

Films Shining Light on Three Lives that Mattered

Kathy Winings
February 3, 2020



The great thing about movies is they often shine light on amazing people or bring to our attention issues that need to see the light of day. Last holiday season did not disappoint in doing both.



Kathy Winings

Three noteworthy 2019 films offer audiences not only Oscar-worthy performances but also a great deal of food for thought: "Harriet," "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," and "Richard Jewell."

"Harriet" not only gives us important information about the beginnings of a courageous 19th century freedom fighter but finally addresses a long-standing omission in our historical knowledge.

"A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" moves our hearts and reaffirms the power that one ordinary person holds when they take the time to listen and offer genuine love and compassion to another soul.

And, "Richard Jewell" stirs our sense of righteousness as we witness an injustice that took too long to correct.

Growing up in the American public school system in the 1960s and 1970s, one topic was standard for U.S. history classes: the American Civil War. Key themes always included the causes of the war, the Gettysburg Address, significant battles, and, of course, the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Though some textbooks noted the "Underground Railroad," it was not a major focus in the schools I attended. If abolitionist Harriet Tubman was mentioned at all, it was more of an historical footnote than spotlighting a woman who helped bring hundreds of slaves to freedom.

We learned she was connected to the Underground Railroad but little more than that. Whether because we knew little about her at that time or as a black woman, she was sadly deemed not important enough, and the result was the same. A generation of people grew up without appreciation of her immense contributions to American anti-slavery efforts, women's rights and social justice. However, "Harriet" begins to correct this omission.

The film opens with Tubman's own extraordinary brave flight from slavery in eastern Maryland, a harrowing 100 mile journey taken alone on foot. Harriet (played by English actress, singer and songwriter Cynthia Erivo), fearing she will be sold by her slaveholders, the Brodess family, and separated from her new husband, John Tubman, a free Black man, experienced first-hand the lifeline that involved the compassionate families and clergy who were the Underground Railroad between the slave-based South and freedom in the North.

On reaching Philadelphia, Harriet does not sit still. During her first year of freedom, Tubman writes her husband and family frequently, but hears nothing from them. She finally realizes she has no other option than to return to Maryland and free her family. Thus begins her calling as a freedom fighter and one of the early conductors on the Underground Railroad. From that point, the film gives us glimpses of some of her freedom journeys, leaving no doubt just how dangerous these trips were for both Harriet and her those she brought to freedom.

The film is powerful and engaging. Erivo's memorable performance as Tubman demonstrates why she is nominated for a Best Actress Oscar (as well as for co-writing a Best Original Song nominee, the film's "Stand Up"). What makes this movie stand out from the books written about Tubman is the role of divine guidance in her life. Though Tubman was known as "Moses" among slavers and slaves alike, her ability to hear God's voice during her dangerous trips on the Underground Railroad was often questioned or dismissed as a result of being struck in the head by a slave owner when young or a sign of mental instability. This recurring theme, though, is what adds depth to this telling of Tubman's story.



The official trailer for "Harriet" (courtesy Focus Features).

During challenging times, it is God who speaks to Harriet and who gives her the strength, vision and guidance to continue her calling. This distinctive perspective of Tubman's life is what gives meaning to her passion and commitment to freedom. Her passion for freedom for all did not end with the 1865 surrender of Lee at the Appomattox courthouse. After the Civil War, Tubman turned her attention to women's suffrage, working alongside Susan B. Anthony and Emily Howland. It is ironic that one of the most courageous women in American history was not paid for much of her work and ultimately died penniless in upstate New York.

The dialogue and screenplay are bare bones and straightforward. In another film, that might have been the death of the movie. For "Harriet" though, it is what allows the brutality of slavery and strength of Tubman's conviction to be felt. This movie reminds us a film does not always need a brilliant script or stunning cinematography to make a deep impact. For me, "Harriet" made quite an impression and reminded me we could use some Harriet Tubmans who can serve as modern-day conductors.

Few over 45 in America have not heard the opening strains of "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood/A beautiful day in the neighborhood/Will you be mine?/Will you be mine?" from the PBS children's television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I don't know what you thought of the long-running show or its theme song, but I used to think it was the most inane thing on TV. Who could possibly like Mr. Rogers? The program had very low tech production values. The songs seemed simplistic. And the content bordered on sappy.

That used to be my image of Fred Rogers -- until I saw "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" with Tom Hanks, nominated for the Best Supporting Actor Oscar as Fred Rogers, and Mathew Rhys as journalist Lloyd Vogel. Based on a 1998 *Esquire* article on Rogers, the film presents a personal view of this beloved clergyman, trained at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, who America came to know as Mr. Rogers, doing what he does best -- listening to others.

The film creatively makes use of the same type of simple animated elements for which *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was known for all of the transitions between scenes. Of course, no film about Fred Rogers could ignore other iconic elements for which he was famous, such as his cardigan sweater, blue sneakers and puppets. The film gives us two perspectives. On one hand, it is framed as if it is an episode of *Mister*

Roger's Neighborhood in which Rogers introduces the audience to his friend Lloyd Vogel, a journalist who is so sad and unable to forgive. On the other hand, it is about Vogel forced to take on an assignment he feels is a waste of his time while he is in the midst of fighting his own personal demons.



The official trailer for "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" (courtesy Sony Pictures).

Vogel, an investigative reporter, is asked to do a simple story on Rogers for a major magazine, an assignment quite different from his usual cutting edge, hard core investigative stories. In the middle of tackling an assignment he clearly does not want to do, Vogel, a new father, is confronted with his hatred and anger concerning his own father -- a man he believed was unfaithful to his wife while she was dying, something for which Vogel could not forgive his father. A cynical man with issues of his own, Vogel reluctantly begins his assignment convinced Rogers is too good to be true and must be a man with something to hide. What he ends up experiencing, though, is a humble, simple, imperfect man with a generous heart who is completely and genuinely focused on whomever he is speaking to at the time.

Though the film is not a biopic about Fred Rogers, one learns more about the man and his life than by reading his biography because it gives us a very personal look as if we are peering into his soul. In the process of watching Rogers patiently trying to penetrate Vogel's cynical shell to reach his heart, we learn what concerned Rogers in his life, what gave him strength and what replenished his soul. We see Rogers candidly expressing to Vogel his concern about being a good father himself and the impact his public fame and image was having on his two sons.

At the same time, though, he impresses upon Vogel how being surrounded by one's family and being able to forgive and love is the secret to a peaceful and worthwhile life. During one visit to Rogers' Pennsylvania home, Vogel awakens to the strains of a beautiful piano duet only to find out that it is Rogers and his wife sharing a musical moment on their twin grand pianos. This is how Vogel learns the essential role of music in Fred Rogers' life. More importantly, we are vividly shown in the film what it means to truly engage another person -- to not just hear them but genuinely listen to hear their words as well as their heart.

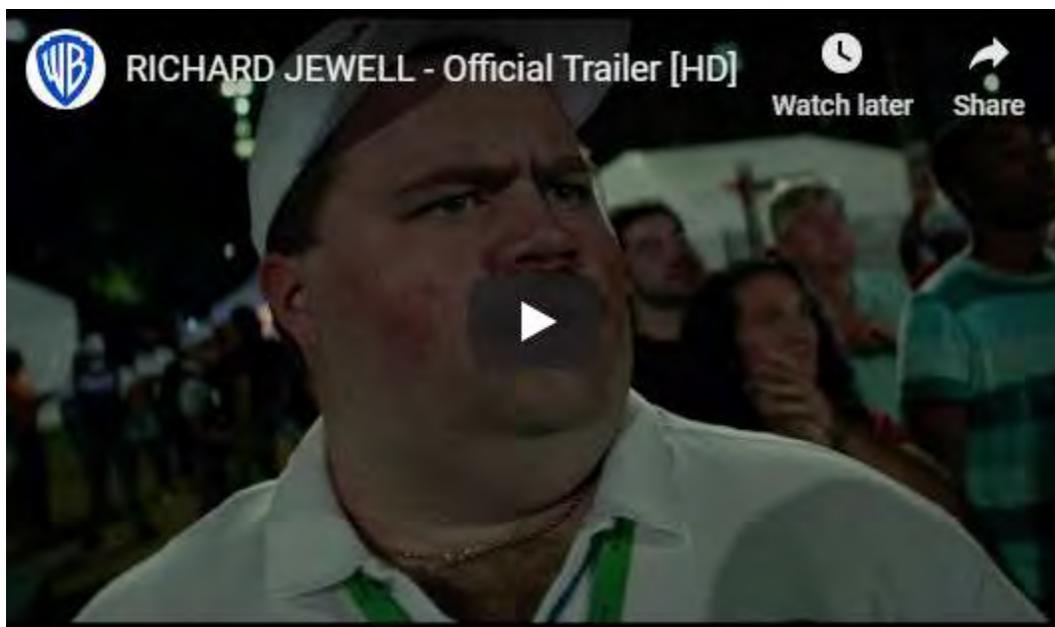
I came away from the film with greater appreciation for Fred Rogers and what he was trying to do through his *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* show. It lasted 31 seasons (1968-2001), longer than an old children's favorite, *Captain Kangaroo* (1955-84). Rogers not only wrote but performed most of the songs on the show and was the main puppeteer as well. There was not an issue he shied away from. Rogers believed children needed someone to help them understand the difficult world around them. When the movie ended, all I could do was to sit and try to digest this thought-provoking and inspiring film.

The third standout film this season is Clint Eastwood's "Richard Jewell." Jewell was the security guard on duty the night a bomb detonated in Centennial Park in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 1996 Summer Olympics. Jewell was initially hailed a hero for saving hundreds of lives but subsequently became the FBI's prime suspect in the bombing. Jewell (Paul Walter Hauser), a single man living with his mother, Bobi (Kathy Bates), had bounced from job to job, hoping one day to work for law enforcement. During one of his jobs, he makes the acquaintance of Watson Bryant (Sam Rockwell), an attorney and one of the few who does not treat Richard with disrespect. This proves to be a most opportune relationship for Jewell.

Serious about his new job as a security officer, Jewell conducts his rounds in Centennial Park each night with zeal. On July 27, 1996, while a band played to a crowded park, Jewell spots an unattended backpack and immediately alerts the police. The officers check the bag and find a bomb inside, but the bomb squad

is called a bit too late. Although two are killed and 111 injured, because of Jewell's fast thinking and determination, hundreds more are saved from injury or death. His heroism makes headlines. Publishers are calling about book deals and news organizations are vying to interview him.

The FBI is anxious to make an arrest as quickly as it can, with none more eager than agent Tom Shaw (Jon Hamm), who was on duty in the park the night of the bombing. From this point forward, Shaw sets his sights on Jewell as the prime suspect for the bombing through a bizarre combination of elements. A previous employer of Jewell contacts the FBI noting his fears that Jewell could have been the bomber because he always wanted to be a hero. An FBI profiler subsequently describes Jewell as fitting the profile of someone who creates a disaster in order to save the day. At the behest of the FBI, an acquaintance of Jewell secretly tapes a dinner conversation with Jewell in which he describes how the bomb could have been made in response to his friend's questions about the incident. All these isolated events conspire to paint Jewell as the Centennial Park bomber in the mind of the FBI.



The official trailer for "Richard Jewell" (courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures).

The situation kicks into high gear after Kathy Scroggs, a reporter eager to get a scoop for the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, writes a front page article naming Jewell as the FBI's prime suspect in the bombing, a story she says is confirmed by Agent Shaw. Overnight, Jewell goes from hero to villain. He quickly becomes the sole target of the investigation. His life and that of his mother and close friend are turned upside down as the FBI goes through every detail of his life, combing through the apartment he shares with his mother and carting off boxes, hoping to formally charge him with the bombing if they only can find enough evidence or obtain a confession.

Jewell is portrayed as a trusting, somewhat simple man who is deferential to law enforcement because respect for authority has been engrained in him from early life. Plus, Jewell sees himself as a kindred spirit to the FBI and police; as a security guard, he is one of them. In a moment of insight, though, Jewell decides to contact Bryant, the one attorney he knows.

From that point, the film focuses on the FBI's need to find solid evidence of Jewell's guilt and Bryant's efforts to protect Jewell and his mother from the media's innuendos, the questionable tactics of law enforcement and from Jewell himself. Ultimately, three months after the investigation began, Jewell is notified in writing that the FBI investigation of him has been dismissed. Eight years later, serving as a police officer in Luthersville, Georgia, Jewell learns that an Eric Rudolph confessed to the Centennial Park bombing.

Eastwood, who directed "Richard Jewell," is known for tackling stories about underdogs and injustice. Like a modern-day Don Quixote, he tilts at windmills, and the story of Jewell is no exception. This is simply a story Eastwood wanted to tell. For her portrayal of Bobi Jewell, Bates was nominated for Best Supporting Actress at the Golden Globes and is also nominated for an Oscar in this category.

I found the film thought-provoking and moving because it puts front and center how our perceptions and misperceptions of people can be so damaging and hurtful. These same perceptions can easily cause us to rush to wrong conclusions. Jewell was the type of person one often looks at and dismisses because he does not fit our concept of someone we should pay attention to, someone who is successful, and who has something to say. The movie also reminded me that once a reputation has been damaged, it is very difficult to change public perception.

After the bombing in Centennial Park, I remember attentively watching the news because I had friends

working at Olympic venues in Atlanta and who were in the park on different evenings. I was concerned if any had been there when the bomb went off. I remember the reports of Jewell as the FBI's prime suspect. However, I do not recall later hearing he was exonerated because the conclusion of the investigation did not hit the major news outlets. Nor did we read about any apologies offered to Jewell.

While the Centennial Park bombing was pre-9/11, the challenge we face living in an increasingly violent world with a growing list of groups fueled by resentment, revenge and anger is our push for justice. We want justice for these acts of terrorism and prefer it be done quickly. But when we rush justice, we usually make mistakes as seen in Jewell's case. Our other challenge is the growing sense of cynicism that many harbor. We want to think the best of people but, at the same time, we increasingly doubt that someone can be a genuine hero and act altruistically. While the public wanted to believe Jewell was a real hero, just the hint he may have had another motive was enough for people to quickly change their view of him and believe he was the bomber.

Three films about three people from different time periods who lived lives counterintuitive to the general population -- a freedom fighter, a caring, compassionate television personality, and a security officer who wanted to protect his community. These films challenge us to reflect on the larger issues concerning God's role in our lives, who we are as human beings, and learning to love and living for the greater good. Not bad for a trip to the movies.

"Harriet" (rated PG-13): Running time: 125 minutes. Directed by Kasi Lemmons; written by Gregory Allen Howard and Kasi Lemmons. Main cast: Cynthia Erivo, Leslie Odom, Jr., Joe Alwyn, and Janelle Monáe. See IMDb for full details. Now available for streaming from iTunes, YouTube Movies, and Amazon Prime Video.

"A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" (rated PG): Running time: 109 minutes. Directed by Marielle Heller; written by Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster. Main cast: Tom Hanks, Matthew Rhys, Susan Kelechi Watson, and Chris Cooper. See IMDb for full details. Available soon for streaming from iTunes, YouTube Movies, and Amazon Prime Video.

"Richard Jewell" (rated R): Running time: 129 minutes. Directed by Clint Eastwood; written by Billy Ray. Main cast: Paul Walter Hauser, Sam Rockwell, Kathy Bates, Jon Hamm, and Olivia Wilde. See IMDb for full details. Available soon for streaming from iTunes, YouTube Movies, and Amazon Prime Video.

Dr. Kathy Winings is Professor of Religious Education and Ministry; Director, Maryland Instructional Site; and Director, Doctor of Ministry Program at UTS. Dr. Winings is also Vice President of the Board of Directors for the International Relief Friendship Foundation.

Photo at top: Cynthia Erivo as Harriet Tubman (courtesy Focus Features).