takes place in the Outback with lots of characters and dialogue that are very reminiscent of the equally quirky movie “Fargo.” So it is both fun and funny, though the plot often veers off the straight path. The film stars Jamie Dornan and Danielle Macdonald, who do admirable jobs in their roles.

“The Unlikely Pilgrimage Of Harold Fry” (+) is an odd film about an odd fellow, who walks 500 miles in the UK to bring comfort to an old friend who is dying of cancer. Along the way, he becomes a media celebrity and attracts a crowd of people who join his pilgrimage. Those scenes are very reminiscent of similar scenes in Forrest Gump. Jim Broadbent’s performance as protagonist Harold Fry is brilliant.

“Tokyo Vice” (+++) is a two-season TV series based on the 2009 memoir by Jake Adelstein, who is an American investigative journalist. He became the first foreign journalist to work for a major Japanese newspaper covering the organized crime activities of the yakuza. The cast is first rate, especially Ken Watanabe, who plays the lead detective in the Tokyo police division that investigated the yakuza. Ansel Elgort plays the American reporter, who has a risk-defying passion to expose the bad guys as he gets to know them up close. Several of the Japanese actors playing yakuza gangsters do an admirable job of showing the inner workings of the Japanese mob.

“We Were The Lucky Ones” (+++) is a historical miniseries about a Jewish family residing in Poland as World War II begins and the Germans invade their country. Some escape to other countries, while others struggle to survive by hiding themselves or trying to stay alive in concentration camps. They have no idea whether their relatives have perished or not. As they reunite after the war, they are amazed by how many of them did survive. The movie is based on a 2017 book by Georgia Hunter that was inspired by what happened to her own family during the war. .

“Wicked Little Letters” (++) is a hilarious detective story based on true events. In 1920, Edith Swan (played by Olivia Colman), a devout Christian spinster who lives with her elderly parents in the southern English seaside town of Littlehampton is the victim. She suddenly starts receiving anonymous letters that curse her with a full assortment of expletives. She complains to the police, who immediately suspect Rose Gooding (played by Jessie Buckley), the Swans’ next-door neighbor. She is a fouled-mouthed young single mother. The case against her becomes a national sensation and goes to trial. It’s all great fun.

“Widow Clicquot” (+) is based on the true story about the Veuve Clicquot champagne family and business that began in the late 18th century. The leading lady is Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot. Her husband dies when she is in her twenties. She insists on carrying on with his champagne business at a time when the Napoleonic Wars are making it hard to do business in Europe. She succeeds nonetheless and gets a big boost from the champagne mania in Russia. Needless to say, Madame Clicquot faced several challenges as a woman in a competitive industry run by men. But she triumphed with her superior product and entrepreneurial determination. Tchin-tchin! The movie is a bit slow paced, and the flashbacks to her eccentric husband are annoying.

“Wild Rose” (+) is an entertaining movie about a single mom who has a criminal record and aspires to be a country singer in Nashville. She lives in Glasgow with her two kids. She’s a good singer but not a very good mom. Along the way, reality bites, and she learns to be a better mom while still pursuing her aspirations. Jessie Buckley does a good job with the lead role and has a nice voice.

“Young Woman And The Sea” (+++) is an excellent biopic about Trudy Ederle, who was the first female swimmer to cross the English Channel. She did so on August 6, 1926, in 14 hours and 31 minutes, setting a record that beat the time of all five men who had crossed the Channel before she did. She and her sister were encouraged to learn to swim by their mother, whose sister had died in a drowning accident. The family lived in Little Germany located on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. That community experienced the worst disaster in New York City maritime history when a ferry boat sank on June 24, 1904, causing over 1,000 riders to drown because they couldn’t swim.

“Zone of Interest” (+++) is a remarkable film about the banality of evil. The film focuses on SS soldier Rudolf Hoss, the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, and his family. They live in a very nice house surrounded by a high wall that doesn’t completely hide the adjoining death camp nor the fire and smoke spewed by its chimneys. Beyond the wall, the air is also filled with the sounds of gunshots, barking dogs, and prisoners screaming in terror and pain. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hoss happily tends to her large garden, while the kids enjoy their swimming pool. Mr. Hoss works hard to impress his superiors with the efficiency of his horrible crematory furnaces. Steven Spielberg praised the movie as the best Holocaust movie since his own (“Schindler’s List,” 1993), highlighting its impact on raising awareness. Unfortunately, raising awareness of this historical horror is needed more than ever today.