

Laina At the Movies, November, 2010
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Hereafter.

Waiting for a new Clint Eastwood movie to begin, I always know that he will \223make my day.\224 This man just keeps getting better as he gets older.

Hereafter is a tender, civilized movie about something that has obsessed our human ancestors from the beginning of time: what happens after we die. Anthropologists were surprised to find a body buried carefully in a Neolithic cave, in fetal position and surrounded by flowers and herbs. They obviously cared about him.

The earliest priests, shamans, went into trances so that they could \223speak with the spirits of the ancestors.\224 This still goes on today in sessions with spirit mediums who claim to be able to talk to the dear departed. Most of these are scams, of course\227but people still pay their money for this service.

We know how our first civilized ancestors felt about death. The Egyptians took great pains to bury their kings for eternity\227and these mummified bodies are of continued fascination to us. They did not decay.

One Chinese emperor was buried with a whole army of soldiers and horses\227fortunately made of clay; but other accompaniments were not clay: they were the wives, concubines, and servants to accompany their master into the afterlife.

In this film, several people have experiences that throw them into deep despair or depression. The first is a French television reporter (Cecile de France) who nearly drowns when a tsunami rolls over an island in the tropics (Indonesia or Thailand?). She has an experience while unconscious that she cannot shake. She experienced the hereafter\227briefly but intensely.

Back in Paris after her vacation, she cannot return to the world of news, intellect, and life as usual. She is drawn into the research done about people\222s almost universal experiences during near-death and writes a book about it.

In San Francisco lives a man (Matt Damon) who seems to have real ability to connect to the dead. He knows that he had a brain injury as a child and that this either produced a real clairvoyant or strange brain function that produces images. He is tired of exploiting this gift for money and longs for a normal life where he can find love.

In London are twin brothers, 12-year-olds, who have learned to take care of themselves because their mother is addicted to drugs. They protect each other and her. One of the twins dies in an accident and the other one (Frankie McLaren) desperately misses him and wants to talk to him.

The three characters come together in London in a way that resolves all their anguish.

The movie does not attempt to deal with the views of organized religion about the afterlife\227except to show that it does not convince or comfort the three protagonists. It also shows the fraudulent side of this industry that even a 12-year-old can see. It leaves us something to think about.

Colored Girls.

This movie, directed by Tyler Perry, was based on a play: \223For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Euf.\224 Translating a play that is based on poetry into a movie is not easy, and in this case, made the film seem very surreal. The best reason to see it is that it is an extraordinary showcase for a group of wonderful Black actresses, including in Janet Jackson, Anika Noni Rose, and Whoopi Goldberg. Other than that, it is painful, depressing, and strange.

The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet\222s Nest.

This is the third of the trilogy from Sweden: The Girl With the Dragon Tatoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire, and then The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet\222s Nest. In addition to having one of the most engaging heroines in a film, portrayed by an actress of amazing ability (Noomi Rapace) who plays Lisbeth Salander, the trilogy gradually exposes a problem we all know well: government abuse of power and cover-up to hide it.

Those who have not read the books would still be able to enjoy the incredibly exciting first two films, in which an investigative journalist begins unwinding some of this abuse (initially protecting Swedish Nazi collaborators) with the help of a gifted young computer hacker\227Lisbeth Salander\227with some mysteries of her own.

The third film of this trilogy may not be as easy to follow for those who have not read the book. The plot is dense, action continual, and I think it would be rather confusing to follow the story. However, when I saw it, obviously the theatre was filled with people who had read the trilogy and loved it as I did.

You still have time to read these three novels before the American version of the trilogy comes out. I know that the American producer has already selected the actress to play Lisbeth Salander\227but I wonder if any of you out there have seen the actress who plays a law firm investigator, Kalinda (Archi Panjabi), in The Good Wife television series? From the first, I could imagine her as Salander. Let me know.

Unstoppable.

Just as walking into the theatre to see a Clint Eastwood movie, anything that stars Denzel Washington guarantees time well spent. It was wonderful\227and timely.

In the story, a half-mile long freight train with boxcars full of volatile chemicals gets loose and is hurtling through Pennsylvania toward a large city where it will derail with dire consequences. The film is about the confluence of human error, technology, and corporate culture\227all the same elements that converged in the Gulf oil rig explosion and spill last summer. The potential for catastrophe presented in this movie was even worse\227and is something that we could expect to see any time.

The story is also about two other human elements\227courage and experience\227when combin

ed can turn a potential disaster off. What makes it even more fascinating is that it is based on a real event in 2001. It will surely arouse the hysteria of those opposed to moving nuclear materials on our rail lines. But what can be learned from this film (and the near catastrophe on which it is modeled) is that human intelligence can converge with technology if strict guidelines are followed. We really can do things right if we try.

Fair Game.

This is the story of the Bush Administration\222s thrust to go to war against Iraq and what they did when the CIA and a former ambassador sent to find out if Niger had really shipped tons of yellow cake (uranium) to Saddam Hussein. The administration\222s main reason for going to war was the belief that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction to threaten (and use) against his Middle East neighbors (Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Gulf States, and Israel).

The Administration (and particularly Vice President Cheney) had plenty of reasons to fear that Saddam was dangerous and utterly ruthless. He had certainly demonstrated that he would use poison gas, and he boasted that he had such weapons. What he didn\222t understand is that the US really didn\222t know that he was bluffing.

The most important element of this film is the unfolding of a horrific abuse of power (using the excuse of national security). The CIA, which had not known that Iraq had a nuclear program until the first Gulf war, was no longer trusted by the very suspicious Vice President. He gathered his own intelligence instead\227much of it terribly flawed.

A tough former Ambassador Joe Wilson (Sean Penn) was dispatched by the CIA to Niger, which he had known as a diplomat, to verify the yellow cake sale to Iraq. He found not one shred of evidence for this, and said so. The Vice President was not pleased. His people decided to discredit Wilson\227and to get to him by outing his wife, Valerie Plame Wilson (Naomi Watts), who was a very effective counter-terrorism operative. They ruined her career, ruined Wilson\222s reputation, and put a number of people around the world (and nuclear scientists in Iraq) in danger and many of them were murdered because of it.

Abuse of power is always a danger in any government\227and is particularly awful when it is used by a power as great as the American government. This cautionary tale is worth seeing and thinking about.