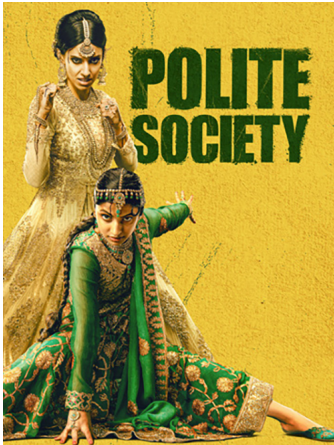


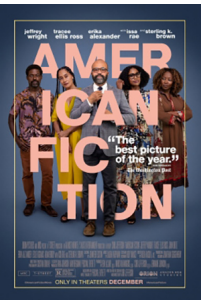
The best movies of 2023

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 29 December 2023 00:00



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Another year has passed in no time at all, which means that many critics groups are listing their favorite films and creating Oscar buzz in the process. Of course, everyone has a different opinion of what the best titles were, but hearing someone explain why a particular feature struck a nerve is what makes these kinds of discussions fun and interesting. With that in mind, this reviewer will let you know what films made a lasting impression on him.

One memorably unique effort is *Polite Society* from Focus Features. It follows a teen in London of Pakistani descent learning that her older sister is about to be married. Upset at losing her sibling, the glowering youth becomes determined to stop the wedding, causes chaos in the process and soon believes that she has uncovered a conspiracy. The movie is carried by young lead Priya Kansara, who manages to deliver comedic beats and a bit of pathos from the possibility of losing her best friend. The filmmakers also successfully create a uniquely amusing world where seemingly ordinary characters get into kung-fu fights. The title is currently available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

As a kid, I always enjoyed watching Godzilla movies, particularly to revel in the enormous, fire-breathing reptile stomp his way through cities. *Godzilla Minus One* from Toho International

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delivers all of this via excellent visual effects work, but it also does something harder and even more remarkable. It makes viewers care about the people fighting for their lives. In fact, after seeing the despairing protagonist suffering from the loss of family members, it's the first time for many where you will want humanity to come out on top. It is currently playing at cinemas in major markets and will be released on disc in the near future.

One surprise is the recent release, *The Iron Claw* from A24. The drama tells the true story of the Von Erichs, a family of professional wrestlers. In particular, it focuses on the four brothers who worked the circuit in the late 1970s through the 80s.

Some believed that the family was cursed and, based on what befell many members, it's an understandable claim. However, the film digs deeper into the family and the immense pressure put upon the brothers that seems to have caused some tragic events. The picture contains excellent performances that create an unexpectedly moving portrait of the wrestlers. It is worth checking out at theaters.

Past Lives is another independent gem that was released by A24. It is available for rental on most streaming services and was also released on Blu-ray. This largely foreign-language effort involves a 12-year-old boy and girl who are friends in Seoul, South Korea.

When the girl moves to North America, she loses contact with her chum. A dozen years later, he attempts to reconnect via video chat calls. They become very close, but lose contact once again for more than a decade. When they eventually get a hold of each other again, the boy (now a 30-something adult) decides to visit and see if there might be a future for them.

It's a quiet, beautiful and bittersweet movie about two characters examining their choices in life and what might have been. The movie resonates long after the credits roll.

One of the year's highest profile titles was Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* biopic. Telling the detailed story of a complicated figure was no easy task, but for patient viewers Nolan manages

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to pull it off. It does build slowly, but everything comes together in the second half of the movie which addresses Oppenheimer's grave concern about the implications of his invention, as well as his treatment by members of the government and those in his scientific community, not to mention the strain he causes on his own personal relationships.

The movie includes a dynamic cast, with lead Cillian Murphy embodying the role and Robert Downey Jr. standing out as a political foe later in life.

This effort from Universal Pictures is out on 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray and is available for rent on most streaming services.

Martin Scorsese's adaptation of the David Grann non-fiction book *Killers of the Flower Moon* is another lengthy but impressive accomplishment examining the shocking treatment of the Osage Nation in Oklahoma by a crime boss who managed to gain a position of power over the entire community. We see the various abuses committed for his own personal benefit and for those under his tutelage.

This is a heavy and somber picture, but benefits from incredible performances and deftly delivers an important message about the injustices committed against the Osage community. It is still playing in some cinemas and will eventually be available to watch on AppleTV+.

The year featured a top notch coming-of-age title as well. Based on the popular Judy Blume children's novel, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* is a near perfect adaptation. Set in 1970, the story involves an 11-year-old girl who moves to a New Jersey suburb. In addition to dealing with typical puberty problems, she also contends with pressure from extended family members of various faiths to choose a religion.

The film does a wonderful job of sensitively handling these issues and the disillusionment that can occur. Young lead Abby Ryder Forston does an exceptional job of carrying the picture and Rachel McAdams is phenomenal as her mother, whose Christian parents have cut contact with her for marrying a Jewish man. This Lionsgate release is out on Blu-ray and can be rented on most streaming services.

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American Fiction from MGM and Orion Pictures has been gaining awards buzz in recent weeks and the acclaim is completely deserved. Jeffrey Wright is sensational in this story about a well-educated author and professor whose books haven't quite sold as well as they should. Frustrated by the success of other Black authors whom he believes populate their novels with stereotypes, he writes an outlandish manuscript that turns out to be a major hit and a literary-award contender.

This hilarious film has a razor-sharp sense of humor, brilliantly exposing biases in the modern world. But it also has a heart, as the lead faces family issues during his professional ordeal. The movie is currently playing at cinemas.

A24's *The Zone of Interest* is a stunner too. Be warned, this incredibly disturbing period drama doesn't have a traditional narrative. It merely follows a German household through their daily rituals. But as it soon becomes horrifyingly clear, the family is that of the Commandant of Auschwitz. The prison camp is just over a backyard wall and is never visible.

Instead, we watch the official discuss upgrades to the camp. His wife, her servants and visitors rummage through suitcases, chat about future plans, all the while maintaining a perfect-looking household. As this occurs, viewers hear muffled shots and screams.

There's never been a film that has told The Holocaust from this perspective and it's chilling to witness a family with blinders on, ignoring the agony all around them. The photography is top-notch, the sound design is incredible and while there is no violence in the movie, it is stomach-churning. This is a powerful feature that makes one feel complicit in all the wrongs being committed in the world and this reviewer found it unforgettable.

And finally, for something more hopeful, *The Holdovers* from Focus Features is another magnificent effort. This tale of three cast-outs at a boarding school forced to spend the winter holiday together features many familiar story elements, but the performances are outstanding and the events all play out in unexpected ways. These damaged characters bicker humorously among themselves and are compelling to watch from beginning to end.

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In a movie filled with comedic and dramatic moments, each is perfectly handled to maximum effect. The filmmakers have sought to emulate character-based dramas from the early 1970s and every note is perfect. It's a wonderful little movie that delivers a bit of hope for the future. It's still playing in a few cinemas around the country and can also be rented on streaming services.

Additionally, some other solid efforts include *May December* (Netflix), the wrestling biopic *Cassandro*

(Amazon Prime), the animated features

Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget (

Netflix),

Robot Dreams

(which will be released in the U.S. by Neon in the coming weeks) and the Japanese effort

The Boy and the Heron

(GKids).

Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One

(Paramount) and

John Wick: Chapter 4

(Lionsgate) deliver plenty of action thrills. For arthouse aficionados who don't mind movies with an interpretive finale,

All of Us Strangers

(Amazon Prime) features some remarkable performances.

Those looking for more international fare should check out the working-class Finnish rom-com *Fallen Leaves* (

Mubi) for its deadpan sense of humor, as well as

Anatomy of a Fall

(Neon), a beautifully acted French drama about a wife accused of murder after her husband mysteriously plummets from an upper floor window.

That's it for 2023. Here's hoping for plenty more great films in the coming year.

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