

directors, William Wyler, who directed such films as M_r_s. M_i_n_i_v_e_r,
T_h_e B_e_s_t Y_e_a_r_s o_f O_u_r L_i_v_e_s, T_h_e D_e_s_p_e_r_a_t_e H_o_u_r_s, T_h_e
B_i_g C_o_u_n_t_r_y,
B_e_n H_u_r, and F_u_n_n_y G_i_r_l. After he completed M_r_s. M_i_n_i_v_e_r, Wyler
enlisted in the Army Air Corps only to be assigned to make
documentaries about the day-to-day business of the Army Air Corps.

THE MT VOID

Page 2

He made two; one was T_h_u_n_d_e_r_b_o_l_t and one was T_h_e M_e_m_p_h_i_s B_e_l_l_e.
The latter was about the B-17 crews stationed in England who bombed
Germany and used as a focal point the last mission of the Memphis
Belle. The Discovery Channel on cable just happens to be running
Wyler's M_e_m_p_h_i_s B_e_l_l_e this month.

[The following paragraph will include some spoilers about the 1990
movie.]

Wyler apparently went on several bombing missions to create the
documentary, though he has what is at best only a minute or so of
footage from the Belle's final flight, and that is from the landing
and taken from the ground. The 1990 film seems to have much
exaggerated the danger of the final mission. The following are
apparently inaccuracies of the later film:

- There were no injuries on the Belle on her final mission. When
she landed the crew was grinning from the windows and the glass
nose. There is a reference to a transfusion in some places but it
is not the Belle. The Belle had no fires, did not have to throw
out its guns, and was not losing fuel.
- In the original most of the planes are not named for or
illustrated with pictures of sexy women. More common are names
like "Old Bill." The nose paintings usually show cartoons of
nasty things happening to a frightened-looking Hitler.
- The 1990 film shows some spectacular collisions. The original
film does not, but probably would not mention the dangerous
mishaps.
- The 1990 production could get only eight planes. The original
gives more of a feel of an armada.

- The crew looks considerably older in the original. There are references to crew members in their late teens, but most looked more like mid-thirties.
- The Belle was not assigned to Bremen; it was assigned to the submarine pens at Wilhelmshaven.

The Wyler documentary is worth seeing and makes a worthwhile supplement to the movie. After the documentary there are interviews with crew members who flew the B-17s. The contention is made that this is one of the best-designed planes ever built. Every architectural element has a backup so if it were shot away the backup takes over. The planes could be horribly shot up and still be in good flying condition, as both versions of the film showed. A German flier is quoted as saying that attacking a B-17 was "like making love to a porcupine ... on fire."

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THE FIRE'S STONE by Tanya Huff
A book review by Frank R. Leisti
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This pleasant tale revolves around the characters of a thief, a third prince and a princess, who just happens to be a Wizard of the Nine (which is to say that she has great potential, not much experience). The plot which weaves a fabric of deceit around the players involves the regular political intrigue as well as mental fabric being torn asunder and remended while on an absolutely impossible quest.

The quest is the return of the Fire's Stone, a magical stone that took 9 wizards of the nine, 9 years to create, whose power holds back the bubbling lava of a volcano near a great and glorious land. With the quest these three untried and quite youthful people form new relationships even when they do not wish to form such relationships. The interactions between the players, the doubts of abilities, the failings of the three make for an interesting byplay of both tearing down and of support as the quest proceeds.

Of course, in a world where magic occurs, magical things are quite likely to turn out to the benefit of the right and this story is no exception. So in this regards, the story is rather lame and unappealing. Matching the psychological description of the various participants is the mass of supporting characters which both conflict with and aid and support the three heroes as they go through their quest.

Although this story is the standard story of unlikely people and how they became heroes, the interplay of the characters probably draws on the author's own experiences with drunks, thieves and young headstrong people. I found the interactions interesting yet very predictable.

From the rating system, I would rate it at +0.5 from the -4 to +4 scale.

MEMPHIS BELLE

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Disappointing and undoubtedly fictionalized account of the twenty-fifth mission of the first B-17 crew to reach that number and be sent home.

Eight real B-17s were used and they deserve billing above the likes of Matthew Modine, Eric Stoltz, and John Lithgow. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4).

Undeniably there is some truth to this story. The Memphis Belle really was the first B-17 Flying Fortress to complete twenty-five missions and hence win its flight crew an opportunity to go home and sit out the rest of the war in celebrity and with relatively cushy assignments. Hence there really was a twenty-fifth mission of the Memphis Belle. Whether the first twenty-four missions were as routine as suggested in the film and the twenty-fifth was as dangerous ... that I am somewhat skeptical about. I take most of the film with more than one grain of salt. The drama is pat; the characters are stereotypes. In fact, the script candidly tells you that the characters are going to be stereotypes. "There's always one guy who's very religious, always one guy from Cleveland," we are told in the first scene. So of course we have these cliched characters here. This is n_o_t_T_w_e_l_v_e_O'_C_l_o_c_k_H_i_g_h and it is not one of the great adventure films about World War II. It is, however, a very nice film to look at. The music and the decoration have a nice feel of 1943, even if one can argue that the party is a bit lavish for a humble air base. But the real visual splendor is in seeing genuine B-17s taking off and flying together. I think most people get some sort of a charge out of seeing airplanes flying and there is a lot of flying in this film.

Basically Memphis Belle details for the viewer several of the more common hazards of bombing runs over Germany. You see air battles; you see near-misses, light collisions, and heavy collisions. You see flying through a shower of flak. You see people getting shot up and mid-air surgery. Mostly you see a lot of scenes you have seen in other films. Yet somehow the film falls short of actually generating real excitement or tension. We know the Belle is going to get back and the characters are not real enough and certainly not endearing enough for us really to worry about their individual safety. The film has a few too many contrived touches even to have a feel of authenticity. It has fliers mistaking tomato soup for blood. It has a dog who recognizes the sound of his master's plane engines. Touches like these get in the way of the audience taking the story very seriously.

This is a pretty film to watch but both too shallow in its drama and too unexceptional in its action really to engage an audience. I give it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

HENRY & JUNE

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: Anais Nin's affair with Henry

Miller as recounted in her diary may well be pretentious enough to have pleased her. This is a film with a lot of sex and very little eroticism as Nin demurely and sensitively has sex with anyone who will stand still and then describes it in perfumed prose in her diaries.

Rating: -1 (-4 to +4).

Take these comments with a grain of salt. Films about people's sex and love lives somehow just do not appeal to me, even from excellent filmmakers such as Woody Allen or Philip Kaufman. I rate them much lower than other people seem to. Not that sex itself cannot be interesting, but even a Woody Allen agonizing over why he cannot bed Diane Keaton is for me the formula for a total yawner. Philip Kaufman's last film, T_h_e_U_n_b_e_a_r_a_b_l_e_L_i_g_h_t_n_e_s_s_o_f_B_e_i_n_g, while much in this genre, did have enough substance besides the sexual maneuvering that it held my interest. His current H_e_n_r_y_a_n_d_J_u_n_e is a long film, but not nearly as long as it seems. In spite of the title, the film is mostly about Anais Nin and her early 1930s affair with Henry Miller. The film is based on the account in her memoir of the same title. She makes herself out to be small and in some ways strong, but in most ways she is fragile. She is not entirely satisfied by her banker husband Hugo and is attracted to virile American writer Henry Miller. Awakened by his presence, she proceeds in her frail, sensitive way to have sex with everyone in reach but the housemaid and perhaps the dog (though the dog wasn't talking). She also has a stimulating intellectual relationship with Miller, who is straight-laced enough to limit his sexual partners to only the members of the opposite sex within reach. When one of them is not making love, he or she is agonizing, writing books, or riding bicycles.

Most of the story is told in Nin's voice, which is an acquired taste like candied violets. The camera adopts a soft focus to mirror her writing style. One set, apparently near the house where much of the action happens, is a long walkway next to a wall in night and fog. It looks very much like an impressionist painting. I was hoping we would see it in the daytime or at least without fog, but we never do. I remember no other fog in the film and it is there apparently mostly for effect.

Kaufman underscores that most of what we are seeing is from Nin's point of view by having one sequence be a flashback narrated by Miller. The soft focus is banished and the prose changes to a hard-boiled Raymond Chandler style. Even in Nin's style Fred War may be trying to affect Miller's character but it comes out like Humphrey Bogart. Maria de Medeiros' Nin is a dictionary illustration for "demure" and often

also for "naked." Kaufman has created a tremendous number of nude positions for couples in which the parts that would be most busy are out of sight, perhaps trying for an R rating, or perhaps affecting Anais Nin's point of view. (Of course, the film got first an X rating and then inaugurated the NC-17 rating.) "June" refers, incidentally, to Miller's wife, played by Uma Thurman, who usually is not around.

The film is constantly melodramatic, with deep people feeling deep emotions which we are told about cheaply and superficially. You know you're in trouble when characters start voicing lines like, "Does she think she can love anything in you I haven't loved?" Even if these are real people, these people aren't real. My rating: -1 on the -4 to +4 scale. It might have been lower but for the peculiar background created of Paris in the 1930s.

