

Literature and Film Recommendations

"We had the experience, we missed the meaning / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form." T. S. Eliot's poem "The Dry Salvages" reminds us that our daily encounter with reality requires attentiveness and interpretation, if we are to receive and respond to the gift of life in its whole richness and depth. But we creatures have lost the sense of transparency to the Creator that marked ancient and medieval Christian culture; we are left instead with a sense of separation between faith and life, between meaning and experience.

A central task of the Christian is thus the work of recovering the unity between faith and life. At the heart of this recovery is the education of our sight: in what light do we "read" the events of our lives, our relationships, our responsibilities? How do we permit love to manifest itself to us, in its radiance, in its brokenness?

In his 1999 Letter to Artists, John Paul II referred to art as "a kind of bridge to religious experience" even when there seems to be a chasm between culture and the Church. In seeking the beautiful, which is simply goodness and truth in their visible form, the artistic imagination helps us to behold the transcendent meaning at the core of our life.

The following list of literary works and films is offered as a vehicle for cultivating our capacity to see reality truly, in light of the revelation of love in Jesus Christ. Writer Flannery O'Connor held that understanding art is not an esoteric hobby for an intellectual elite but rather a necessary work for "the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by its contact with mystery." This sort of exercise, as demanding as it is enjoyable, requires courage as well as observation and reflection as we survey the human condition, following the lead of an artist who has glimpsed the truth embedded in reality. Another writer, Joseph Conrad, wrote that

. . . if the [artist's] conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fullness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked or charmed, must run thus: My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there, according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm, all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

The entries below offer a brief judgment of the particular contributions of a broad spectrum of works that turn our attention to the persistent beauty of human love—spousal love, filial love, friendship—without failing to show that love's beauty persists precisely amid the ugliness of temptation and sin. Each work can contribute to the cultivation of a Christian imagination, enabling us to cast new eyes upon the persons and things entrusted to us—helping us to seek and find the love of Christ as it discloses itself in these, his gifts.

FICTION

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice* (1797).

Self-knowledge is at the heart of discernment, and in the heroine of this book we find a woman aware of herself. Elizabeth Bennet is aware of her own great desire for happiness, and she swears that only the greatest love would induce her to marry. However, this rudimentary knowledge of her desires is incomplete until she comes face to face with another — Fitzwilliam Darcy — who is the occasion for a deeper knowledge, and in this way Elizabeth discovers that even she could not have guessed what the deepest love would look like for her. Austen sees that marriage, in its truest sense, is a response to a surprising presence that has entered one's life with the promise to make life more true. The two young people become for each other a sign and a promise of a fuller life that can only be entered into through the painful knowledge of their own faults, a knowledge that can only be learned in the light of another's love for one's self. Jane Austen's novels confine themselves to the domestic lives of young women, and yet she reveals to us that even in the most pedestrian lives the human drama is fully present.

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues" (1957).

This story is about two brothers in 1950s Harlem who discover that despite drug use and estrangement, they are irrevocably bound to one another as family. Sonny is a jazz musician, recently arrested for drug possession, who invites his brother to hear him play in Greenwich Village. His brother somewhat begrudgingly agrees to go and realizes how, through his music, Sonny is able to transform his suffering into an experience of beauty.

Berry, Wendell. *Hannah Coulter* (2004).

The straightforward narrative voice of seventy-year-old Hannah Coulter is the vehicle for this chronicle of rural life in the community of Port William, Kentucky, from the early 1900s to the present. Berry has written several novels involving the same setting, town, and characters, all of which shine in their own way. The brilliance of this book is the authenticity of Hannah's feminine voice, which relates the memories of her life's joys and sorrows through a lens of wonder and utter gratitude. As with many of Berry's characters, Hannah's life has been intricately rooted in the particularities of her place, and her story also contains meditations on the ties between family, community, and land that are increasingly being lost in the modern age.

Carver, Raymond. "Cathedral" (1983).

This story explores the theme of ignorance and sight through the narrator's journey from insecurity to openness. The narrator begins as closed-minded and fearful of what he does not understand, but as the story progresses, his eyes begin to be opened — ironically, with the help of a blind man.

—. "A Small, Good Thing" (1983).

The story unfolds when Scotty, an eight-year-old boy, dies three days after being hit by a car as he walks to school. Carver depicts the grief of the parents and their quarrel and final reconciliation with a baker who was baking a birthday cake for Scotty. Although tragic and disturbing, "A Small, Good Thing" conveys a message of forgiveness, kindness, and the healing power of human community.

-Fiction-

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia* (1918).

My Ántonia tells the stories of several immigrant families who move to rural Nebraska to start new lives in America, with a particular focus on a Bohemian family, the Shimerdas, whose eldest daughter is named Ántonia. The book's narrator, Jim Burden, arrives in Nebraska as a child when he goes to live with his grandparents after his parents have died. The novel is Jim's recollection of his life and the way that the friendships of his childhood have formed him and will forever populate his soul.

Greene, Graham. *The End of the Affair* (1951).

Set in London during and just after World War II, this novel centers on an illicit affair which becomes a drama of love of self, love of another, and ultimately love of God. One day, during an afternoon tryst with Sarah, an acquaintance's wife, Bendrix, the narrator, goes downstairs to look for intruders in his basement—and a bomb falls on the building. Sarah's puzzling reaction to Bendrix's injury unfolds through the remainder of the novel, as they both learn the true meaning of love through a suffering that opens up space for an awareness of the totality man is made for, whose truth cannot be extinguished even in the darkness of sin.

— ***The Power and the Glory* (1940).**

The novel contemplates persistent power of truth through the story of a Roman Catholic priest in the state of Tabasco in Mexico during the 1930s, a time when the Mexican government strove to suppress the Catholic Church. The persecution was especially severe in the province of Tabasco, where an anti-clerical governor succeeded in closing all the churches in the state, forcing the priests to marry and give up their cassocks. The main character in the story is a nameless "whiskey priest," who combines a great power for self-destruction with pitiful cravenness, a painful penitence, and a desperate quest for dignity. By the end, the priest acquires real holiness.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birthmark" (1943).

"The Birth-Mark" is a romantic short story that examines man's obsession with human perfection. The beautiful Georgiana has a small hand-shaped birthmark on her cheek. Her husband Aylmer, a scientist, begins to detest the birthmark more intensely with each passing day. When he tries to remove it, his desire for the perfect creature leads to a grievous loss.

Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. *The Salzburg Great Theater of the World* (1922).

In this twentieth-century version of the traditional medieval "world theater," the King, the Rich Man, the Beggar, the Farmer, Beauty, Wisdom, and Death are assigned their unscripted roles in the great theater of the world, and then are told to go act out the play. It is titled "Do Right! Under God," and takes place under the watchful eyes of God, in the role of director. Along with the astonished World, who must watch the drama unfolding within her, we witness everything contained the drama of human history: temptation, pettiness, magnanimity, anguish, joy, and the varied reactions of each of the characters at the approach of Death. Finally, in the wrenching choice that is given to one of the characters and that he makes rightly, we glimpse the profound interconnectedness of all of the characters' fates. In the communion of saints and in this communion of all the living, the choice of the one depends on the prayer of all, and on that choice of the one rests the salvation of all.

-Fiction-

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World* (1932).

Set in London in AD 2540, the novel anticipates developments in reproductive technology and sleep-learning that combine to change society, raising questions about many bioethical issues and their relation to the truth of love. It becomes clear that the society is disordered in its understanding of the human person. Most women are sterilized and the rest are forced to take contraceptives; sex is treated as a commodity and a matter of mere pleasure. Ultimately, this cultural climate is shown to destroy the human person and his happiness.

Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956).

This much-beloved series of children's books relates the adventures of English children in the magical world of Narnia—a world into which evil was introduced on the day of its creation by a son of Adam, and which Adam's race must help to heal. The series, which originally began with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, spans the whole history of Narnia, from creation (*The Magician's Nephew*) to redemption (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) to the end of the world (*The Last Battle*). These books approach an almost allegorical transparency to Christianity for the reader who is well-versed in that faith, but they also stand on their own as wonderful stories for those who are not—for such readers, they can serve as a kind of delightful pre-catechesis, a preparation of the imagination for the Christian understanding of the universe.

—, *Perelandra* (1943).

Elwin Ransom, a philologist and college don, is inexplicably "chosen" by Maleldil (God) to take up a mysterious mission which requires a voyage to Perelandra (Venus), a fantastical and beautiful world of ethereal vibrancy and vitality. It is a young world, only just fashioned, with only two human inhabitants: The Green Lady and The King. After meeting the Green Lady, a woman of radiant beauty and an innocence majestic rather than naive, Ransom discovers why he was sent to Perelandra. He must deflect the treacherous assault upon the Green Lady's unsullied innocence by another newly arrived space traveler, Edward Rolles Weston.

This second volume of Lewis's "space trilogy," an imaginative revisiting of the temptation of man in Eden, describes in vivid detail a world which is yet unstained and unbroken. Its beauty, in Lewis's own words, is "too definite for language." Moreover, Lewis captures with arresting insight the dark shrewdness of an enemy who wages war not by fear or force, but suggestion and crafty ingenuity. In the end, Ransom's victory will not be had by *his* ability to muster powers, personal resolve, or native strength. Indeed not, for his is a task beyond his choosing; and his strength comes from having been called.

Manzoni, Alessandro. *The Betrothed*.

The first modern Italian novel, *I Promessi Sposi* is also one of the finest, wisest, and funniest. Its influence on Italian language and culture has been immense. Set in the late sixteenth century, the story concerns the trials and tribulations of a peasant couple who are engaged to be married. A local warlord takes a fancy to Lucia and persuades the cowardly parish priest not to go through with the wedding. Separated from his beloved by riots and local wars and eventually brought back together with her by the great plague of Milan, Renzo has to overcome (with the help of a saintly Franciscan) Lucia's determination to fulfill a rash vow she made to the Blessed Virgin.

-Fiction-

There are brilliant portrayals along the way of human weakness, corruption, sanctity, and conversion.

Milosz, Oscar. *Miguel Mañara* (1913).

Don Miguel Mañara struggles with sorrow, guilt, and despair after he loses the thrill of wooing women. Provoked to conversion after meeting Girolama, Don Miguel ends his days as a monk to learn and live the truth of love.

O'Connor, Flannery. "Parker's Back" (1965).

A man discovers that his desire for the infinite, which had been expressed in his compulsion for covering his body with tattoos, is only answered by the gaze of Christ. Parker's buried desire to see Christ comes to light only in the recognition that he has been the one who first has been seen.

—, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960).

In this novel, the author, notorious for her use of shock to awaken her characters from their slumber, does not spare us the usual violence. Here, it is the protagonist himself, Francis Marion Tarwater, a fist-shaking back-country orphan, who commits it—against the child entrusted to his care. And it is precisely in that terrible act that Tarwater realizes that he cannot shake the irrepressible fact that he (and now the child) cannot but be bound to Another: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead* (2004).

This luminous Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel takes the form of a letter written by a Congregationalist minister to his young son, offspring of a marriage late in life. Knowing that his age and heart condition will keep him from watching the boy grow up, Rev. John Ames renders an honest account of his history as it intersects with the lives of his grandfather, father, and fellow citizens of an obscure Iowa town from the 1800s to the mid-1950s. In addition to the honesty, what is most moving in his account is the tenderness toward himself and others, even in the midst of shortcomings and sins. Indeed, the overall word that comes to mind is "wonder." His letter is a confession of wonder before the beauty of creation and the mystery of the human person.

—, *Home* (2008).

This novel provides a deeply sympathetic portrayal of the lives of three members of a neighboring family of the Rev. John Ames. The paterfamilias, Rev. Robert Boughton, is accompanied in his final months by his daughter Glory and his son Jack, the black sheep of the family who has returned after an absence of 20 years. The relationships between father and son and between sister and brother are complex: full of love, longing, forgiveness, guilt, sorrow—and so often incomprehension. Jack means well but cannot be trusted or understood, even by himself. His sense of isolation and alienation in the midst of a large and loving family predated his slide into alcoholism. *Home* portrays with painful accuracy and detail the anxiety of all three characters (with brief glimpses at other family members) implicated in the drama of remaining together, or even attempting to do so. It is ultimately a story of how love and hope endure amid profound fragility.

-Fiction-

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55).

Almost too obvious to mention, although many people don't realize how Catholic it is in spirit, this epic fantasy novel by an Oxford don (a sequel to his children's story, *The Hobbit*), is rightly one of the most popular books of all time. Imbued with a profound sense of providence and grace, the beauty of virtue and the loveliness of the natural world, it explores the nature of temptation and the struggle against evil in the human heart. We emerge refreshed and invigorated. Read it every few years, and follow up with *The Children of Hurin*, *The Silmarillion*, or *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

—, *The Silmarillion* (1977, posthumous).

This collection of legends and stories is an account of the first Age of the Middle Earth of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. "The Music of the Ainur" offers an astonishingly beautiful account of the creation of the world through music, the disruption of this music by one of the Ainur (roughly like the heavenly host), and the resolution of this discord through the yet-greater and more beautiful melody sung by the One himself, who is able to incorporate this discord into an even greater harmony. In the tales that follow, we watch this "song" as it plays out in the pre-history of Middle Earth, with particular focus on the last, mysterious melody sung by the One. This last melody has to do with the creation of men, whose mortality poses a kind of insoluble riddle to the other, immortal creatures. The tale of the corruption of the human race contains a profound meditation on the meaning of death, which is first given as a *gift* to men—that is, the possibility of surrendering their lives in trust to something higher than themselves—but which men resisted, making it instead an ugly process of degeneration and corruption. The final section makes clear that the fate of Middle Earth does not rest with the powerful and the immortal, but with the weak and mortal, and even with the smallest and most insignificant among these.

Undset, Sigrid. *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22).

Set in medieval Norway, the drama of Kristin's life unfolds in a world imbued with both deep Catholic sensibility and an abiding residue of paganism—a world where family, land, religion, and marriage are tightly interwoven. Betrothed to an honorable and capable gentleman farmer, Kristin shamefully breaks her betrothal in order to marry a handsome man of noble birth but ignoble reputation who seems to promise "the greatest days." What follows for Kristin is a life of great hardships and suffering. Yet Undset does not paint for us a moralistic story, but rather probes the depths of the human heart's search for an eternal and resplendent love. Kristin's choice must become for her, and her family, a path of redemption through Christ the Bridegroom. This book dramatically explores the relations among love, virginity, marriage, family, society, and sanctity.

Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).

Charles Ryder is inspired to recount the story of his relationship with the English Catholic Marchmain family when, as an officer in World War II, he returns years later to their neglected and occupied Brideshead mansion. It is a novel of conversion and redemption given through friendship and the objectivity of man's communion in the Catholic faith.

Wilder, Thornton. *The Alcestiad: Or, A Life in the Sun* (1955).

In this play, Wilder retells the Greek myth of Alcestis, the queen who for love of her husband chooses to die and descend to Hades in his stead, and who, because of her act of self-sacrifice, is allowed by the gods to return to life. At the beginning of the play, Apollo tells Death that both of them are about to be taught a lesson, and the lesson is this woman whose love is like light: she loves the sun god, Apollo, who in a way directs all the action of the play, and begs him for a sign that her impending marriage to the king of Thessaly is right. She receives the sign she seeks, and at first lives a married life of sheer joy. This joy becomes the most profound suffering, however, as she realizes that she must die for the one she loves, and does this in the certainty that the gifts of life and joy and of suffering and death come to us from the same hand. When she comes back to life, she returns to an even bitterer fate, which she must endure to the end, but at the end of a life filled with such bitter suffering, she who has loved is able to ask: "Whom do I thank for all the happiness?"

—, *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942).

In this distinctly American take on the "world theater" tradition, Wilder presents us with the drama of the life of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus (Man and Woman, or, it is implied, Adam and Eve), who live out the ages of the world in a New Jersey suburb with their son, Henry, or Cain, as he used to be called before "all that bad business." The play, which features a mammoth, a dinosaur, Homer, the three Muses, and a telegraph boy, is both a hilarious and a profoundly moving account of what it means to be human beings in this world that is filled with both love and infidelity, eternal meaning and apparently groundless evil. It is *our* drama, for as we learn at the end, "The end of this play isn't written yet." It is a drama of how we human beings keep on living and hoping that some good will come out of our suffering, and how something enables us to hang on, in spite of everything, by "the skin of our teeth."

Wojtyła, Karol. *The Jeweler's Shop. A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony Passing on Occasion Into a Drama* (1960).

On an unnamed street in a mid-twentieth-century European town, a jeweler's shop, with its wise but mysterious proprietor, forms the point of connection between several love stories. The first act tells the story of Teresa and Andrew, a young couple in love, but also struggling to understand whether they are right for each other in marriage. The second act is the story of Anna and Stefan, whose twenty-year marriage is nearly dead, leaving Anna desperate for love and companionship. She wants a man, and in the mysterious Adam, she gets more than she bargained for when he initiates her encounter with the Bridegroom. The final act places the children of the first two marriages together: Christopher, the son of Teresa and Andrew (who died in combat), is engaged to Monica, the daughter of Anna and Stefan. Given that death and disappointment marked their parents' marriages, Monica and Christopher carry certain burdens with them into their courtship. How is it possible to love? To love for a lifetime? This play is indeed a "meditation on the sacrament of matrimony" that can be read multiple times, each time yielding fresh insights into the mystery, drama, and beauty of human love.

NONFICTION

Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. *What's Wrong with the World* (1910).

Long considered a classic of the distributist economic movement, Chesterton's work criticizes both "Hudge" and "Gudge": neither individualist capitalism nor collectivist socialism honors persons or the most basic bonds between them. He analyzes how Hudge and Gudge seem to conspire to cause disorder in the relationships between men and women (especially through the distortion of gender difference), between parents and children (especially through public education), and among men more generally (through politics and economics that disregard the actual needs of the human person). With his usual wit, Chesterton argues for common sense: that the institutions of society – government, industry, education – exist to serve the person, made in the divine image, and his home and family.

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. *Gift from the Sea* (1955).

First published in 1955, this book is a collection of thoughts inspired by time away on vacation on Florida's Captiva Island, during which Lindbergh reflects on the lives of Americans, particularly American women, in the mid-twentieth century. She shares her meditations on youth and age, love and marriage, peace, solitude, and contentment during her visit. The book ponders man's need for simplicity, solitude, and stillness.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being* (1979).

O'Connor's collected letters offer us a glimpse of the deep friendships and passing acquaintanceships of a woman and artist of profoundly Catholic sensibility, manifest in the most ordinary experiences of daily living. Wholly unsentimental and clear-eyed, her tenacious love of the world is imbued with a sacramental sense of its origin and destiny in God.

—. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1957).

This collection of essays, enlivened by the author's characteristically caustic wit, is a series of meditations on the meaning of art—in particular O'Connor's own art, literature—and on the vocation of the artist in the Church and in the world. Ultimately, this vocation is to perceive and show the world in its relation to grace, which confronts it with the gravity of its own fallenness and moves it toward redemption.

POETRY

Kinnell, Galway. "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps."

A poem in which the young son of a married couple is able to sleep soundly through any noise but is recurrently aroused from his slumber to find his way languidly to his parents' bed, returning to the love from which he was born.

—. "Daybreak."

A simple poem in which the speaker compares the starfish he sees crawling across the "tidal mud" to the movement of real stars in the sky. The poet's gaze on reality reveals that there is always more to see in what gives itself to be seen.

-Poetry-

Pastan, Linda. "To a Daughter Leaving Home."

A little girl learning to ride a bike provokes in her mother a reflection on the tenuous drama of motherhood as an education in letting go.

Soto, Gary. "Oranges."

As a twelve-year-old boy walks with a young girl of whom he is enamored to buy a piece of chocolate at the drugstore, he is awakened to a brightness and glow through her presence, which likewise awakens in him the awareness of himself. His quiet innocence reveals a knowledge that this girl has been entrusted to his care.

Wright, James. "A Blessing."

The seemingly banal experience of coming across two ponies on the edge of the highway becomes for the speaker one in which his attentiveness to what he sees enables him to discover a beauty that opens him to the world and to think: "if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom."

MOVIES (BY DIRECTOR)

Each film recommendation is followed by the rating of the Classification and Ratings Administration (G, PG, PG-13, R) and that of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (A-1: general patronage; A-II: adults and adolescents; A-III: adults).

Brooks, James L. *Spanglish* (2004).

A beautiful native Mexican woman becomes the housekeeper for an affluent, yet troubled, family. The result is a wittily perceptive collision of cultures and values, and a refreshingly honest look at such life-altering commitments as marriage, parenting, and devotion to family. (PG-13; A-III)

Carney, John. *Once* (2007).

Once tells the story of a nostalgic singer-songwriter who is captivated by a beautiful young Eastern European woman living in Dublin with her family. Brought together by a common love of music, the two find that they share something else in common: wounded hearts. In an unusual twist, she, estranged from her husband, manages to go to the depth of this new mutual affection, so that each can find there, once more, the ones to whom they were originally bound, once and for all. (R; A-III)

Curtiz, Michael. *Casablanca* (1942).

Set in Africa during the early days of World War II, an American expatriate meets a former lover, with unforeseen complications. They come to realize that their love for one another is not to be enclosed in the fulfillment of immediate pleasures and desires; rather, it is something for the world and calls upon them to recognize and affirm the beloved's destiny. (PG; A-II)

-Film-

Dahan, Olivier. *La Vie en Rose* (2007).

The final interview with French singer Edith Piaf as portrayed in this movie is breathtaking. Piaf was by no means the “perfect Catholic,” but despite all her wandering and the great suffering of her life, her faith somehow persists. Her continued devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux is beautifully portrayed in the movie. Subtitles. (PG-13; A-III)

Dar, Giddi. *Ushpizin* (2005).

An Orthodox Jewish couple cannot afford to build their succah, or temporary dwelling, for the succoth holiday. Striking in the film is the intense prayer and faith of Moshe and his wife Malli, who are childless. Through various unlikely circumstances, screenwriter Shuli Rand, who also plays the lead role, explores generosity, fruitfulness, conversion, and surrender to a God who loves. Subtitles. (PG; A-I)

Henckel von Donnersmarck, Florian. *The Lives of Others* (2006).

A ideologically committed member of the Stasi, communist East Germany’s secret police, is assigned to spy on a well-known Berlin playwright at the behest of a corrupt and powerful government official. In the course of spending all his waking life observing the “lives of others” – lives that may not be exemplary, but that nevertheless contain real friendships, real pleasures, and real griefs – this man who has made himself a sheer instrument of the state begins, very imperceptibly, to recognize beauty, to desire, to live. Finally, after a long education in these lives that other men live, he finds that he himself can act: he can sacrifice himself to protect precisely those lives he had been assigned to destroy. Subtitles. (R; A-III)

Howard, Ron. *Cinderella Man* (2005).

Jim Braddock is a depression era boxer who literally fights to save his family, staging an unlikely comeback. The film’s most interesting idea is the integration of Braddock’s “profession” as a boxer with his vocation as a husband and father. He seems to take a rash risk in agreeing to fight the then-current champion who has a reputation for killing his opponents. In a marvelous scene the head of the fighting commission shows Braddock a film of the champion. Braddock, seemingly disregarding the danger, studies the film with a professional eye. He is not being rash. He knows what he is fighting for – “milk,” as he says at a press conference earlier in the film – and now we see that he also knows how to fight. He understands completely the situation and the stakes, and that is what ultimately gives him the confidence to face the challenge without fear. (PG-13; A-III)

Jackson, Peter. *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003).

Tolkien’s literary masterpiece shows him to be a man who understood deeply that there are some things in life worth dying for, and Jackson admirably renders the epic tale on the silver screen. Of particular interest is the portrayal of the structural hierarchy of the characters. The characters flourish within their given roles within the Fellowship of the Ring and the whole order of Middle Earth, and when something goes awry, it is usually because one of them has rejected his role and tried to usurp another’s. The role of friendship in the journey of life, and the restoration of leisure and culture figure prominently also. (PG-13; A-III)

-Film-

Kurosawa, Akiro. *Ran* (1985).

This is a magnificent adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*—set in medieval Japan—by the much-acclaimed director. When an aged warlord wishes to hand over rule to his heirs, he heeds the flattery of his two evil sons and banishes the one child who truly loves him. As a result of this decision, he is forced to come face to face with both the wickedness of his sons and the horrors he himself has inflicted upon others, as his family and his kingdom dissolve into “chaos” (in Japanese, *ran*) and he himself gives way to madness. But in this mad, broken king stripped of his kingdom, who at last wishes for nothing more than the love of his children, the dignity of the human being—and the small acts of humanity this pitiable but still regal man calls forth—survives amid the ruins of a kingdom. The hatred that consumes everything else in this story cannot consume this dignity—which shines forth precisely in humiliation—or silence the question of human suffering, posed in a strikingly explicit manner at the movie's end. Subtitles. (R; A-II)

Luhrmann, Baz. *Strictly Ballroom* (1992).

This is a deceptively charming story about Fran, an ugly duckling ballroom dance student who convinces Scott, the ousted star of the dance school, to take her on as his ballroom partner, despite the obvious disparity in their talents. What develops is a sweet, genuine love story. Particularly poignant is the redemption of Scott's parents' marriage through Scott's fidelity to Fran. (PG; A-II)

Majidi, Majid. *Baran* (2001).

In this film, the heart of Latif, an Iranian construction worker, is transformed through the presence of Baran, a woman worker disguised as a man. He comes to show his affection for her by doing what he can to ease the hardships she suffers at work, and discovers the truth of sacrificial love. In many ways, this movie can be understood as a meditation on the feminine genius. (PG; A-II)

— ***The Color of Paradise* (2000).**

Blind adolescent Mohammad attends a boarding school for the blind; he is a bright and kind boy with a zest for life. His father, however, feels ill equipped to deal with his son and treats Mohammad as an embarrassment and burden to the family. In the course of the film, the father recovers his fatherhood in learning to be a child through the witness of his son. The movie is a beautiful exploration of what it means to experience the world with our senses, and in this to seek God. (PG; A-II)

Mangold, James. *Walk the Line* (2005).

Walk the Line portrays the tumultuous life of the singer and songwriter Johnny Cash with great honesty and with an eye for what it means to be a man who, in spite of everything, still wishes to live and to love. Above all, it portrays this life with an eye to mercy, since Cash's friendship with and eventual marriage to June Carter, while not unproblematic, is ultimately a kind of grace: grace that can reach a man even in the disaster of his life, grace as the entirely undeserved good

-Film-

that comes to us when we have done everything we could to destroy it, and grace that can finally reconcile us to ourselves and to the world again. (PG-13; A-III)

Newell, Mike. *Enchanted April* (1992).

The story of four English women struggling through their separate personal agonies in rain-drenched London. Together they find their way to an Italian villa in April. Marriages are saved and lives turned around through the encounter with beauty. (PG; A-II)

Olmi, Ermanno. *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978).

This is a beautiful portrayal of the lives of four peasant families who share a farmhouse in a northern Italian village at the turn of the century. Over the course of a year, we see their labor and hardships, which are many, but also their love for one another and their tremendous, unassuming generosity. The title comes from the event that forms the backbone of this panoramic portrayal of these families' lives: a small boy, the only one of his village to study, breaks his clog while walking home from school, and his father cuts down a tree to carve him a new shoe. This eventually leads to the family's eviction, on the grounds that the father has destroyed the landlord's property. While this may sound very grim, the movie is not predominantly sorrowful: far larger than this and many other objective injustices is the beauty of these peoples' lives, their loves, and the thoroughly joyful, sacramental wholeness of the world in which they live. (NR; A-II)

Rothemund, Marc. *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005).

A beautiful German film that raises questions about what it is to be a citizen, a student, a sister, and a daughter while understanding that life is for an Other who is greater than us—and that our fruitfulness is never ours to determine. Subtitles. (NR; A-II)

Schnabel, Julian. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007).

Wonderful cinematography. The main character has a stroke and gets 'locked-in syndrome,' a very rare condition in which he is aware of his surroundings and can see, but cannot speak or move. He learns to communicate by blinking one eye, and writes a book upon which this movie is based. The film draws attention to our inability to judge what an incommunicative patient is thinking or praying at any moment. The argument, "I wouldn't want to live like that," is unconvincing in light of this film. The main character, for all his pessimism and depressing thoughts at times, also has a deep sense of hope that grows throughout the movie—but only because of the presence of people who love him. (PG-13; A-III)

Silver, Joan Micklin. *Crossing Delancey* (1988).

A "sex-in-the-city" type Jewish career woman finds herself set up in a meeting with a "pickle-man" by her grandmother's marriage broker. The characters have a delightful freshness and the man-woman relation is authentic. (PG; A-III)

-Film-

Wyler, William. *Roman Holiday* (1953).

A bored and sheltered princess escapes her guardians and falls in love with an American newsman in Rome. In the end, they each realize that life is not about following one's own capricious wishes, but that the truth of love and freedom is to respond to what one has been given even if it is not what one immediately wants. (NR; A-II)

Zaillian, Steven. *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993).

Based on the life of Joshua Waitzkin, a prodigy chess player, the film explores the theme of fatherhood while following the development of an extraordinary talent. In addition to his own father, who supports, encourages, and sometimes pushes his son, Waitzkin also has two other father-figures in the persons of his chess instructor and a street chess player, not to mention the phantom of the famous Bobby Fischer himself. It is a story in which a young boy develops an understanding of himself and his talent in relation to these others. (PG; A-II)