

Deepwater Horizon

Catastrophes test human character, ingenuity, and endurance. Nature provides plenty of tests with weather, fire, floods, and earthquakes, all considered by insurance companies as "acts of God." But the most fascinating catastrophes are those arising from the very technologies that demonstrate the brilliance of human ingenuity. We are smart creatures, but we do worry about getting too smug about how smart we are. The earliest warning about this smugness is Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, the namesake being a scientist who tried to design the perfect man, a creature made from some diversely gathered human parts. Robert Louis Stevenson added to this genre with his book: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, in which a drug permitted a good man to become completely evil. It was a conscience killer. And then Poe's Poisoned Garden illustrated how very bad the good intentions of a scientist can be.

Deepwater Horizon dramatizes a horrible disaster that destroyed an amazingly brilliant structure, an oil drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico. No matter how remarkable the technology, we learn, human agency can make it fail. Carelessness, error, failure to heed warnings about technological weak spots and corporate penny pinching can undo the best of technologies. We get all of these in this film.

As always, the courage, professionalism, and general decency of the crew aboard this platform make one proud to be a fellow citizen of these people.

The film is technically amazing in revealing both the technology and the failure of the oil industry, and the cost of failure in deaths and ecological damage. The cast of the film was excellent, with performances by Mark Wahlberg, Caleb Holloway, Kurt Russell, Gina Rodriguez, all of them heroic, and John Malkovich as a devious employee of British Petroleum.

Queen of Katwe

This Disney film claims to be an "uplifting" view of Africa, which is a real stretch! The story is very uplifting: that a 10-year-old slum girl-child could learn to play chess and become a world chess champion is certainly uplifting. That the film shows how Africa is not as bad as we thought is not true.

The film opens with a panorama of an enormous slum in Kampala, Uganda (once Big Daddy Amin's country), a slum that looks as bad as the slums of India. These slums are a regular feature of every African city: unpaved, no plumbing, and dangerous. The film carefully avoids another reality in Africa, the sexual predators who ruin every young girl (and boy) not protected by someone.

This true story, however, is uplifting and depends on sheer good luck. A ten-year-old girl who helps her mother at the street market hears that there is a chess club where soup is served. Always hungry, this child of five youngsters of a widowed mother, joins the chess club and surprises everyone by being a chess prodigy. Against all odds, she becomes an international phenomenon and raises her family out of dire poverty.

The child, Phiona (played by Madina Nalwanga) is a new actress; the film features two other leads, both of them African with world acclaim: Lupita Nyonglo (Kenyan) who plays the determined mother desperate to keep her children safe and alive, and David Oyelowo (British Nigerian) who plays the gentle chess coach and Christian missionary who really cares about his slum children chess players.

The one good thing one can say about Uganda's always corrupt government is that there are a few people who manage to scrape up the money to offer these chess clubs to inner city children and pay for them to compete in meets.

The other good thing (which is never discussed) is that chess, the etiquette of this game (politeness), and concern for underprivileged children are not native to Uganda. They are the remnant of British colonialism. The other unaddressed issue is that this child's family and the chess coach are Christian, not Muslim. They both embrace western values. A talented girl child who is African Muslim wouldn't have a chance that this child had.

One thing that emerges from this story: talent and sheer intelligence have no skin color or geography; they are distributed among all human beings. What differs is

culture and history. Those gifts require extraordinary good luck to Girl on the Train

I expected a good thriller when I went to see this film. I found instead the most dreary exploration of the lives of three women, one of them a drunk, who are all connected to a very evil husband. All of the characters were repugnant, the story overwrought, and the mystery not particularly gratifying. Can you tell I hated this movie?

Jack Reacher: Never Go Back

This is one case where the sequel was even better than the original. Tom Cruise (who wears his years amazingly well) plays Jack Reacher, a former military investigator who had left that world to become a homeless wanderer who runs into a situation that gets his attention. A rural sheriff was running a human trafficking ring that Reacher dismantles, calling it in to his old friend, Colonel Bob Moorcroft. Moorcroft tells him that a woman Major, Susan Turner, who had been on his team investigating the murder of two soldiers in Afghanistan, has been accused by Reacher's old enemy, Colonel Sam Morgan, of committing espionage. Reacher's friend, Moorcroft, is murdered, implicating Reacher and Turner.

Reacher springs Turner from lockup and the two make a run for it, hoping to clear their names.

What makes this film a superior thriller is that the characters are sympathetic, the possibility of some military in Afghanistan engaged in some very lucrative smuggling is believable, and the stakes for Reacher are even more urgent when a teen-age girl turns up who may be a child fathered by Reacher 16 years ago, one he knew nothing about. She too is on the run with Reacher and Turner. The movie was well timed, the issues seemed important enough, and it was an excellent example of a well-designed thriller.

Inferno

I had read this Dan Brown book several years ago and uncharacteristically completely forgot it. The theme was that a passionate population explosion activist gave up when his idea of putting contraceptives in the water supply was rejected. He then decided to release a virus that would accomplish the same end: eradicate half of the world's population. This fanatic really believed that he would be saving the world. The hero of all of Dan Brown's books, Harvard professor Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks), wakes up in an Italian hospital with amnesia and terrible visions, not knowing how he got there. A doctor, Sienna Brooks (Felicity Jones) rescues him from the hospital when it looks as if some villains are after him, and they race across Europe and Istanbul to thwart the release of the plague virus. Inferno references the great medieval poem by Dante, Inferno, a detailed vision of Hell. This work influenced generations of artists and really gave a very frightening vision of what life after death in Hell might involve.

While I find Dante's vision tiresome, it was fun, as usual, to have this travelogue following the puzzles hidden in the painting. The World Health Organization is also involved in this chase, but it is difficult to know who might be a friend or a foe. One interesting actor to watch is Irrfan Khan, who reminds me of Peter Lorre, with a woebegone face and sad eyes.

The movie is essentially silly, but still entertaining to see on a rainy afternoon. I like the idea of the contraceptives in the water supply better.