

THE FANZINE THAT IS HOPELESSLY DEVOTED TO 80S MOVIES
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Girls. on film

BASED ON A
TRUE STORY

STEEL MAGNOLIAS | SID & NANCY | HEARTBURN | MASK | COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER
DRUGSTORE COWBOY | AT CLOSE RANGE | TUCKER: THE MAN AND HIS DREAM

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STOP US IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE...

Welcome to *Girls, on Film*, the fanzine that is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! Each issue features eight movies that share a particular theme, and this time, we're spilling tea with a selection of 80s movies based on true stories:

Coal Miner's Daughter (1980)

The true story of Loretta Lynn's rise to fame despite having 4 kids before turning 25.

Mask (1985)

Eric Stoltz wears some crazy makeup to tell the story of Rocky Dennis.

At Close Range (1986)

True crime turns into Greek tragedy in a film about the 1978 Kiddie Gang Murders.

Heartburn (1986)

A food writer and journalist fall in love, get married, separate, reconcile, and separate again in a dramedy about Nora Ephron's life.

Sid and Nancy (1986)

It's love, drugs and rock 'n' roll in this devastating dip into British punk rock and deviance.

Tucker: the Man and His Dream (1988)

Preston Tucker tries to build the car of the future, but ends up investigated for fraud.

Drugstore Cowboy (1989)

Pill-stealing drug user, Bobby Hughes is forced to rethink his future after an untimely death.

Steel Magnolias (1989)

Southern gal pals love, laugh, and complain in Robert Harling's tribute to his late sister.

BEHIND THE ZINES

Girls, on Film was founded in 2017 by Stephanie McDevitt and Janene Scelza. Digital issues are free on our website, girlsonfilmzine.com. Contact info@girlsonfilmzine.com to purchase print copies, and inquire about guest submissions, collaborations, and trades.

Editors

Stephanie McDevitt

Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on '80s films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

Janene Scelza

Janene has written a buttload of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the '80s movies she could find. There were lists! She's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.

Contributing Writers

Dr. Rhonda Baughman

Rhonda, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the '80s and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all of '80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare*

Sisters, and *Reform School Girls*. She had a pink laminated Video Time Video rental card at 9 years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and sweet, sweet VCR. And let it be known: the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

Matt Scelza

Matt loves to dissect and analyze everything. He is stoked to join his sister, Janene, for two essays in this issue. He logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. However, he's got too many favorites to name.

Guest Writers

Jessica MacLeish

Jessica MacLeish is a Veronica, not a Heather. She's also a writer, editor, and late 80s baby who loves watching, thinking about, talking about, and writing about movies.

Lilyann Foster

Lily, a freelance writer, a film studies grad student, and no stranger to zines as the co-editor of her own music zine. From the ragin replicants in *Blade Runner*, the comical whit of *Myster Science Theater 3000*, and crazy Cronenberg and Carpenter sci-fi flicks, Lily gorges on everything absurd and strange the 80s has to offer.

Guest Submissions

80s fans are invited to guest write for the zine! Send a resume and writing samples to info@girlsonfilmzine.com.



Honkey Tonk Girl: COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER (1980)

by Stephanie McDevitt

When we decided the theme of this issue of Girls, on Film would be movies based on a true story, I focused my efforts on biopics. Originally I chose *Great Balls of Fire*, which is about Jerry Lee Lewis. However, once I thought about it, I didn't want to write about a guy who married his 13-year-old cousin. So, I switched focus to *Coal Miner's Daughter*, which is about Loretta Lynn, who was married to a 23-year-old when she was 15. Sigh. It's pretty gross but wasn't uncommon at the time, and at least with this movie, I can focus on her career instead of his.

Loretta Lynn seemed to be very involved in the production of this movie (which was based on Lynn's 1976 biography of the same name by George

Vecsey). She chose Spacek to play her after seeing a picture of her. Lynn then appeared on *The Tonight Show* and announced Spacek as the lead in the movie before Spacek agreed to do it. Spacek was hesitant to do *Coal Miner's Daughter* because she had an opportunity to film another movie at the same time. In the end, Spacek was looking for a sign about which movie she should do, got in the car to drive home, and "Coal Miner's Daughter" (the song) came on the radio [1]. The rest, as they say, is history.

Coal Miner's Daughter tells the story of Loretta Lynn's rise to fame. The movie begins as 13-year-old Loretta (Sissy Spacek) lives in a small house with her parents and seven siblings in Butcher Hollow,

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Kentucky. Her father, as the title implies, works in the coal mines. Loretta meets 22-year-old Doolittle Lynn (Tommy Lee Jones), and, much to her parent's chagrin, they get married after only a few months of dating. Doo's name was actually Oliver, but he went by Doolittle or Mooney. Loretta calls him Doo throughout the movie, so that's what I'll call him.

Loretta had six kids with Doo, and four of them were born by the time she was 25. At this point, they were living in Washington state and Doo was working in the forest industry. One night Doo, who was very drunk, buys Loretta a guitar for an anniversary present. She really wanted a wedding ring. But, he says she's a good singer and she should learn to play the guitar. So, she does. And then she gets gigs at honky tonk bars. And she eventually starts writing songs.

Doo manages to get Loretta some time in a recording studio, shoots some promotional pictures of her, and writes letters to a bunch of radio stations asking them to play her music. When Loretta's father dies, they attend the funeral in Kentucky and then embark on a tour of radio stations in the south to promote her music. While they're on the road, Loretta's first single, "I'm a Honky Tonk Girl," gains popularity and eventually earns her a spot on the Grand Ole Opry lineup (all of the concert scenes in this movie were filmed at Ryman Auditorium, the home of the Grand Ole Opry from '43-'74) [2].

Loretta's career continues to explode, but her marriage has some issues. Doo is an abusive alcoholic, and as Loretta's fame grows, he struggles with his wife's success. They had some pretty intense fights, but they always made up (even when she caught him with other women). The movie goes on to show Loretta playing to crowds of 10s of thousands of people while Doo watches their kids back at their Tennessee ranch.

Finally, there are scenes of Lynn suffering from migraines and other health problems and popping pills in an attempt to continue touring (there have been rumors of her addiction problems, and Lynn



Learning those cords and cooking dinner.



On tour with BFF Patsy.



Honky Tonk Gal hits the big time.

has said she was addicted only to sleeping pills). She eventually has a breakdown during a show and she has to be carried out of the venue. In the end, she triumphantly returns to the stage while sporting the most amazing hairdo in the entire movie.

One of my favorite parts of *Coal Miner's Daughter* is the depiction of Lynn's friendship with Patsy Cline (Beverly D'Angelo). In 1961, Cline was in a major car accident that left her hospitalized for a month. Lynn, who was a huge fan of Patsy Cline, dedicated one of her radio spots to Cline, singing Cline's song, "I Fall to Pieces." According to the movie, Cline sent her husband to go get Loretta and bring her to the hospital so they could meet each other.

What followed was a tight-knit friendship that lasted until Cline's death in a plane crash in 1963. They toured together, Cline taught Patsy how to put on make-up for the stage (despite Doo's hatred of the make-up), and she even offered Loretta some of her maternity clothes after Loretta found out she was pregnant with twins. It seems like the two women were very close, which is why I thought Patsy's death wasn't discussed enough in the movie. Lynn hears the news on the radio, and she's crushed, but then life just goes on.

Beverly D'Angelo played a great Patsy Cline. She looked just like her (I didn't realize it was Beverly D'Angelo the first time I saw this movie) and she did all her own singing. She sounded amazing. I really only knew D'Angelo from the National Lampoon movies, so I was blown away to hear her sing like that. She was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress for this role.

Spacek also did all her own singing in the movie. She had some experience as a singer, even releasing a single in 1968 called "John You Went Too Far This Time" (about John Lennon and Yoko Ono's naked album cover for the *Two Virgins* album). The single didn't do well and she was dropped by her record label. After that she turned her attention to acting, which worked out for Spacek because she won the Best Actress Oscar for the role of Loretta Lynn [3].

Not only would Spacek win acting awards for this movie, but she went on to win a Country Music Association award when the soundtrack won Album of the Year in 1980. The album featured Spacek, D'Angelo, and Levon Helm, who played Lynn's father (Helm made his acting debut in this movie but was otherwise known as the drummer in *The Band*). The soundtrack was certified gold in January 1982 [4].

In addition to all of the awards, Spacek made a life-long friend in Loretta Lynn. Prior to filming she spent a lot of time with Lynn trying to pick up Lynn's odd speaking cadence, and Lynn even taught Spacek how to play the guitar like she did [5]. They are so close, in fact, that Spacek accepted the Country Music 2018 Artist of a Lifetime award in Lynn's place when Lynn was too sick to attend the ceremony. Spacek said, "From the moment we met, she's been my cheerleader, my sister, and my best friend. And it's like that almost 40 years later" [6].

Coal Miner's Daughter got a bunch of other award nominations and won the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy. It made \$67 million in the US and Canada and was the 7th highest grossing film in 1980. It only cost \$15 million to make, so I'd say it was a hit [7]. The critics liked it, too. Roger Ebert especially loved Spacek's performance, saying, "With the same sort of magical chemistry she's shown before, when she played the high school kid in *Carrie*, Spacek at twenty-nine has the ability to appear to be almost any age on screen" [8].

If you watch *Coal Miner's Daughter* and want to learn more about Loretta Lynn, you can tour her Hurricane Mills Ranch. It is middle Tennessee's biggest full-service campground, with tent camping, RV hookups, and cabins. There are tons of activities (hiking, tubing, fishing, etc), but you can tour the *Coal Miner's Daughter* museum (about Lynn's life, not the movie), a doll and fan museum, and Loretta's Frontier Homestead. I drove through it in 2002, but I don't remember much about the ranch; however, I do have a picture of my college roommate outside of Lynn's home [9].



Cher Loved That Boy: *Mask* (1985)

by Stephanie McDevitt

The 1985 movie *Mask* is based on the real-life story of Roy “Rocky” Dennis (1961-1978). Rocky was born with Craniodiaphyseal Dysplasia, a rare disease in which abnormal calcium deposits in his skull distorted his face, causing it to grow to twice the normal size. Doctors said that Rocky would experience vision loss, hearing loss, and intense headaches and that he probably wouldn’t live past his 7th birthday [1]. Rocky lived until he was 16. He was smart, able to read, and surpassed everyone’s expectations (except for maybe his mother’s; she believed in him). Rocky and his mother, Rusty, have an incredible story, and *Mask* tries to do it justice.

Mask introduces Rocky (Eric Stoltz) as a 16-year-old kid getting ready to go to school. His mother, Rusty (Cher), takes him to register for the school year in

a new school. The principal tries to convince her to take him to a school for kids with disabilities, and she tells him to fuck off. As they leave the principal’s office, Rocky assures him that, except for the way he looks, he’s a pretty normal kid. And, despite his condition, Rocky leads a pretty normal life. He’s upbeat, funny, and charming, and as he meets the kids at his new school, he’s able to brush off their funny looks and mean comments. He even tutors some of his classmates to make extra money for a motorcycle trip across Europe that he’s planning with his best friend, Ben.

Rocky’s home life is anything but normal. His mom is a member of a biker gang called the Turks, and their house is a crash pad for various members of the gang. However, they all love Rocky (and Rusty)

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Gotta get that checkup.



Cher also loves Sam Elliott.



Rocky finally gets the girl.

and help out when they can. They drive Rocky to school, pool their money to buy him a new suit for his awards ceremony, and stand up for him when people say terrible things. While unconventional, Rocky, Rusty, and the bikers make their own family unit, and it seems to work for them.

Well, it mostly works. Rusty has a drug problem. Throughout the movie she is seen buying and taking drugs, despite Rocky's pleas for her to stay clean. At one point, Rusty's parents (Estelle Getty and Richard Dysart) come to visit and take Rocky to the Dodgers game, and when they get home, Rusty is in a drug-induced haze. Rocky decides he needs to get away from his mom, so he takes a job as a counselor's aide at a summer camp for people with blindness. While at camp, he meets Diana (Laura Dern), one of the campers. Rocky is smitten with her and she eventually falls for him. When Rusty comes with all the biker dudes to pick him up from camp, she tells him she's clean. Everything seems to be going great for Rocky!

Until it's not. Diana won't return his repeated calls (her parents don't want her with Rocky because of how he looks, so they don't give her the messages), Ben bails on their motorcycle trip across Europe, and the remarks about his appearance start to bother Rocky more and more. Finally, his health isn't great. His headaches are getting worse, and he has a harder time getting the pain to subside. Seeing as how the real Rocky Dennis was deceased for several years before they made this movie, I think you know where this is going.

Anna Hamilton Phelon wrote *Mask* after meeting Rocky and his mom while working at a hospital [2]. Rusty (whose real name was Florence) decided to sell the rights to their story for \$15,000 because she needed the money to help her other son, who had AIDS [3]. Rusty described *Mask* as a "fairy tale" [4]. She said, "I thought *Mask* was going to be a movie about Rocky. I always thought showing Rocky's courage would help a lot of disabled kids and the parents of disabled kids--sometimes they are more disabled than their kids. I didn't realize the movie

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would be about me, too. Thanks to Cher's brilliance, I come off [as] a kind of heroine" [5].

And, while the events of the movie may not have been completely accurate, it appears they nailed Rusty's character. She ran with motorcycle gangs, had a drug problem, and fought for her Rocky to live as normal a life as possible. She also taught him how to be tough and resilient. She said, "Once he came in from the playground crying because, 'The kids are calling me ugly.' I told him when they laugh at you, you laugh at you. If you act beautiful, you'll be beautiful and they'll see that and love you" [6]. Rusty sounds like a cool lady, and unfortunately she died in 2006 after contracting an infection from injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident.

Mask's depiction of Rusty's and Rocky's relationship transcended the movie. A season 5 episode of *The X-Files*, called "The Post-Modern Prometheus," about a Frankenstein-like creature (The Great Mutato) referred to (and showed scenes from) *Mask*. The Great Mutato has a deformed head, and he yearns to know what it's like to have a mother that loves him. He says, "Cher loved that boy so much," and I think *The X-Files* team nailed the crux of the movie (and the real-life story). Rusty had her issues, but she did everything she could to give Rocky a normal life, and Cher's performance really captured that love and that drive to teach Rocky that he was exceptional beyond his appearance.

In addition to exploring the mother-son relationship, *Mask* dives deep into themes of otherness, "normal" family units, and, of course, how we all wear masks of some kind. One particular member of the Turks, Dozer (Dennis Burkley), personifies all of these themes. He is a big dude who doesn't speak. Rocky says he doesn't like to talk, but we find out later that he has a terrible stutter. Dozer intimidates some kids at Rocky's school after they make fun of Rocky, but he also gets Rocky a puppy and cries when Rocky wins academic awards. So, he's a big, scary dude with a heart of gold. He has his own struggles, so he can somewhat relate to Rocky, and he found his family unit within this group of societal outsiders.

Rocky working at the camp is another example (the camp in the movie is a real place, btw). Rocky gets to meet a girl at camp, and while he's still an outsider there, he sees that he's not the only person who has a physical disability. At one point he tries to describe a landscape to Diana, and she has to explain that she doesn't understand colors. It takes him a little while to get it, and later in the movie he tries to describe colors like blue and red by using hot and cold rocks. It's a sweet scene, but Rocky's reality comes back hard when he meets Diana's parents and gets a very cold reception. But, shortly after, his mom and the Turks roll up to get him and remind Rocky that he is surrounded by people who love him.

Mask was made for \$7.5 million, but went on to gross over \$48 million in the US. Quick reminder here that Rusty sold the rights for a measly \$15,000. Anyway, *Mask* was also met with critical acclaim when it won the Oscar for Best Makeup. Cher and Stoltz were nominated for Golden Globes for their acting performances. Cher didn't win a Golden Globe, but she did win the 1985 Cannes Film Festival award for Best Actress [7], and, frankly, I thought she was great.

Cher not only turned in a great performance, but she took her experience from *Mask* and translated it into charitable work. I watched the director's cut, and at the end of the credits, Cher gives some information on the Children's Craniofacial Association, of which she is the National Chairperson and Honorary Spokesperson. According to the CCA website, she became involved with their organization after making *Mask* [8], and "holds an annual retreat to provide craniofacial patients, their siblings and parents an opportunity to interact with others who have endured similar experiences" [9].

Mask is a good movie (although the director's cut runs a little long). I definitely recommend checking it out, but be prepared for the sad ending. And, while you're at it, do some research on the real Rocky and Rusty. Their story is pretty inspiring.



The Untold Story of the Johnston Gang: *AT CLOSE RANGE* (1986)

by Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

At Close Range is one of two films we (Janene and Matt) discuss in this issue that, in addition to being based on true stories, also focus on parent-child relationships. However, they're presented in opposite extremes. There's no doubt Shelby Eatonton and her momma love each other dearly in *Steel Magnolias*. It's why we cry our asses off at the end when (spoiler alert!) M'Lynn struggles to cope with Shelby's death.

There is death in *At Close Range*, too, but not like that. Elliot Lewitt and Nicholas Kazan's script for the forgotten 1986 drama plays out like a Greek tragedy: an aimless teeanger (Sean Penn as Brad Whitewood Jr.) reunites with his estranged father (Christopher Walken as Brad Sr.), a modern outlaw

and career criminal. Brad Sr. welcomes his son to a criminal underworld, feigns affection for the boy, and then attempts to have him killed.

The father-son pair are loosely based on Bruce Johnston Sr. and Jr. The elder Bruce, along with his brothers David and Norman and their various associates, ran a kind of hillbilly mafia in rural Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware from the 1960s to the late 70s. To hear former FBI agent David Richter tell it, they had a George Jung kind of monopoly on stolen antiques, farm equipment, and Corvettes, although anything was up for grabs [1]. They even robbed beloved Dutch Wonderland and Longwood Gardens.

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We call them hillbillies, but the Johnston Gang was a pretty sophisticated operation involving skilled thieves and a huge network of fences to distribute the goods. They also did whatever it took to evade investigators like bribery, assault, arson, rape, and even murder... a lot of goddamn murder [2]. Judge Dennis Reinaker, a former defense attorney for one of the gang's associates, described the Johnston Gang as "one of the most cunning and sly groups of criminals I've ever encountered or heard about. One of the most cold-blooded as well" [3].

By the late 1970s, Bruce Sr. brought Bruce Jr., stepson Jimmy, and their friends into the fold. However, their tenure was short-lived, coming to a gruesome end in 1978 in an event dubbed the Kiddie Gang Murders. *At Close Range* provides some backstory.

It is a hard movie to watch. The performances are good, it's beautifully shot (though people complained that James Foley's stylistic choices detracted from the grittiness), and the story is crazy but engrossing, but Roger Ebert put it best: it is "spare, violent, and unforgiving" [4].

Brad Jr. is a smart, tough kid in a podunk town. He's got no real prospects, except a puppy dog romance with a younger girl, Terry (Mary Stuart Masterson) that begins after one hell of a meet-cute. Then, Brad Sr. enters the picture, flashing cash and cars and busting Pandora's Box wide open.

Interestingly, while the actual events happened in Lancaster and Chester counties in Pennsylvania, *At Close Range* was shot in Tennessee because the PA DA felt the movie painted too rosy a picture of the gang [5]. However, the motivation is not so much the gang's history (and for that reason, it's ripe for a remake), but rather, a core violation of mother nature: that a father would try to kill his son (and, with the help of other gang members, killed his stepson and several others) without remorse. And, that it should happen in a bucolic setting; Chester County, after all, is home to the Wythe art dynasty.



"Let the bible belt come and save my soul."



Doing some laundry with dear old dad.



The satisfaction of a final showdown.

Critics praised Sean Penn and Christopher Walken for their performances. They really are the whole movie, but the supporting cast is a real banger. Chris Penn is Brad Jr.'s non-too-bright stepbrother, Tommy. The Penn brothers' grandmother, Eileen Ryan as their onscreen grandma. Keifer Sutherland, weirdo Crispin Glover, and Stephen Geoffreys, aka Evil Ed of *Fright Night*, are in bit parts as the Kiddie Gang. Candy Clark plays Brad Sr.'s girlfriend, and David Strathairn, JC Quinn, and Tracey Walter are seen in the grown-up gang.

Walken, in particular, is a terrifying presence — outwardly plain and eerily absent any humanity like a prototype Anton Chigur. Even when staring down the barrel of a gun, thrust in his face by a son who's had enough, he can only muster an unconvincing "I love ya." He is played for the main villain, even lording power over his brothers.

In later scenes, Christopher Walken is lit like a shadowy devil who lures naive kids, teenagers or a year or two beyond that age looking for a way out of the rut of small-town life, into his criminal underworld. At first, he seems charming and the things he does relatively innocuous, like money-laundering errands at the used car lots where he happily imparts his own brand of paternal wisdom, mostly to do with crime and loyalty. But slowly, that facade starts to change and, as police starting closing in on the gang, the kids become a liability. Brad Sr. and his brothers begin plotting to get rid of any loose ends.

The sad part, if true, is that Bruce Johnston Jr.'s girlfriend, 15-year old Robin Miller, urged him to go straight. (In the film, Terry encourages Brad Jr.'s participation in the gang so they can make some money to run away to Montana and live out a Jack & Diane [5] fantasy). Bruce Jr. had been jailed for stealing a pickup. Bruce Sr. offered to take Robin to see Bruce Jr. in jail, but instead, got her drunk and raped her. When Bruce Jr. found out, he decided to tell the FBI what he knew. Jimmy Johnston told his father he had been subpoenaed, and the rest of the

younger gang would likely have been, too [6].

The Kiddie Gang Murders happened in August of 1978. Jimmy Johnston, Dwayne Lincoln, and Wayne Sampson were shot. Their bodies were stacked one on top of the other in a shallow grave. Wayne Sampson's brother was also killed. Meanwhile, Bruce Sr. put a hit out on his son. Bruce, Jr. and Robin had returned from Dutch Wonderland one night when the ambush happened. The assailants fired nine times into the car. One bullet hit Robin Miller in the chin. She bled to death almost instantly. The other eight bullets hit Bruce Jr. Amazingly, he survived [7].

The film, however, gives us the satisfaction of (a purely imagined) final showdown between Brad Jr. and his father. After the hail of bullets hits the car, killing Terry instantly, Brad, Jr. cleans himself up with a garden hose and waits patiently for his father to return to his house. Blood subtly drips and he stumbles slightly. His rage is so palpable as he points a gun-- the gun that likely killed Tommy and Terry-- at Brad Sr. who, for once, is scared shitless. (Allegedly, Penn switched the prop guns to get just the right reaction from Walken). The reign of terror finally comes to an end.

The actual story comes to an end with Bruce Johnston Sr. and his brothers receiving multiple life sentences for their part in the Kiddie Gang Murders. The elder Bruce died in prison 20 years ago. Unfortunately, Bruce Jr. never got himself together. He has been in and out of jail ever since [8].

We weren't kidding when we said this is a hard one to watch. But, we include it in this issue as one of those well-done 80s films that has since been utterly forgotten. For more info about the Johnston Gang, check out former FBI agent David Richter's full interview on the Jerri Williams podcast, or the 2009 book, *Jailing the Johnston Gang: Bringing Serial Murderers to Justice*, by Chester County reporter, Bruce Mowday.



A Key Lime Pie to the Face: HEARTBURN (1986)

by Jessica MacLeish

Let's get the meta factor surrounding this film straight right off the bat: *Heartburn* the movie is adapted from *Heartburn* the novel, which is in turn a fictionalized account of the events of author/screenwriter (and later director) Nora Ephron's own life (see: her second divorce from famed Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein). A slightly dizzying chain of adaptation, yes, but one that does in fact qualify *Heartburn* as a film that's "based on a true story." And here we are.

When *Heartburn* the novel was published in 1983—with little secret of its origin story in Ephron and Bernstein's felled marriage—it received mixed reviews, with male reviewers in particular decrying the personal nature of the story at its

core, and Ephron as "an effective self-publicizer"[1]. Nonetheless, it was a bestseller, and the prospect of it being adapted into a film prompted Bernstein to take Ephron to court, where he was awarded the "right to read all drafts of the screenplay and see and submit notes on an early cut of the film, extracted a pledge that Ephron would never turn *Heartburn* into a TV series, mandated that a trust for their two young sons be created with part of the film's profits, and won her guarantee that "the father in the movie *Heartburn* will be portrayed at all times as a caring, loving, and conscientious father in any screenplay prepared or executed with my name attached to it" [2].

The film reunited a trio who'd previously worked

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The look... of love... is in... their eyes.



The retro "I've made a huge mistake" meme.



Baby makes three (of four).

together on 1983's *Silkwood* [3]: Mike Nichols, Nora Ephron, and Meryl Streep. Nichols and Ephron—and Nichols and Bernstein—were friends in addition to collaborators, and Nichols, in fact, was a signatory to the settlement between Bernstein and Ephron [4]. (If you're thinking that this sounds messy and might result in something of a messy creative pursuit, well, join the club and keep reading.)

By all accounts, the movie was in good hands: Nichols was committed to the fact that this was Rachel's (the Ephron character in the novel) story, her reaction to her husband's affair and their attempted-yet-failed reconciliation; Streep, meanwhile, was committed to treating the movie like a work of fiction rather than a "tell-all drama," though she did watch Ephron on set to capture the writer's mannerisms for her portrayal of Rachel [5].

Mandy Patinkin was initially cast as Rachel's unfaithful husband, and production started with him in the role—until Nichols couldn't shake the feeling that Patinkin just wasn't right and fired him five days into shooting [6]. Jack Nicholson became the movie's Mark, despite Ephron worrying that he was too charming and Streep fretting that the story would now become the man's story, not the woman's, with movie star Nicholson's involvement. (Luckily, Nichols heard Streep's concerns and the movie really does stick with Rachel's side of things, not Mark's) [7].

And what is that side of things? In *Heartburn*, Rachel (Streep) and Mark (Nicholson) meet at a wedding (where Rachel breaks the cardinal rule of wedding guests and wears white) and quickly fall for one another. He's infamously single, according to their mutual acquaintances, and she's divorced from a gerbil-loving ex-husband. They wed—overcoming Rachel's intense cold feet on the day of the ceremony and general reservations about marriage—and move to Washington, D.C., where he works as a columnist and she plans to dip back into

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her New York City-centric food writing career when possible, I suppose.

Things are chaotic yet mostly blissful in their fixer upper townhouse, though Rachel is often bored by the D.C. dinner parties and gossip she must endure. They have a baby, and then with a second on the way, she discovers he's having an affair with the wife of a diplomat, flees to New York, indulges in some group therapy, returns to her job (and editor Jeff Daniels!), and is persuaded by Mark to come back and try reconcile. They do, for a moment, though things don't seem quite right—and Rachel discovers that Mark's affair has resumed (or never ended in the first place). She throws a homemade key lime pie in his face at a party, and leaves him and D.C. once again, for good, both babies in tow.

Many of the film's reviews took issue with this so-called one-sidedness, and condescension seems to have abounded from male reviewers turning up their nose that Nichols would take on such "flimsy" material so focused on a woman's point-of-view [8]—never mind the fact that the set was one in which Nichols' collaborators of note were nearly all women!

I can't say I loved the movie (despite loving the novel), but perhaps unsurprisingly, my qualms have little to do with the reviewers' qualms over the fact that it's a movie specifically aiming to show & tell a woman's side of the story in a relationship gone sour. Rather, I found that though the script/dialogue snapped and crackled with Ephron's signature wit and wry observations, the pace of the movie dragged and the two leads felt utterly... miscast. (Imagine thinking this about a role of Meryl Streep's?! I know, I was as taken aback when I heard myself thinking it as you surely are reading it!)

Streep's interpretation of Rachel felt a tad too soft and carried an "aw, shucks!" air about her, a mismatch for Ephron's quick and acerbic dialogue. And perhaps it's my age and my personal pop

culture experience of Jack Nicholson, but I've never been able to quite wrap my head around him as a romantic lead, even one who's a cad. So from the moment he showed up as Mark, I struggled to connect, and the chemistry between him and Streep simply never popped for me. Despite these misgivings, the script itself shone, and there were a few moments in which I truly laughed out loud (or pumped my fist in righteous support of Rachel). (As a longtime fan of Ephron's writing, this hardly shocked me, and made me want to return to *Heartburn* the novel and some of her other work.)

A film with a basis in drama also found itself a pivotal piece of a dramatic moment in its' filmmaker's life, as well: when *Heartburn* came out, Mike Nichols was in the midst of a nervous breakdown (spurred on by many factors, it seems, including a heart attack in early 1986), and *Heartburn's* mixed reviews and poor box office performance (roughly \$25 million during its run) didn't help matters. The rough patch ended, along with other changes, with Nichols' marriage in tatters [9].

When it comes to writers using their lives for material (as the characters in *Heartburn* struggle with occasionally themselves), the life-influences-art influences-life-influences-art cycle continues as ever, and we are merely mortal spokes on that wheel. But when it comes to this iteration of "based on a true story," I'd recommend the book over the movie.



A Whole Lotta Punk Rock Love: Sid and Nancy (1986)

by Lilyann Foster

The words rock 'n' roll and tragedy breed tales as old as time. Unforgettable and infamous downward spirals of too much drugs, sex, and partying have taken many lives too soon. Often called the Romeo and Juliet of punk rock, Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols and his girlfriend Nancy Spungen are some of the first that come to mind when thinking of rock tragedies.

Their dizzying heroin-fueled relationship was brutal and short-lived when Sid Vicious stabbed Nancy in their room at the Hotel Chelsea on October 12th, 1978. Nancy was only 20 when she died, and Sid Vicious was 21 when he overdosed just three months later. Whether or not the stabbing was intentional or accidental is still a mystery.

The troubling story was captured in the 1986 biopic *Sid and Nancy* by offbeat director Alex Cox (*Repo Man*). The devastating tale has received wavering reviews and criticism with many claiming the film romanticizes violence, domestic abuse, and drug addiction. However, Cox, and his starring cast -- Gary Oldman as Sid Vicious and Cloe Webb as Nancy Spungen -- capture the out-of-control and ruinous relationship in an emotional and hyper-real performance.

Gary Oldman is known for his chameleon-like abilities and intense method acting, and he did not miss a beat as Sid. Reportedly, Oldman only consumed steamed fish and melon for weeks before filming to achieve Sid's emaciated look,

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though he was also hospitalized for malnutrition in the process [1]. Oldman looks indistinguishable to Sid in most of the movie, even singing many of the musical numbers himself, although his voice sounds just slightly deeper and rougher than Sid's.

Chloe Webb was also an excellent casting choice and delivered just as moving a character in her first significant role in a feature film. Courtney Love (in an unfortunate foreshadowing moment) auditioned and insisted that she be cast in the role of Nancy, claiming that she was just like the real Nancy Spungen [2]. Love took the backseat in a smaller role as Nancy's friend Gretchen, but a little over a decade later, Love would be put in a similar vein of rock tragedy after her husband Kurt Cobain committed suicide.

Cox often includes rock 'n' roll legends in his films, and Sid and Nancy is full of cameos from start to finish. Outside of The Clash's Joe Strummer providing music and historical points of reference from time to time, all members of Guns and Roses show up as background characters early on in a punk club. Iggy Pop and Keith Morris (Black Flag and Circle Jerks) also have brief appearances [3].

The film begins with the ending: it is the morning after Nancy was stabbed and Sid waking to her dead body in a haze. After an intense interrogation by police, the audience is introduced to Sid right before his first meeting with Nancy. He is wild and outrageous.

A few minutes later Nancy is introduced as a doting yet mysterious Sex Pistols fan who follows him to his next show, and later to a hotel room where it all begins. Sid does heroin for the first time, beginning a long, slow, depressing downward spiral for the pair.

Not long after their drug binge, the Sex Pistols grow sick of Sid's inattentiveness and argue whether it is worth kicking Sid out of the band. Sid and Nancy



The _____ Generation.



Doing a little redecorating.



The end of an affair.

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sit hazy and wavering with sunglasses on as they make the argument that Sid is a core member of the band.

Throughout the rest of the film, Nancy and Sid's drug use gets worse as their relationship becomes a constant of violence and chaos. In one of Webb's best scenes, Nancy screams into a telephone booth after her parents refuse to give her money, and she begins smashing the windows of the booth. In the studio, many of the panes had been replaced with fake glass, however Webb smashed a few real panes of glass as well, risking injury to herself and Oldman [4].

Belches, baked beans, and unrecognizable thick British slang and curses make each scene as auditorily thick as the visuals. Most scenes are filled physically with people, trash, buildings, or just clutter. The film is so busy it doesn't give the audience room to breathe.

The sheer density of the movie adds a level of realness as Cox attempts to capture the grittiness of the British punk rock scene that was just beginning in the late 1970s. Most moments are dull and gray with only red spray paint and Nancy's peroxide hair popping out on screen.

Outside of the bleakness, Cox successfully incorporates much needed moments of black comedy and touches of signature British dry humor. When Nancy brings Sid home to her tame suburban family, there is a funny moment of juxtaposition and tragicomedy. The dark humor continues in moments when Sid and Nancy argue over drug money or where they are going to stay.

While what really happened the night Nancy Spungen died remains a mystery, Cox decides to view the final moment as a total accident and depicts Sid as confused, remorseful, and devastated.

Cox keeps a rhythm of love and empathy flowing throughout the scene and shows the stabbing as non violent. A black screen declares Sid died of a heroin overdose on February 2nd, 1978, neglecting to state whether the death was suicide or not. The film leaves the viewer in a pit of despair at the pungent vulgarity of it all.

Notably, right up until the final edits, the film was supposed to be named *Love Kills* (Joe Strummer performs the title song of the same name), but the crew decided to play into the Romeo and Juliet feel with the title, *Sid and Nancy* [5]. Undoubtedly, the name change did create a new meaning for the film and how the pair exists in many minds, now inseparable.

In an iconic 80s moment during the premiere, a member of Duran Duran shouted out something when the film began playing, and he was quickly silenced by Joe Strummer [6]. As the story goes, all members of Duran Duran were quiet after that.

Sid and Nancy may not be the most fun and bright movie out of the 80s, but it showcased an integral real-life story that directly impacted the music scene that would develop out of the late 70s into the 80s. All that crazy punk hair and fashion really stuck around for awhile.



Torpedoed: TUCKER: THE MAN AND HIS DREAM (1988)

by Stephanie McDevitt

Tucker: The Man and his Dream tells the true story of American entrepreneur Preston Tucker and his quest to make the car of the future. I know very little about cars, and I had never heard of Preston Tucker before watching this movie. It's actually a great story that encompasses the American Dream, corporate greed, political influence, and the potential for a good old American scam. However, the movie very clearly takes one side, and it is slow at times. But if you like cars, you should definitely watch this movie.

Preston Tucker (1881-1960) got his start working on the Ford assembly line and selling Studebakers on the side, which eventually turned into a career selling cars for different dealerships. In 1935,

Tucker started a company that built race cars. In 1939, Tucker built a prototype combat car, but the American military said it was too fast. He also built gun turrets, but the military never used them. In 1940, Tucker formed the Tucker Aviation Corporation to manufacture aircraft and marine engines, but it was yet another failed business venture. In 1948, Tucker moved his family to Ypsilanti, Michigan where he planned to start his own auto company: The Tucker Corporation [1].

Tucker the movie picks up post-World War II as Tucker (Jeff Bridges) is planning to build The Tucker Torpedo (the car of tomorrow). This exciting new car includes a rear engine, interior padding, seatbelts, and a shatter-proof windshield. He enlists

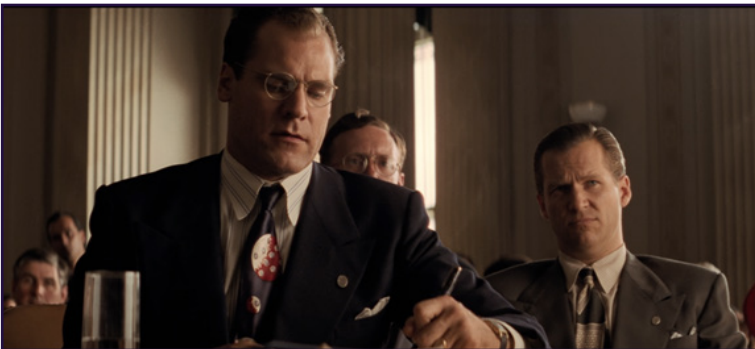
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Look kids! The car of the future!



Working the assembly line.



Defending his good name.

New York financier Abe Karatz (Martin Landau) to help him get financial backing, and Tucker launches the car via a magazine ad. The only problem is, Tucker hasn't actually built the car. So, as money comes rolling in and shareholders show enthusiasm, Tucker doesn't have a product to display.

Tucker faces backlash from the Big Three car companies in Detroit (GM, Ford, and Chrysler), the government (mostly in the form of Michigan Senator Homer S. Ferguson), and his own Board of Directors. Tucker's small team of designers and engineers, including his son Preston Jr. (Christian Slater), works non-stop to build the prototype and get the rear engine to work. However, they can't get the materials they need due to Big Three market manipulation, so they're forced to use junkyard scraps to build the prototype.

When Tucker finally reveals the prototype at a big press event, the car they show everyone doesn't actually work. It can't go in reverse, it has an oil leak (which starts a fire backstage), and it's built from an old Studebaker frame. Unfortunately, there is a reporter at the event who sees all of the issues the guys have with the car before it makes its debut, and he starts leaking information to the government.

So, while Tucker figures out how to make the car run with a rear engine and gets the car into production with all the right parts, the government starts to build a fraud case against him based on the reporting from the prototype unveiling. Tucker makes 50 working, safe cars, but eventually, the SEC files 25 counts of mail fraud against him and he's forced to go to trial to defend his name, his company, and his car.

The story of Preston Tucker is an interesting one, and Director Francis Ford Coppola had long thought about making this movie. According to Wikipedia, Coppola had started working on this film when he was at UCLA in the 1960s. Originally, he had

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planned to make *Tucker* a dark musical, taking inspiration from the work of Bertolt Brecht. He picked Marlon Brando to play the lead (but had also considered Burt Reynolds and Jack Nicholson), Leonard Bernstein was to compose the music, and he had conferred with Cary Grant about choreography. This movie sounds awesome [2].

Unfortunately, when Coppola's movie studio, American Zoetrope, went bankrupt, the funding for *Tucker* fell through. He stopped working on *Tucker* to make *Peggy Sue Got Married* (discussed in *Girls, On Film* issue 13) and only revived *Tucker* when George Lucas told him it was a great project. Lucas agreed to executive produce the film out of his own studios, but he advised Coppola to abandon the musical aspect of the movie. Instead, Coppola focused the story on post-World War II capitalism and politics [3].

The movie production involved Tucker's children and grandchildren. Jeff Bridges "spent hours studying Tucker home movies; on the set, he wore the man's black pearl cuff links. 'He's got it all,' says Tucker's son John, 57, 'in the mannerisms and the look. My father was very positive, always thinking of what came next. Jeff captures that" [4]. They also needed to find some of the originally produced Tucker cars. Coppola borrowed 21 of them from Tucker Automobile Club of America [5] (according to the epilogue at the end of the movie, 46 of the 50 Tucker Torpedoes were still in roadworthy condition as of 1988).

One thing that struck me about the movie was that Coppola portrayed Tucker in a very sympathetic light, and both Coppola and Lucas said that was an intentional choice (makes sense, they both owned two of Tucker's cars) [6]. In Tucker's defense, the government was already pissed at small auto companies after an automaker named Kaiser Frazer took a bunch of government grants to develop a new car and squandered all the money. So, Tucker was under scrutiny from the very beginning [7].

While Tucker never took any government money, the SEC case highlighted some very tricky business practices. He sold accessories for the car before it was even produced, and buyers were then put on a waiting list for a car that didn't exist. An even more lucrative practice was selling 2000 dealerships across the country before they had successfully built the car [8]. The real Tucker was often described as very charming and smooth talking, and his main money guy, Abe Karatz, was a convicted felon. That's some pretty sketchy stuff that the movie does show, but through the entire film, it's clear the filmmakers think Tucker is innocent.

Spoiler alert: Despite his shady business practices, Tucker was acquitted of all charges. The trial focused on Tucker's intent. Did he intend to make the car or to just sell the accessories and dealerships without a car? According to Wikipedia, "Tucker collectors ...have amassed over 400,000 drawings/blueprints, corporate documents, and letters which they believe suggest that Tucker was, in fact, developing the manufacturing process necessary to mass-produce the Tucker '48" [9]. They also point out that Tucker had hired over 1900 employees, and at his trial, the Tucker VP Lee Treese testified that they were 90% ready with industrial machinery at the Chicago plant to produce the vehicle [10].

Innocent or not, Tucker didn't do well at the box office, making back only \$19.6 million of its \$24 million budget. However, it still got mostly good reviews. It's a beautiful looking movie and reminiscent of a 1940s billboard. The lighting, costumes, and cinematography are all top notch. Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* said, "The entire film gleams with the allure of lacquered sheet metal and hurtles forward with the supercharged art and refined science of reinvigorated, industrial-strength movie-studio craft" [11]. I recommend checking it out if only to see the quality filmmaking. But like I said earlier, if you like cars this movie is a must see.



The Lifestyle Just Didn't Pay Off: *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989)

by Dr. Rhonda Baughman

“You can buck the system, but you can’t buck the dark forces that lie hidden beneath the surface.” I never put a hat on a bed. It’s part of my personal code: if I tell someone to remove a hat from a bed, and they know what I’m referencing, a secret, yet palpable current passes between us. IMDB trivia tells us the idea of ‘no hats on beds’ first appeared in the 1954 noir classic *Shield for Murder*, but once I heard the rule in the honeyed tones of *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) anti-hero addict Bob Hughes (Matt Dillon), the ‘no hats on beds’ superstition belonged to me and other movie lovers like me [1].

Over 30 years ago, Dillon’s intense portrayal of Hughes assured viewers took his wisdom seriously – to carry all through our complicated days. For his role, Dillon spent a lot of time talking

to, interviewing, and hanging with real addicts; moreover, technical advisors like Jim Carroll and William Burroughs were available to offer additional insight actors needed. And oh, how I hung onto every word that spilled from both gentlemen, Carroll and Burroughs, whether song or poetry, and especially so Burroughs’ *Cowboy* dialogue.

As a fan of the film since a year after its release, I refreshed my memory with the Artisan DVD release of *Cowboy* containing the making of documentary and production notes. I didn’t know I could fall in love with the film further, but Production Designer David Brisbin made sure I could. His beautiful color palette made surreal scenes pop and dreamy scenes sing. But I wanted more, so I did some light internet reading about the film, re-read its novelization and

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screenplay, watched the film with and without commentary, and caught up with one of its notable screenwriters [2].

In the Pacific Northwest of the '70s, Bob and his crew of three—his wife Diane, his sidekick Rick and Rick's girl Nadine (Kelly Lynch, James LeGros, and Heather Graham, respectively)—knock off drugstores, snort and shoot their scores, and try their best to remain high. Leader Bobby Hughes, the master of diversion, just wants the drugs, likes the adrenaline of the score, and doesn't want anyone to get hurt: he's a nice, likable junkie—and Dillon's performance (though incredible) is almost upstaged by the quiet, virile presence of James LeGros [3]. Apparently, the mundane uncertainties of day-to-day life prove exhausting to Bob and his small squad, and dope's allure has more of a hold on each of them than any other ambitions. The viewer can see character potential, but the characters themselves cannot, not until they're forced to.

It's an untimely death that forces this awakening. With the death, Bob's freestyle days are interrupted, and he and his remaining crew must dispose of a body under both the watchful eye of Detective Gentry (James Remar) and the coincidental presence of a sheriff's convention in town (convening in Bob's hotel). The crew make it out, but there are debts to be paid and the universe always comes to collect.

As a young movie lover, I wasn't aware of the tightropes and fine lines director Gus Van Sant [4] and Avenue Pictures head and *Cowboy* Executive Producer Cary Brokaw faced with the film: how to avoid romanticizing a life of drugs; how to avoid fear-mongering the idea of drugs; how to show a life of crime that had never been previously shown without alienating viewers; how to make viewers fall in love with the characters and root for their redemption.

At 12 years old, how could I recognize any of that? I only knew the film spoke to me on many levels that the elementary school DARE program could not. It wasn't until I was much,



Bobby Hughes: Master of Diversion.



Tear the place apart, board by board.



"Should'a been a philosopher."

much older that I realized a lot of people who had never done drugs had an awful lot of opinions about drugs, and Van Sant and Brokaw (as well as other cast and crew) did a magical job of effectively navigating those aforementioned tightropes and fine lines, never moralizing or condescending to the viewer.

However, if IMDB is to be believed, the one-sentence plot of *Cowboy* is basic: “a pharmacy-robbing dope fiend and his crew pop pills and evade the law.” There are viewers who know better, know the film is anything but that facile, singular premise. Moreover, an epic list of synchronistic occurrences had to happen for this equally synchronistic film to come to fruition. James Fogle wrote the mostly-autobiographical novel while serving a sentence in Walla Walla, Washington (rumor has it he could only write in prison, having spent more than 50 of his 75 years incarcerated) [5]; Fogle sent an unsolicited manuscript (*Satan’s Sandbox*) to prison systems expert and consultant, the *Birdman of Alcatraz* writer Thomas Gaddis; Gaddis encouraged freelance journalist Daniel Yost (who had interviewed Gaddis for *The Oregonian*) to contact Fogle; and finally, for decades, Yost cultivated a friendship with Fogle, cleaned up Fogle’s works, used his editing prowess to turn the inmate’s works into screenplays, and eventually connected with director Gus Van Sant to bring *Cowboy* to the big screen.

Clearly, *Cowboy* existed many years before the film’s release (as early as 1976) as it’s Fogle’s life and subsequent source material, but it’s really Yost’s patience, perseverance (over 30 publishers rejected the novel) and belief in Fogle’s work, as books and screenplays, that would bring *Drugstore Cowboy* alive. “I’m not the kind of person to just let things happen; and with *Drugstore*, as with writing, as with life in general, I had to make adjustments,” Yost tells me in a brief phone interview. “I prefer when writing is natural, organic. Life changes. Language changes. You have to make adjustments.”

On the phone, Yost and I discussed his own films [6] and screenwriting in general and I expressed my struggle with the form itself. “It’s a learning process; you just have to fight through it ...” (even if the form is correct) “it doesn’t mean the story is

any good. Gotta make sure there’s a story there,” Yost says. When our topic switched to current writing schedules, Yost gave the best insight of all: “Being a writer is a good thing to have in the pandemic, but I write whenever I need to now – or want to.” Yost continues: “Fogle had great abilities in characterization and a great sense of humor. I was blown away by the raw reality of his words. They were powerful, dizzying. They really stirred up the body” [7].

Less stirred, once upon a time, was Hollywood. The liner notes of *Drugstore’s* Artisan DVD release indicate “Hollywood was reluctant to pursue the story because of the graphic, drug-using elements.” Based on some of the early prose and dialogue of Fogle’s original novel, I might be willing to believe this. From page 50: “...’How about that pretty little girl in the other bedroom, Bob? Is she hooked good? Is she going to slobber, puke, shake, and sneeze if we take her in and hold her, huh, Bob? Is she going to sing real good for us? I hear she’s a hell of a screamer.” It’s possible Hollywood execs wring their hands at scenes like this; the above dialogue from Gentry to Bob is not in the film and instead replaced with snappy, less gritty screenwriting credit from Yost and Van Sant.

Perhaps Hollywood wasn’t ready for this level of dystopic honesty, although as painfully relevant now as it was then. Or perhaps it’s because viewers intuitively know Fogle’s story is real—and the reality is ugly, unwatchable, so instead a Hollywood team created a gorgeous picture peppered with noir markings and darkly comedic elements, instead. *Cowboy* withstood my tests of time and intense scrutiny (visually surpassing my expectations). I had begun wondering if a character like Bob Hughes would have fared half as well in present day, in the pandemic, in lockdown. Technically, unless Bob and his crew were out stealing, or running from the law, they were inside, exhibiting quarantine-behavior long before the current pandemic. Furthermore, I now better understand those poignant, quiet last words of the film itself and Bob’s (also Fogle’s) refusal to color inside the lines of a society intent on providing only a few dull shades of mostly broken crayon possibilities.



Honey, Let Your Hair Down: STEEL MAGNOLIAS (1989)

by Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

Steel Magnolias used to be THE seminal chick flick. It was the movie you rented with maybe *Terms of Endearment* if you wanted a good cry, or maybe *Moonstruck* if you wanted a good laugh for movie night with the girls. But, just not these Girls! (Contributing writer Matt is one of the Girls). The prevailing reputation as a love-dovey “woman’s movie” was why we had avoided it for so long.

Eventually, we gave in, namely because we were searching for lighter-hearted titles to discuss in an issue about 80s movies based on true stories, and there are way too many grim ones. (By the way, have you read our other essay on *At Close Range*?!!!) Anyways, here’s what we discovered: for as much as *Steel Magnolias* is remembered as a cry

fest, it’s also a really good comedy.

The irony of this being what we (and plenty of other commentators) celebrate about the movie is that *Steel Magnolias* was originally intended to be played for straight drama. Margo Martindale, who played Dolly Parton’s part (Truvy Jones) in the stage debut said: “We all thought it was a drama, and then the first night it was in front of an audience, we were shocked. It was riotously funny and played straight as an arrow. It was never like any of us thought we were doing jokes. We thought we were just talking like the people from that part of the country talk” [1].

That part of the country is Louisiana. The story

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Like *GoF*, pink is Shelby's signature color.



"A little piece of immortality."



Thank you for being a friend.

centers around a group of friends from the fictional parish of Chipiquin. (Screenwriter Robert Harling is a native of Natchitoches where the movie was filmed). The women regularly gather at Truvy Jones's hair salon to gossip, share their lives, and of course, get their hair and nails done.

In addition to Truvy, played by the terminally charismatic Dolly Parton, and her sheepish new "glamor technician," Annelle (Daryl Hannah), a woman with a past (she flees a thieving husband, gets D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D, and devotes herself to God to an annoying degree), there is also Shelby (Julia Roberts), the tragic newlywed, soon to leave the nest, and her mother, M'Lynn (Sally Field). Olympia Dukakis plays the town's delightfully bonkers former First Lady and recent widow, Clairee (her locker room scene is hilarious). Best of all is Shirley MacLaine as curmudgeonly Ouiser who is most certainly not crazy, she has just been in a bad mood for the last 40 years.

These women are the steel magnolias; seemingly delicate southern belles (except no-nonsense Ouiser) who prove to be a witty, feisty, and resilient ensemble. They are also madly funny, even during the film's more somber moments. Fans of the *Golden Girls* and maybe the Suzanne Sugarbaker era of *Designing Women* are likely to find their comfort food here. Of course, *Steel Magnolias* doesn't have that network TV obligation to drum up conflict in order to periodically relearn an important lesson about friendship. These women already know it.

The film follows the women over the few short years between Shelby's wedding to her strapping lawyer beau, Jackson (Dylan McDermott), and her death from diabetic complications. The film opens to a wedding so pink and billowy it would make Jane Mansfield jealous. (And just wait till you see the red velvet armadillo cake that Jackson's aunt made, but just don't ask her to do snakes... she doesn't have the counterspace). The film ends with a funeral and life, anew.

The development of the story itself was an exercise

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in grieving. Screenwriter Robert Harling wrote the original 1987 play in an effort to preserve the memory of his sister, Susan Harling-Robinson (Shelby in the film and play), who died of kidney failure at the age of 33 [2]. Hers was quite a sad story. She was a Type 1 diabetic and was advised by doctors not to have children because the stress of pregnancy and labor were considered too risky.

When other avenues to parenthood didn't seem possible (adoption, etc.), Susan got pregnant. It was a calculated risk that Shelby defends in the movie, saying "I would rather have 30 minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special." Though Susan's mother fought her on the decision, she was prepared to donate a kidney when Susan went on dialysis. Unfortunately, Susan died two years after giving birth to her son, Robert. Pat eventually remarried.

Robert Harling wrote what would become *Steel Magnolias* out of fear that his young nephew would never know who his mother was. As he told *Country Living Magazine* in 2017, "All I wanted to do was have somebody remember her" [3]. It started as a short story but felt more comfortable as dialogue (Harling was an actor at the time) [4].

Truvy's salon was the sole setting for the play. For Harling, the salon represented a kind of feminine mystique; a "hermetically sealed environment" where women gathered to bare their souls (if they wanted) and left, transformed [5]. (The number of settings were expanded in the adaptation to film, but the conversational nature largely remained intact).

Perhaps the harder translation to film was to give life to male characters that had previously only existed in conversation. Some critics complained that the men in the film "don't amount to much" [3], to borrow Roger Ebert's words, though he was understanding.

The inattention to these characters seemed to coincide with observations in his own life. In an

interview with *Garden & Gun* in 2017, he recalled the differences in the way the men and women behaved at the family's house after the funeral. They completely fell apart. "My dad couldn't talk about anything; none of them knew what to do." Meanwhile the women gathered in the kitchen, joking and telling stories and remarking on what's needed in the food. "This is very interesting," Harling said, "the women are getting it done and the guys cannot function" [6].

Robert Harling has often said that he never expected that when he sat down to write about his sister, his mother, and the amalgam of spirits in their circles that became the central characters of the story, that it would ever see the light of day. Harling gave the finished piece to a literary agency who told him that a story about a group of women at a beauty salon didn't have commercial appeal, but they'd go ahead and send it out to an agent [7].

The rest is history: a debut at the WPA Theater in NYC in 1987 (the same place *Little Shop of Horrors* had its beginnings); an Oscar-nominated film in 1989 (Julia Roberts for Best Actress); a pilot for a CBS TV show in 1990; a Broadway run in 2005; a Lifetime TV remake in 2012; and numerous stage productions. The film even put Natchitoches on the map. (Let the girls at *Southern Living Magazine* be your guide [8]).

Most of all, it helped Susan's friends and family grieve. At a *Steel Magnolias* screening in Natchitoches several years ago, Robert Harling closed the Q&A session with a tearful thank you: "Through the magic of friendship and art and love... thank you for remembering Susan" [9].

Y'all, we think we just might cry.

ENDNOTES

Coal Miner's Daughter

Release Date: March 7, 1980

Written By: Tom Rickman

Directed By: Michael Apted

[1] "Coal Miner's Daughter (film)" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/bddfvcjb>

[2] "7 Things You Never Knew About the Movie Coal Miner's Daughter" (Country Rebel, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/yneezprp>

[3] "Sissy Spacek" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/2zkw689m>

[4] "Coal Miner's Daughter (film)" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/bddfvcjb>

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Loretta Lynn and Sissy Spacek Have Been Best Friends For 40 Years." (Wide Open Country, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/2p948m8b>

[7] "Coal Miner's Daughter (film)" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/bddfvcjb>

[8] Roger Ebert's review of Coal Miner's Daughter" (1980), <https://tinyurl.com/mr2x6csz>

[9] Loretta Lynn Ranch, <https://tinyurl.com/3ct9kh6x>

Mask

Release Date: March 8, 1985

Written by: Anna Hamilton Phelan

Directed by: Peter Bogdanovich

[1] "Florence Tullie" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/47rmdjtr>

[2] "Anna Hamilton Phelan" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/5884tayb>

[3] "Mask (1985 film)" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/2s4cmrtc>

[4] "Florence Tullis, portrayed by Cher in "Mask," Dies at age 70" (The Seattle Times, 2006), <https://tinyurl.com/2p9ad8py>

[5] "An Unusual Mother" (Chicago Tribune, 1986), <https://tinyurl.com/2p93vkje>

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Mask (1985 film)" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/2s4cmrtc>

[8] Children's Craniofacial Association. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9crpdm>

[9] "Cher" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/2pkcjmnt>

At Close Range

Release date: April 18, 1986

Written by: Elliot Lewitt and Nicholas Kazan

Directed by: James Foley

[1] "Episode 131: Dave Richter – Johnston Gang, Kiddie Gang Murders" (Jerri Williams Podcast, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/bdetx85t>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Hearing for Bruce Johnston Jr. stirs memories of notorious gang" (Lancaster Online, 2013), <https://tinyurl.com/3mjzvkyk>

[4] Roger Ebert's review of At Close Range (1986), <https://tinyurl.com/yzhvjzf7>

[5] "Episode 131: Dave Richter – Johnston Gang, Kiddie Gang Murders" (Jerri Williams Podcast, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/bdetx85t>

[6] Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Johnston

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(2012), <https://tinyurl.com/5asjd872>

[7] "Episode 131: Dave Richter – Johnston Gang, Kiddie Gang Murders" (Jerri Williams Podcast, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/bdetx85t>

[8] "Bruce Jr.' back in the news again" (The Mercury, 2013), <https://tinyurl.com/3bc3kr9d>

Heartburn

Release Date: July 25, 1986

Written by: Nora Ephron

Directed by: Mike Nichols

Citations:

[1] "Mike Nichols: A Life" (Vulture, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/mt6sj7pp>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Silkwood" (IMDB) <https://tinyurl.com/2p8euzrn>

[4] "Mike Nichols: A Life" (Vulture, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/mt6sj7pp>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Sid and Nancy

Release Date: November 7, 1986

Written by: Alex Cox and Abbe Wool

Directed by: Alex Cox

[1] "10 Things You Might Not Know About The Film Sid and Nancy" (Louder Sound, 2016), <https://ti->

[nyurl.com/54253abm](https://tinyurl.com/54253abm)

[2] Ibid.

[3] "13 Vicious Facts About Sid and Nancy" (Mental Floss, 2016) <https://tinyurl.com/ytee45x9>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

Tucker: The Man and His Dream

Release Date: August 12, 1988

Written by: Arnold Schulman and David Seidler

Directed by: Francis Ford Coppola

[1] "Preston Tucker" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/26uwmtb7>

[2] "Tucker: The Man and his Dream" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/5c96td9s>

[4] "Cinema: How Bridges Fights Boredom" (Time, 1988). <https://tinyurl.com/uraer632>

[5] "Tucker: The Man and his Dream" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/5c96td9s>

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Preston Tucker" (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/26uwmtb7>

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

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[11] "What to Stream: 'Tucker: The Man and His Dream,' a Slyly Personal Francis Ford Coppola Film" (The New Yorker, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/4atxn7h8>

Drugstore Cowboy

Release Date: October 20, 1989

Written by: James Fogle (novel); Gus Van Sant and Daneil Yost (screenplay)

Directed by: Gus Van Sant

[1] It's as iconic as the first rule of Fight Club (1999).

[2] There's only one thing left to do: read a sequel to Drugstore Cowboy titled Backside of a Mirror from screenwriter Daniel Yost. Special thanks to Yost for sending it!

[3] I swoon for James LeGros and I blame his role opposite Drew Barrymore in Guncrazy (1992) for starting my LeGros obsession. I mean LeGros' 7Up jacket in Cowboy is almost as iconic as Ryan Gosling's jacket in Drive (2011).

[4] Director Gus Van Sant is no stranger to controversy – My Own Private Idaho (1991), To Die For (1995), and Elephant (2003) are a few of his director credits.

[5] Fogle's novel, page 74: "Doing time, to Bob, was just a good way to regain his health and build up his veins by lifting weights and getting exercise ... Bob didn't worry about the problems of the outside world."

[6] "Daniel Yost" (IMDB), <https://tinyurl.com/5ch3yvjf>

[7] Yost keeps many of Fogle's works (short stories and novels) warm for us until the world is ready for

them to be unleashed.

[8] Masterfully edited by Daniel Yost.

[9] Additional sources: "James Fogle, Author of 'Drugstore Cowboy,' Dies at 75" (The New York Times, 2012), <https://tinyurl.com/4ymrchmh>; "'Drugstore Cowboy' back in jail again" (The Seattle Times, 2010), <https://tinyurl.com/3y666mju>; "The return of the 'Drugstore Cowboy'" (Dangerous Minds, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/49xp5mhz>.

Steel Magnolias

Release date: November 5, 1989

Written by: Robert Harling

Directed by: Herbert Ross

[1] "Thirty Years of Steel Magnolias" (Garden & Gun, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/2kzr2w2b>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Heartbreaking Real-Life Story Behind 'Steel Magnolias'" (Country Living Magazine, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/jhyvvajx>

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Thirty Years of Steel Magnolias" (Garden & Gun, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/2kzr2w2b>

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] [VIDEO] "The Steel Magnolias Bed & Breakfast Road Trip | Hey Y'all | Southern Living" (Southern Living Magazine), <https://tinyurl.com/yc32rjmx>

[9] [VIDEO] "Robert Harling -Steel Magnolias" (Jean Sill), <https://tinyurl.com/yckc3zet>

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