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The Secret Life of Bees

Directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood

Set in rural North Carolina in 1964, 14-year-old Lily (Dakota Fanning) is running away from her intolerant father, pushed by memories of her mother's accidental death and by the fear that she is an "unlovable" child. Accompanied by her caregiver, Rosalee (Jennifer Hudson), the two find their way to the Pepto-Bismol pink house of the Boatwright sisters: August, June and May (Queen Latifah, Alicia Keys, Sophie Okonedo) - beekeepers who successfully produce their own honey.

There's a hint of mystique in Lily's infatuation with the Boatwrights - a tenacious, yet uncertain need to stay and find the love she believes has escaped her life. Yet Lily is a minor, and Rosaleen's in trouble with the law, and in the South, the newly legislated Civil Rights Act is fanning the embers of tenuous change, crumbling generations of segregation.

Lily is colorblind and quickly finds comfort amid the quirky Boatwrights. But her past begins to encroach upon her new-found happiness... which is probably a good place to end any further revelation. *The Secret Life of Bees* is one of those movies you really should know little about; other than this tender, intelligent fable is a drama-lover's delight.

The cast (including Paul Bettany as Lily's emotionally abusive father) is sterling. If there were Oscar nominations for Best Ensemble Film, the buzz (sorry, couldn't resist) would have been all about Bees.

There's very little wrong with this tale, and nothing a hanky or two won't fix. And if you can overlook a few coincidences, a few puzzle pieces perhaps falling too easily into place (I did), the resulting journey is most memorable. It's a coming-of-age tale, and not only Lily's; in a sense, the entire country is in midst of a change due to the racial turmoil of the mid-60s. Yeah, it's about race, but it's more about love. And, as we all know, sometimes love hurts.

Even if you do suspect where this one might end up, you really don't mind getting there. The journey's worth it. And bees really do have a secret life. "Don't want to get stung?" asks August Boatwright. "Send the bees your love."

Sage advice for all of us.

Reviewed by Dave Workman

Posted 8/3/2010
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The Horse Boy

A Father's Quest to Heal His Son
By Rupert Isaacson
Little, Brown & Company, 2009

File this under the category of: 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.' When Part One of *The Horse Boy* begins with the sentence, "In April 2004 my son, Rowan, was diagnosed with autism. The feeling was like being hit across the face with a baseball bat," you can't help but feel empathy for the parents of seven-year-old Rowan, and simultaneously grateful that it's someone else's story.

The Horse Boy is about a journey of incredible faith, a belief in miracles, and a father's undeniable desire to help rescue his son from the clutches of a lifetime of painful collisions with the 'real' world. Chronicling the journey with a play-by-play of what they see and encounter along their journey through a country that couldn't be more foreign ("Modernity intruded only along the narrow strip of tire-worn highway"), Isaacson also allows us to be part of the inner sanctum of parents with autistic children; and it isn't an easy task. You can certainly feel his pain as a father who's quite simply unable to help his son, yet driven by an unerring commitment to do so.

Like many autistic children, Rowan is inexplicably drawn to animals. Perhaps it's their gentle nature; perhaps it's the general lack of noise and commotion that surrounds them. But ultimately, the animal Rowan most connects with are horses. To that end, Isaacson takes us backwards and forwards through time - explaining how *he* had first found the healing power of horse when he was a boy, and then how he'd discovered that Rowan, too, has a special bond with them when he discovered his connection to a neighbor's horse named Betsy.

The discovery that Rowan has an uncanny connection to horses comes by accident, but once Isaacson makes the observation he devises a plan to take his son by horseback through the far reaches of outer Mongolia to seek help from shamans - most especially a man named Ghoste, who is one of the few remaining "Reindeer People."

While the writing is not Pulitzer-caliber ("I took off my plastic Crocs, and as the rain intensified once more, and to the accompaniment of a new set of shrieks so sharp, so shrill, that they reverberated behind the eyeballs"), there's no denying that it's from the heart. When Isaacson relates to the reader what an enormous accomplishment it is for Rowan to complete a sentence with an independent thought, or to keep himself from defecating in his pants, you celebrate these tiny victories as well.

Rowan is not only helped by the shaman of the Reindeer People while in Mongolia, but is able to return to his life in Austin, Texas, healed for good - with the understanding that he will never really be "cured" of his autism; it will be a part of him and his personality for the rest of his life. But the bridges that were built between the solitary confinement of his autism before he left, and his ability to live and connect with the "real" world that the rest of us inhabit, are nothing short of miraculous.

"Rowan is still autistic," writes Isaacson. "His essence, his many talents, are all tied

up with it. He has been healed of the terrible dysfunctions that afflicted him - his physical and emotional incontinence, his neurological firestorms, his anxiety and hyperactivity. But he has not been cured. Nor would I want him to be. To 'cure' him, in terms of trying to tear the autism out, now seems to me completely wrong. Can Rowan keep learning the skills necessary to swim in our world while retaining the magic of his own? It seems a tangible dream." That statement is a far cry from the desperate yearnings of Isaacson at the start of the journey.

As any grateful father would do, he thanks many individuals in the Acknowledgments pages at the book's end. But it is perhaps the last sentence of those grateful words that are the most endearing: "And Betsy. How do I thank Betsy? Suffice to say that I have never been so indebted to another living being as I am to you. Perhaps, in another life, it'll be my turn to carry you. It would be only fitting."

Reviewed by Erin Caslavka
Posted 7/20/2010
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Seabiscuit

Directed by Gary Ross

Although many true stories combine elements of greatness - heroics in battle or survival against inhospitable elements - few films manage to successfully capture such tales. But once in awhile a film rises above the ordinary, from a seemingly random juncture of chance and circumstance. Based on the best seller by Laura Hillenbrand, *Seabiscuit* is a gentle film of fortitude and courage (the very elements of greatness), centered around a small and repeatedly dismissed thoroughbred that raced into legend over 60 years ago.

*Seabiscuit i*s the story of three unspectacular men whose lives and that of an ungainly, undersized animal intertwine, and capture the heart of America at a time when the country desperately needed winners. The spirit of America is ambition, after all, defined by a sense of purpose. As separate entities, Seabiscuit's owner, Charles Howard (Jeff Bridges), trainer Tom Smith (Chris Cooper) and jockey Red Pollard (Tobey Maguire), lack both ambition and purpose. But together, as an unlikely team, they find it again. The film wonderfully, almost magically relates that formula of success - why Seabiscuit the animal resonated with Depression-era America - and why *Seabiscuit* the film is likely to resonate with audiences today. It is the classic American success story.

But the film is also a visually stunning and multi-dimensional ride through 1930's Americana. It is swiftly paced, finely tuned and told with great clarity, and contains some of the most impressively choreographed racing sequences I've ever seen. *Seabiscuit* is not a yawner. The dialog is crisp and smart, and those moments of humor (there are many) come from the heart. It's a refreshing treat to see a film that doesn't cater to the throw-away one-liner and respects the intelligence of its audience.

The film admittedly displays an overt, almost mythical sentimentality that some may dismiss as trite, but what are our heroes without their pedestals? Anyone willing to step away from the deluge of pyrotechnics and road-rage demolitions will come to realize that sometimes it's the smallest stories that become the most powerful tales.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 7/2/2010
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Oceans

Narrated by Pierce Brosnan

Remember 2007's visually stunning documentary *Earth*? Well, *Oceans* is quite similar...just wetter. In terms of cinematography, it's a top-notch, family-oriented, mind-expanding treat. In terms of a learning experience—well, let's just call it Aquanautics 101, more eye candy than relevant info.

Nothing wrong with that, but for those who yearn for more than just a passing glance at the astounding inhabitants of our planet's five oceans, this film is merely an appetizer.

There's little doubt, however, of Disney's marketing brilliance. I suspect *Oceans* is simply a calling card, a prelude to what will likely become a boxed set, similar to the 11-DVD *Planet Earth* set (2006) that preceded the theatrical release of *Earth*.

In my opinion, the BBC's *Planet Earth* series is one of the most extraordinary and essential documentary films ever made, a must for classrooms and home film libraries. Whether or not *Oceans* expands to include a more in-depth, equally relevant DVD set remains to be seen. However, given the film's remarkable effort, I suspect an extended collection will be forthcoming.

Co-directed by Jacques Perrin, who also directed the exceptional *Winged Migration* (Le Peuple Migrateur) in 2001 (see review below), *Oceans* is a marvelous glimpse of life below the waves. It gets up close and personal with a host of rarely seen and magnificent creatures, documenting their lives and the often peculiar habits of their existence.

While *Oceans* is a family film, I suspect children under the age of 4 or 5 will be bored. (There's minimal bloodshed; an occasional orca snatches a hapless seal, but the action is quick and the cameras do not linger.) And while there are some kid-friendly sequences—fighting crabs, dancing dolphin, spooky sharks—the brisk, matter-of-fact sequencing, however phenomenal for older kids and adults, will prove less interesting to smaller children.

For true aquatic aficionados, *Oceans* will provide too little earnest information about the creatures we're viewing. I don't blame the film; covering Earth's five oceans in under 90 minutes is a daunting task. So we landlubbers must be content with watching exceptional photography, viewing part of the planet that most of us—those not donning scuba gear—will never witness.

For environmentalists, the film makes an earnest yet minimal attempt to point out how neglect, pollution and overfishing are damaging this essential natural resource. There's the obligatory fish-in-the-net sequence, and the baby seal swimming through a sea of plastic rubbish, but for the most part the film looks not at what we've helped destroy, but at what remains pristine and untouched. For those hoping that *Oceans* is a call to arms, it's not—it's more an uplifting, fascinating travelogue.

However, one possible far-reaching benefit of films like *Oceans* and *Earth*—and this reviewer's personal wish—is that zoos will someday be rendered obsolete. To those of us who've witnessed bottle-nosed dolphin laconically paddling around bare holding tanks and have then caught even a quick glimpse of a school frolicking in the Pacific waves, there's no question where wildlife belongs.

To view these creatures—all creatures—unharmed and unfettered, in a film like *Oceans*, provides a far more gratifying (not to mention humane) experience. Maybe it's time we did free Willy.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 6/11/10
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Planet Earth - BBC Series

Narrated by David Attenborough

Using a powerful, high-tech, mounted camera suspended from a helicopter that can film animals up to 1km (about .6 miles) away, photographers working on the celebrated BBC series have captured a variety of animals in both extreme close-ups and wide-angle shots to show them in relationship to the vast expanses of land they travel over. The quest to film the elusive snow leopard became a three-year effort that necessitated cameramen and researchers going into war-torn Pakistan near the Afghanistan border, and holing up in a remote region of the Himalayas. "This is tedious stuff," remarks cameraman Doug Allen to no one in particular.

But the overall beauty of the series are the impromptu moments captured on film: a pair of golden eagles capturing a crane in mid-air; an immense great white shark bounding up and out of the water with a ferocity that defies description; underwater footage of elephants swimming in the Okavango delta; and baboons that predominantly eat grass and spend their days chattering and grooming amongst themselves high atop craggy peaks in Ethiopia.

There are also lessons to be learned amidst the attendant beauty (and ferocity) of the animals captured on film. A giant panda, whose diet consists solely of bamboo and therefore can't hibernate because she lacks the fatty tissue to sustain herself, is filmed inside a cave as she tenderly nurses her newborn cub. Small mountain bears called red pandas rarely seen in the wild are also somehow found by the ever-vigilant and committed wildlife photographers.

Slow-motion and time-lapse photography are utilized brilliantly to highlight the magnitude and wonder of the interaction between animals and their natural surroundings, with perhaps an overemphasis on the needs of many of these creatures to feed themselves - oftentimes at the expense of other injured, elderly, or newborn animals. Still, there's no denying that *is* life - on planet Earth.

Reviewed by Erin Caslavka
Posted 5/17/10
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Babe

Directed by Chris Noonan

It seems disingenuous sometimes for a critic to recommend "family films" that are truly perfect for an entire family; so it's rare to find a film like this one: a marvelous film for literally everyone. *Babe* is a live-action, magical fable from Australia about farm animals who talk, emote, frolic and utterly fascinate children. The star of the film is a piglet — soon to be Christmas dinner, unless he can turn the tables on the farmer (a wonderfully staid James Cromwell) who owns him. Of course, Babe befriends every other animal in the barnyard, bumbles through adventures galore, and come Christmas...well, not to worry. *Babe* is a marvelous story about tolerence, pride, behavior and respect that serves as great kid fodder. Except for the fact that Babe's mother dies early in the film (a common occurance in Disney flicks as well),

it's entirely kid-friendly and filled with moral (and often hilarious) values, making it a great family treat.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 5/1/10
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Winged Migration (Le Peuple Migrateur)

Directed by Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud and Michel Debats

Sparse on narration, the visuals instead speak volumes about various species (cranes, storks, geese) on many continents, as they undertake the seasons and cycles of their lives. From hatchlings through nesting, first flight, and enduring thousand-mile migrations - to the inevitability of death - the filmmakers capture these splendid creatures with beauty, joy and occasional sadness. *Winged Migration* is a birds-eye, up-close revelation of these creatures (often filmed in-flight by the filmmakers). It's sometimes difficult to believe the film is 100% live-action (no digital or "CG" imagery was used). Much of the dazzling photography was captured from ultralight aircraft and hot-air balloons that trailed the flocks.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 4/15/10
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March of the Penguins (La Marche de l'Empereur)

Directed by Luc Jacquet

Co-produced by the National Geographic Society, the film is a fascinating, groundbreaking effort to depict the annual cycle of Antarctica's population of emperor penguins. Each fall, adult penguins leave their coastal fishing grounds and trudge inland to ancestral breeding grounds, where males and females court and breed. The females trek back to the coast to "fatten up" for their new families, while the males tend to the eggs and hatchlings amid the world's most brutal of winters. Thanks to the diligence of the filmmakers and to technology (digital, hi-res cameras that can withstand sub-freezing temperatures), the imagery and detail of Antarctic life is extraordinary. The creatures, seemingly oblivious to human intrusion, carry on their daily activities without concern - and the result is a marvelously "real" experience.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 4/15/10
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Arctic Tale

Directed by Adam Revetch and Sarah Robertson

National Geographic Film's 2007 documentary *Arctic Tale* tells the intersecting story of two ice-dwelling mammals: a walrus pup they've named "Sela," and a polar bear cub called "Nanu." The film highlights the challenges these creatures face due to their changing environments and deteriorating landscapes, and attempts to bring attention to the global warming issue. The latter goal, however, falls short as the film is ultimately more sentimental than informative. (Though Queen Latifa, who narrates the documentary, does leave room for touches of both comedy and tragedy via vocal inflections and dramatic delivery.)

In the beginning, we witness the wild and windy landscape of the Arctic plain, and we meet both Sela and Nanu for the first time. Nanu's black nose peeks out from inside her mother's den. She takes in the vastness of "Snow Mountain," having no

idea that the world she has entered into is less forgiving than her mother's. In an effort to establish what seems to be a matriarchal subtext, the film then moves to Sela and her two female guardians.

Two adult female walruses guard Sela: one is her mother, and the other is a walrus dubbed by Latifa as "Auntie." After referring to the walrus group as "family" while they crowd onto an ice raft, the film tries to keep things light as the Sister Sledge classic "We Are Family" pipes out over the footage. Shortly after a clam hunt, they proceed in making noises that suggest the creatures are passing gas - a moment that might appeal to the more juvenile members of the viewing audience.

Meanwhile, Nanu's mother teaches her two cubs how to hunt a fur seal. Underscoring the message that "life in the wilderness is hard," the mother bear is lost on the ice. Sensing that it's unsafe, she calls to her cubs and urges them to go back. The most endearing portion of this documentary is both the mother walrus and bear's sense of duty to protect their offspring from danger.

In trying to protect their young, they pay great prices. The mother bear fails to find food in time to save her young male cub, leaving only her and Nanu. In order to teach her a lesson, she forces Nanu away so she may learn to fend for herself. (This portion of the film may be tough for younger viewers.) Eventually this leads Nanu to Rock Island, and it is there that the paths of the two animals collide.

It is clear these animals are desperate. They sniff the sea gales in order to catch the scent of sea ice so that they may return home. But the amount of sea ice is dwindling every year, and they have less and less grounds to hunt and fewer ice rafts to rest upon. Though all turns out will in the end for both Sela and Nanu, the film closes with its bleak, but important, message: "The Arctic's summer sea ice has shrunk by 20 in recent decades. If the current trend continues, the Arctic Ocean could be virtually ice-free in the summer of 2040."

Reviewed by Jennifer C. Cook
Posted 4/1/10
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Marley & Me

Directed by David Frankel

A shamelessly gratuitous dog-lover's film, *Marley & Me* is based on the bestseller from Miami columnist John Grogan, who made a living regaling his Labrador retriever's exploits as "the world's worst dog." (An up-front confession: I reside with two golden retrievers and a lumbering Great Pyrenees, which qualifies me as a dog person. My youngest dog uses the cat as his own personal trainer/chew toy — so yeah, our pets entertain us with endless antics, enough to fill volumes.)

Marley & Me is decently entertaining for those of us who've found keys, belt buckles and parts of furniture at the wrong end of our pooches. Marley (named after Bob, by the way) begins his life at a puppy farm, taken home by a young couple as a pre-child test drive of sorts. One can only deduce that, if you can't handle a puppy, you're probably not ready for children yet. Marley was a barometer.

Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston nicely play John and Jennifer Grogan, and the film documents their years with the irascible, untrainable Marley. Wilson's one of those quintessential boy-and-his-dog type actors, and the film is at its best when John Grogan and Marley are bonding in so many interesting, saliva-prone ways.

No disrespect for Aniston, but the film's at its worst when married life intrudes. *Marley & Me* was written as a duet, after all — quite literally the interaction between a boy and his dog. But the film becomes (and one can imagine all that contractual hoopla about equal screen time) a dog-and-family story, and to some extent suffers for it.

But *Marley & Me* isn't a kidflick either — not at all a shaggy-dog Disneyesque treat for the entire family. Jennifer Grogan miscarries, there's some marital strife; it's more a tale of John Grogan's coming-of-age that happens to include a wife, a dog, a career and eventually three kids. Younger children will be bored...

It's cute in all the right places, though, and - when an aging Marley begins to fail - tearful in all the right places as well. I've heard more than a few critics describe the film's two-hanky ending as over-the-top, but I expect those people aren't dog lovers. You lose a pet and, for some of us, the world caves in. So, the violins weep (as does the audience), but there's genuine affection up there on the screen, genuine love, and in the end, *Marley & Me* proves itself canine-worthy and, for dog lovers, a hearttingly and satisfying film.

Reviewed by Dave Workman
Posted 3/16/10
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Grizzly Man

Directed by Werner Herzog

What happens when a man takes it upon himself to anthropomorphize an animal, especially one that's "wild"? And if in the end that animal fails to behave like a human, who do we fault: man or beast?

In the 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*, that question gets explored as we get a close-up look at the life of self-professed grizzly bear "expert" Timothy Treadwell, who (along with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard) was mauled to death several years ago in the wilds of Alaska. For thirteen years, Treadwell collected approximately 100 hours of video footage from his camping trips to the 49th state, with the hope of bringing protection for (and a deeper understanding of) the bears he had come to love.

The relationship between Treadwell and "his bears" is explored by integrating Treadwell's footage with after-the-fact interviews Herzog conducted. The verdict, however, as to whether or not Treadwell's mission was noble or ignorant of the consequences, is left up to the viewer to decide.

Early in the film, Treadwell (via his self-shot footage) introduces us to "the Grinch," a bear he openly admits to being aggressive. She threatens him, and in response, Treadwell yells at her as though she were a domesticated dog behaving badly. Eventually, of course, we learn that Treadwell and Huguenard are mauled to death by the grizzly bears they had come to love and mistakenly considered to be like an extended family.

In contrast, helicopter pilot Sam Egli provides a gruesome description of what little remained of the two. After having witnessed "four garbage bags full of people," Egli states he believes Treadwell was behaving as though the bears were "people wearing bear costumes out there, instead of wild animals." In Egli's opinion, Treadwell got what he deserved.

Inuit Museum curator Sven Haakonson offers his own insights as he describes Treadwell's story as a tragedy because of his and Huguenard's deaths; however, he believes "the Grizzly Man" crossed a boundary that has always existed between men and bears. And as Herzog himself asserts, Treadwell often tried to interfere with the laws of nature: in support, we witness a scene with Treadwell screaming and begging for rain, as if somehow he had the power to affect that change.

Despite the tragic outcome, Treadwell's intentions appear essentially good. While there is no argument that wild animals deserve to be protected, how to protect them is still a subject open for debate. As the line between bear and human began to blur in his mind, the man who acted like the grizzlies were his to befriend made the fatal mistake of assuming that they were doing the same. And perhaps that is where the fault lies: in Treadwell's inability to realize just how dangerous "his bears" could be.

Reviewed by Jennifer Cook
Posted 3/1/10
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The Meerkats

Directed by James Honeyborne

The Meerkats, a feature-length 2008 BBC Film directed by James Honeyborne and narrated by Paul Newman, offers viewers a chance to witness the surprisingly emotional (and humanlike) struggles and joys of one meerkat family in the Kalahari Desert. Centered on the life of Kolo, the youngest of the meerkat bunch, the 83-minute film focuses on the many dangers that pose a threat to the tight-knit family as they do their best to survive in the "land of great thirst."

With narration written by Alexander McCall Smith (popular author of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*) and film sequences that expose meerkat family dynamics, the movie documents the touching bond between Kolo and his brother while reminding viewers that familial love and devotion are not unique to the human species.

Many of Kolo's adventures take place under the loving and watchful eye of his older brother. While Kolo's mother and father are away during the day collecting food, it is Kolo's big brother who watches the young and teaches Kolo the invaluable survival skills he needs in order to stay alive.

Scenic panoramas and elaborate underground tunnel shots depict the expansive land these tiny creatures call home. In a land of giants such as six-foot snakes, eagles, and lions, the filmmakers do a superb job at capturing several battles the tiny young family endures, including a violent run-in with another meerkat family, and a close call for Kolo with a Marshall Eagle. (It should be noted, however, that the eagle's attack is not without consequences and as such might make this a difficult passage to watch.)

The remarkable filming commands viewers' respect and succeeds in depicting the meerkats' every move and dramatic adventures over a six-month time frame, highlighting Kolo's transformation from innocence and vulnerability to meerkat "manhood." Kolo's journey reminds us of the similarities between the human and animal world by exposing the familiar trials and adventures that he must face as a result of "growing up," and the film's unique blend of animal story line mixed with stunning photography ensures a touching cinematic experience for just about everyone.

Reviewed by Katey Pfeil
Posted 2/24/2010
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The Cove

A Documentary Film
Directed by Louie Psihoyos

Although *The Cove* doesn't come with a disclaimer that reads: "Warning: Some of the images you are about to see will haunt you for a lifetime," it should. In an effort to bring to light the inhumane fishing practices of a remote region called Taiji on the island of Japan, former dolphin trainer Ric O'Barry leads a group of activists in a guerilla operation to expose the Japanese fishermen and what it is they're hunting for. And in the process, they capture on film the merciless slaughter of dolphins on a massive, heartbreaking scale.

Prior to *The Cove*, O'Barry's most famous work was on the television show Flipper, which he fell into as a result of training dolphins at the Miami Seaquarium in the 1960's. O'Barry worked on the show for a long period of time and developed a close relationship with the dolphins he trained. But after experiencing the death of Kathy, one of the dolphins who played Flipper, O'Barry had a change of heart about the dolphin fanaticism he'd helped to create.

Since abandoning his work with marine mammal captivity programs, O'Barry has become an ardent supporter of leaving dolphins in the wild. In effort to further his agenda, he sought the help of Louie Psihoyos (who's had a history of documenting sea life) to expose the terrors of "the cove" at Taiji. Psihoyos used his connections in the film industry to orchestrate the exposure of the cove, using hidden cameras and free divers. More difficult than it sounds, the crew encountered interrogation by Japanese officials and constant harassment by the fisherman. In order to avoid the police (and the possibility of arrest, torture and expulsion from the country), the skeleton crew planted disguised cameras and audio equipment so they could document the brutality of the dolphin hunt.

What these hidden cameras caught on tape was something that can only be described as a crime against nature. Rounded up and corralled into the cove, dolphins fight for their lives as they're surrounded by nets and pummeled by harpoons.

Though the slaughter of the dolphins is the more pressing issue, it is the use of the dolphin meat that is also a travesty. The acceptable level of mercury in seafood is 0.04ppm (parts per million), and the average piece of dolphin meat sold to consumers contains a staggering 2200 ppm. The documentary also shows the fishermen of Taiji selling this mercury-laden, poisoned meat to Japanese schools to be used as lunchmeat for local schoolchildren.

From the onset, O'Barry's mission is clear: To stop the capture of wild dolphins for use in theme parks, as well as the slaughter and sale of their meat to Japanese citizens who are being slowly poisoned by the tainted flesh. It's difficult to watch this film and write off the practice of rounding up thousands of these marine mammals and see them ruthlessly and brutally slaughtered: so be warned ahead of time that this is more than a one-hankie film; sobbing could be heard in the theater when the film was originally screened before live audiences.

The good news for the dolphins of Taiji is the increase in media attention garnered by the film: After *The Cove* was screened at a film festival in Japan (where it was originally banned), a suspension was issued for this year's hunt.

But the dolphins of Japan still need help. They (and other marine mammals in the area) are killed every season - September through March - in other parts of the country. Therefore, Ric O'Barry's organization Save Japan Dolphins is actively seeking donations, petition participation, and canvassing of local organizations (www.savejapandolphins.org) to keep up the fight. But perhaps the strongest chance that *The Cove* has to make a difference on an international level is by winning the Academy Award at this year's Oscar's ceremony on March 7 as Best Documentary of the Year.

Reviewed by Jennifer Cook
Posted 2/12/2010
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Milking the Rhino

A Documentary Film
Directed by David E. Simpson

We've all heard the famous axiom: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Perhaps a reasonable alternative to that is "Teach a man how to kill an elephant, and he prospers from the single use of that animal; teach him how to take care of that elephant, and hundreds of tourists will pay him over-and-over to see it in its natural habitat."

The winner of several film festival awards, the 83-minute documentary *Milking the Rhino* "examines the deepening conflict between humans and animals in an ever-shrinking world. It is the first major documentary to explore wildlife conservation from the perspective of people who live with wild animals."

I first heard about the film (which was three years in the making) when it was being shown as part of the Cottonwood Creek Environmental Film Festival in Encinitas, California. Unfortunately I'd missed the screening of it; fortunately I could rent it from Netflix. The film is very well presented from the unique point-of-view of the Africans who must find a way to peacefully (and lucratively) learn how to co-exist with their animal neighbors, or they will all surely suffer the consequences.

By focusing on two tribes - one, the Maasai warriors at the Il Ngwesi Group Ranch in northern Kenya, and the other, the semi-nomadic Himba people of northwestern Namibia who are part of the Marienfluss Conservancy - the filmmakers have an opportunity to show how each of these groups of Africans are struggling to make a living from their natural environment and whether or not they can successfully learn to work in harmony with the animals that also call the area home.

Canvassing the landscape with their cameras while Kenya experienced its worst drought in years, the filmmakers were also uniquely qualified to show the effects of a lack of rainfall on the cattle farmers who rely on the area surrounding the Il Ngwesi property for food for their livestock. Additionally, the film briefly explores the recently-discovered revenue source of harvesting plant resins by the women of the Himba tribe for use in French perfumes.

A fascinating and insightful film, *Milking the Rhino* captures the beauty - and harsh realities - that collide in the African continent. For more information about the film itself, there is also a comprehensive website (www.milkingtherhino.com) that provides a FAQ page, as well as a trailer for the movie. Anyone interested in wildlife conservation would find this a worthy film indeed.

Reviewed by Erin Caslavka
Posted 2/1/2010
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Bird Songs From Around the World

Featuring Songs of 200 Birds from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology
By Les Beletsky
Chronicle Books, 2007

"This worldwide selection is a superb sample of the extraordinary variety of bird vocalizations, each one identified by concise text and a beautiful painting. Sit back and enjoy a journey around the world of birds, by sight and sound." So praises Rob Hume, Editor of BIRDS, the magazine of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Indeed, the compilation of this vast array of birdsongs is a delight for the eyes and ears.

Whether you're an armchair ornithologist, or someone who's looking to discover what birds you should be on the lookout for in your own backyard or at your next vacation destination, you'll be well-informed by the succinct text, and charmed by the variety of audio recordings captured by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Divided into six chapters, each one is devoted to the birds of different continents. Two-page spreads for each bird provide the common name on the left, along with its Latin name. A 150-250 word description of the bird follows, as well as a short note about the song you'll be hearing. A full-color illustration of each bird is on the right side. For each bird there's a corresponding number, which you enter into the digital audio module attached to the back of the book, along with full instructions for its use.

At $45.00 retail, the book is a bit pricey. But when you consider the quality of the illustrations (rendered by artists David Nurney and Mike Langman), and the prose of Les Beletsky (a professional bird biologist, editor and writer), as well as the inclusion of the audio recordings, it's well worth the cost: for where else can you hear the "loud, chattering vocalizations of a foraging Boat-billed Flycatcher" (#057) or "the Grey Go-away-bird's namesake call, g'way!" (#102) all in one place?

Reviewed by Erin Caslavka
Posted 1/15/2010
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Hot, Flat & Crowded

Why We Need a Green Revolution - and How It Can Renew America
By Thomas L. Friedman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008

Within the first 50 pages of Thomas L. Friedman's *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, the author states there are "five big problems" facing us today: Energy and Natural Resources Supply and Demand, Petrodictatorship, Climate Change, Energy Poverty and Biodiversity Loss. Although the book's focus is not on the animal kingdom per se, it is the fifth issue - that of biodiversity loss - that most tugs at the heartstrings.

As Friedman writes, "There are many events one could point to that tell us that we passed a biodiversity tipping point...For me, the most potent symbol was when, in 2006, we humans lost a relative. We are large mammals, and for the first time in many decades human hands brought a large mammal to extinction - the baiji, or river dolphin. Also known as the Yangtze River dolphin, the baiji lived only in China's Yangtze River and was one of the few freshwater dolphins in the world.

The reason the baiji was such a painful loss to our global heritage is that it represented a genus, not just a species. Species are being lost with increasing regularity, and each loss is a tragedy. But when you lose a genus, which potentially includes many species, you lose a much bigger slice of the history of life. Think of biodiversity as the tree of life. When a species goes extinct, it is as if we cut a twig off the tree. When a genus goes extinct, we are cutting an entire branch off the tree. The baiji was a big branch."

Within the first two chapters of the book, Friedman paints a picture of what the current environmental and socio-political challenges are, explaining how we got to where we are and then segueing into what surely await us if we don't make some fundamental changes. The latter - and larger - part of the book is a 'call to arms' of sorts, laying out the foundation upon which we need to build a global community, with the bulk of the responsibility falling squarely on the shoulders of Americans. Not surprisingly he's extremely adept at justifying his position, populating his 421-page book with numerous quotes, statistics and personal observations based on his experience as a world traveler and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for *The New York Times*.

Though admittedly depressing at times and mind-boggling at others, *Hot, Flat and Crowded* is an eye-opening read for anyone concerned with the fate of the planet. For most of us, we will never know the joy of seeing a baiji in the wild - or even in captivity; they are no more. As August Pfluger, head of the Swiss-based Baiji Foundation, is quoted as saying, "'We have to accept the fact that the Baiji is functionally extinct. It is a tragedy, a loss not only for China, but for the entire world.'"

Perhaps with a greater understanding and education about our impact on the world around us, we'll be able to avoid losses of the magnitude of the baiji before it's too late. And with books such as *Hot, Flat and Crowded* to guide us, we will at least have a grasp on where to begin.

Reviewed by Erin Caslavka
Posted 1/1/2010
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Water for Elephants

By Sara Gruen
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2007

Books you can't put down often fall into one of two categories: a riveting suspense, or a multi-layered story that transforms the simple into the sublime. While Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* is littered with suspense, its ultimate gifts are the sort of cascading life-lessons associated with a book like *To Kill A Mockingbird*. When viewed through the eyes of Jacob Jankowski, Cornell-senior-turned-lost-soul, we're transported on a train through time, into a frightening world where the most humane creature is an elephant.

Kicking off with a prologue that catapults the reader straight into the unfolding drama, the author takes alternating trips through the indignities visited upon Jacob as an elderly nursing-home resident, and his younger, naïve self: As a kid, he's going places when he's dealt a devastating blow, and in what seems like sheer happenstance, the disoriented Jacob quite literally finds himself in the midst of the dark and indescribably dirty circus world.

You might expect artifice involving outlandish circus performers, but what's

fascinating is the sharply-defined circus caste system that Gruen shines an unflinching light on. Some people are dangerous - like the despicable enforcer aptly named Blackie - while others are outwardly civilized, but secretly the worst of all.

By intertwining a storyteller's gift of narrative with historically accurate and detailed facts about life in a Depression-era circus, the author spins a romantic tale that involves the main character, Marlena (one of the circus performers) and Rosie - a bull elephant who can empathize with the blows that life has dealt Jacob.
Though the novel paints a grim picture of what life was like for the tortured souls - animal and human - who inhabit the fractured world of a traveling circus in the 1930s, in the end what raises to the surface is a tale of love and redemption in a most unlikely place.

Reviewed by Meg Marion
Posted 1/1/2010

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