



I don't like much about February. The best holidays are long-gone, the *worst* holiday is reliably disappointing (obligatory romance is not romantic), and spring is a shameless tease that flirts a little, but won't commit.

For me, this ghastly month is salvaged by one thing, and one thing only: the movies. Here in Beaufort, we have the opportunity to "think globally and act locally," as we celebrate our very own International Film Festival, now in its fifth year. (See our extensive coverage in this issue.) This is also the season when we film buffs scurry to make sure we've seen all the nominees for "Best Picture" before the Oscars happen at the end of the month. This formidable challenge doubled in scope last year, when the Academy decided to bump the number of nominees from five to ten.

(I still don't approve of that decision. It smacks of the time my daughter was awarded a ribbon at her school Field Day for coming in 7th place the 50-yard-dash... when only eight kids were dashing. Even *she* knew it was lame.)

But still. It's nice to have twice as many excuses, now, to escape your desk – or whatever important task you have at hand – and head to a matinee. Cold, dreary February days practically cry out for such dereliction of duty. And in a sense, this *is* your duty! You're a serious film connoisseur, and the Oscars are looming. It would be irresponsible

not

to see

Fill In The Blank

on the big screen while you've got the chance. Right?

(If you're me, you might even take this little exercise in self-deception one step further by telling yourself, "Hey, I could get a column of this.")

What is it about the movies, anyway? What is it that makes a responsible adult abandon all sense of propriety and professionalism in order to play hooky from her job like a reckless teenager? What is it that keeps us up 'til the wee hours, watching a bloated awards show full of preening, self-satisfied celebrities who stubbornly refuse to age? What incredible force is this that can make even mousy, lackluster little February seem, somehow, sprinkled with fairy dust?

Movies are powerful magic, for sure. And some of us simply can't resist the spell they cast.

My husband and I are two such people. But since the birth of our daughter nine years ago, we have struggled – rather unsuccessfully – to maintain our film aficionado creds. While we once prided ourselves on seeing every "serious" movie that got made – with pre-Oscar timeliness, no less! – as parents, it became harder and harder to justify the expense: not of the movie itself, but the babysitter. (Not to mention the popcorn.) As our rating on the edgy-meter slipped lower and lower, we consoled ourselves with the knowledge that we were seeing every animated movie that came down the pike. Sure, we missed *The Hurt Locker*. But how 'bout that *Kung Fu Panda*?!

Our child-free friends had no idea what they were missing!

Yeah, it sounded like BS to us, too. We missed our grown-up movies. We felt empty and shallow and cinematically unfulfilled. Something had to be done. It was time to get creative... possibly even transgressive. My husband was the first to speak the words I dared not utter: "We own our own business. We have no boss. We can do our work whenever we want to, as long as we get it done. *We can go to a matinee on a Tuesday if we feel like it.* It's half the price and our kid is at school, so no sitter. The sky will not fall."

And so it began. We don't do it every week. We don't even do it every month. But once in a long while, my friends, the Publisher and the Editor of this hallowed publication spend their afternoon not at the grindstone, but at the Sea Turtle.

(And yes, I have to tie up my Protestant Work Ethic, put tape over its mouth, and lock it in the supply closet. Which does get easier with time.)

This Oscar season, I am proud to announce that, thanks to this mid-week matinee strategy, a long airplane ride to California, and the fact that one of the movies is animated, I have managed to see 60% of this year's Best Picture nominees. Considering my track record in recent years, this is a very high percentage. (And as of this writing, I still have two weeks left to knock out a few more.) It'll be fun this weekend, while mingling with filmmakers at the Film Festival, to actually know something about film. Current film! And I won't even have to limit my comments to *Toy Story 3* (which, incidentally, is quite brilliant).

I can talk about *Black Swan*... about its lyric imagery and dark, menacing allure... the way I had to watch certain scenes through my fingers, hands over my eyes... and how I dreamed about it that night – about dancers and swans and blood – and how my neck was stiff with tension all the way home.

Or maybe we'll talk about *Inception* – with its clever visual tricks and multiple layers of reality... a reeling, spiraling mind game with a delicious ending – tender and cryptic, almost metaphysical – that I still don't understand and didn't stop thinking about for days.

I would love to chat with someone smarter than me about *The Kids Are Alright*. I'm not sure how it made the cut – but maybe that's because I watched it on a tiny screen attached to the back of a Delta Airlines passenger seat while nursing a slight case of air sickness. The acting is terrific – you can't go wrong with Julianne Moore and Annette Bening – but the film, itself, felt flat to me. The filmmakers seemed to be trying so hard to prove that a family consisting of two lesbians and their teenage children (conceived with a sperm donor) is "just your typical family."

But the story that unfolds is

not

typical – not really – and the movie left me vaguely sad and unsettled... wondering if, in fact, the kids really

were

alright. Most of my friends adored this movie – and so did most of the critics – so maybe I'm missing something, or just over-thinking it. I

will

say that it's lovely to see actresses on film wearing authentic, unreconstructed middle-aged faces. Don't give in, ladies!

I was a bit disappointed by *True Grit*, too. With its gorgeous, sweeping vistas and fussy, flowery dialogue, it looks and sounds like an epic. But where is the hero? Who are we to root for, or even seriously care about, in this tale of Old Testament-style, eye-for-an-eye law enforcement? Hailee Steinfeld is a riveting screen presence as Mattie Ross, and Jeff Bridges has a blast with his Rooster Cogburn, but what is this great-looking, important-sounding movie trying to say? What is it telling us about life and death and the human condition? I can't be sure, but I suspect there may be less there than meets the eye. Is *True Grit* profound... or just profoundly nihilistic? Note to self: Good conversation topic for Film Festival cocktail party.

The King's Speech. I've got a lump in my throat just typing those words. Y'all knew it would be my favorite, didn't you? It's got everything I love in a movie: history... romance... triumph over adversity ... top hats. To all you women out there who can't see Colin Firth as anyone but Mr. Darcy – get over it. This is Firth's *ur de force*. to

His

magnum opus

. He's not just pretty and smoldering and British anymore; he's one of the great actors of his generation. Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham Carter, and nearly half the cast of

Harry Potter

, support him with flawless aplomb in this beautiful film that captured my heart with the very first frame and hasn't let go yet. This movie is the whole megillah: smart, funny, challenging, enlightening, and – my most important criterion – deeply moving. If I could recommend just one film to my readers, it would be

The King's Speech.

Without hesitation.

So now it's crunch time, people. There are still four movies on my Must See List: *The Social Network*, *Winter's Bone*, *127 Hours*

, and

The Fighter.

I won't make it, of course – not before the Oscars, anyway. But I intend to have a ball trying. Don't even bother calling my office on a Tuesday afternoon this February...

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