

Laina with August Movies
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Laina At the Movies
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The Hundred-Foot Journey

Another foodie movie has cheered us all, in sheer contrast with the catastrophe films that mark every summer. Perhaps life is not coming to an end after all.

Oprah Winfrey and Steven Spielberg cooked this one up for us, and it was delicious. The story takes place in a French town near the Swiss border, breathtakingly beautiful. A restaurant rated with one star by the bible of French cuisine, the Michelin Guide, run by a classically trained owner, Madame Malory (played by Helen Mirren), is challenged by a new restaurant across the road from hers, run by immigrants from India. She initially assumes that, distasteful as it is, the restaurant will only be a fast food joint and will not compete for her clientele.

What she does not know is that the newcomers are also classical chefs: restaurant owners for generations in India. The two restaurants engage in a huffy war, each doing what they can to annoy the other, such as going early to the farmers' market and buying up all the good produce, or complaining to the town's mayor about violations of stuffy French food laws.

One serious strain in this otherwise lighthearted film is about why the Indian family, the Kadams, emigrated from India. Their restaurant had been torched during a Hindu pogrom against them (they were Muslim, although secular Indians). They had run for their lives, taking only with them their life's savings, chef knives and special chest of Indian spices.

Madame Malory's war against the newcomers gets the unwanted support when the usual French bigots who inhabit the lower levels of French life torch the Indian restaurant. The war ends with Madame Malory's shame and her attempt to make amends.

The foodie delight of this movie centers on the Kadam family's young chef, a youth who from childhood exhibited the talent of the world's best chefs, perfect sense of taste (like perfect pitch for musicians). Hassan Kadam (played by the charming Manish Dayal), apprentices at Madame Malory's restaurant and his extraordinary gifts win the restaurant another Michelin star and launches him into a big-time career.

One can almost taste the refined French sauces modernized by Indian spices! The budding relationship between the starchy Madame Malory and the prickly Kadam papa (played by Om Puri) is almost as delicious. Bon Appetit!

The Giver

The theme of how utopias morph into dystopias is popular, particularly with summer-released movies. It appears that vacation entertainment must include close calls (or warnings) with social engineering. The Giver is one of the better versions of this genre.

Many of these films open with survivors of some sort of global catastrophe, in which mankind's nastier characteristics have brought apocalyptic ruin. In this film the survivors create what they think will be a perfect, safe, and sane community built on an absolutely flat plateau, high enough to look down on a cloud-shrouded world. Modeled on Plato's Republic and Thomas More's Utopia, wise elders establish the rules for the community's survival. The same problems are identified and eliminated: inequality of wealth, which they see as giving rise to envy and ultimately crime and warfare.

This society, like that of Brave New World, has also eliminated biological family. Young women give birth, but the babies are allotted to foster families to rear. This utopia, like Plato's, humanely destroy babies born with handicaps or mental deficiencies. They also help the elderly to go elsewhere, which is achieved by an injection that puts them to sleep.

The community recognizes some diversity of human capabilities, for which it provides a range of jobs which are assigned to graduates of high school by these wise elders who have watched these children since birth.

Human ceremonial desires are addressed by special services when children turn nine (they are given bicycles), 18 (graduation and career assignments), and memorials for those elders who have gone to the \223elsewhere.\224

Everyone lives in identical housing (sterile but efficient); everyone wears the same sort of clothing; all have access to the same foods; there is no opportunity for envy. And to eliminate the slightest possibility of aggression, each person self-injects at the start of each day with something that keeps their emotions stable. This results in a culture which is cheerful, amiable, law-abiding, respectful of their governance by the wise elders, and has only the side effect that they see no color. Everything is in shades of black and white.

One elder is assigned to be the caretaker of human history: a library. One youngster from each generation is selected to apprentice to the Giver (history custodian) as a Receiver who will one day be the next Giver. In this film, we follow the career of one young receiver, Jonas (Brenton Thwaites), and one Giver (Jeff Bridges), both of whom go beyond what the elders want. The chief elder is played by Meryl Streep with complete reasonableness, a true believer that human beings must be kept from their worst instincts.

Think about Clockwork Orange, a movie that posited the notion that when you get rid of criminality you may also be getting rid of genius. A society that is only in black and white has not only cut off human horrors, but also human glories.

As utopias go, this film is not as well designed as Plato\222s or More\222s, but it shares a lot with Huxley\222s Brave New World. It is worth seeing and thinking about. (I wonder if they will show it in Singapore.)

When The Game Stands Tall

I have confessed before that in all my years of schooling, I have never seen a sports event, not even football. In spite of this, my once Stanford baseball coach husband married me. Happily, we have other things in common.

However, despite my dislike for professional or even college sports, I do like many sports movies. When the Game Stands Tall is one that I liked very much! Inspired by a true story, this film follows the football team of De La Salle High School in Concord, California, which had a winning streak of 151 straight victories over the course of 12 years---until they lost.

Their extraordinary coach, Bob Ladouceur, did what so many coaches do not: he remembered that the purpose of high school sports are to help boys grow into responsible men \223who can be counted on.\224 School sports were begun in Victorian England with the same aim: training young men for leadership and responsibility in their communities and country.

Although I do not understand the rules and plays in football, I do understand war, and it is obvious that the elements required of warriors from the beginning of human society are the same for that substitute for the battlefield, sports. The key to both as effective forces is a keen sense of brotherhood rather than individual glory-seeking.

This is a wonderful, engrossing movie, and worth seeing and thinking about.

The November Man

When the San Francisco Chronicle hates a movie and the Santa Cruz Sentinel loves it, I go see it for myself. It is not difficult to watch Pierce Brosnan, a one-time James Bond, play a retired CIA assassin called back into action to help rescue an endangered mole planted in the Russian government.

It is also wonderful to see the good old Russians returning as excellent villains, a mirror of Putin\222s current brave new world of dirty tricks. Russian villains are far more satisfying than the flat-earth ignoramuses of the Middle East (ISIS and other monsters).

Since spy thrillers are also travelogues of a sort, we are treated to Serbia's Belgrade, former home of one of the worst villains around, Slobodan Milosevic, who considered rape camps and genocide a terrific way to wage war.

This is a thriller, and a very bloody one at that. Don't expect much more than entertainment, but do consider an amazing proposal made by one of the villains. His suggestion for the world has some merit.