

TEN FILMS
TEN ALBUMS
TEN SONGS
TEN BOOKS
TEN SERIES

Revised Jan. 2024

TEN RECOMMENDED FILMS

(In alphabetical order)

1. ***Apocalypse Now*** (1979, dir. F. Coppola). Loosely based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, but taking place in Vietnam during the war, this is arguably one of the most impressive films in film history—and it's something of a miracle that it was ever finished (see also the documentary on the making of the film, entitled *Hearts of Darkness*). The original 1979 theatrical release is recommended over the *Redux* director's cut.
2. ***Basquiat*** (1996, dir. J. Schnabel). Biopic on American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, a major figure in the New York art world of the 1980s. Directed by Julian Schnabel—also a famous painter—the film focuses much of its attention on Basquiat's relationship with artist Andy Warhol. The film's casting, their performances, and Schnabel's work behind the camera are all outstanding. Also boasts an extraordinary soundtrack.
3. ***Big Night*** (1996, dir. C. Scott, S. Tucci). This lovely film takes place in a sinking Italian restaurant, owned and operated by two Italian brothers. They are convinced by a competitor who seeks their talent that the famous singer Louis Prima is coming to dinner, and this might be their big break. So, preparations are made for the dinner of a lifetime. Loaded with charm and impeccably cast, *Big Night* is a film you will return to again and again.
4. ***Dead Man*** (1995, dir. J. Jarmusch). The word "unique" doesn't quite do it. Sure, *Dead Man* is a black-and-white Western. However, when you add Johnny Depp playing a character from Cleveland named William Blake, an American Indian named "Nobody," and then include a cameo by Iggy Pop wearing a bonnet, and a hallucinatory guitar soundtrack by Neil Young, it ceases to be your standard black-and-white Western.
5. ***Finding Forrester*** (2000, dir. G. Van Sant). Gus Van Sant followed his successful *Good Will Hunting* (1997) with *Forrester*. The two narratives are similar—a savant in need of a mentor, a mentor in need of a friend—but the atmosphere and the characters of Forrester (Sean Connery) and young Jamal are more captivating. Forrester's apartment becomes a place we don't want to leave—something Forrester is having difficulty doing.
6. ***Lawrence of Arabia*** (1962, dir. D. Lean). While loose in terms of history, this epic masterpiece makes up for it with breathtaking cinematography and a performance by Peter O'Toole that unsurprisingly launched a career. The film tells the story of T. E. Lawrence's facilitation of an Arab uprising against the Ottoman Turks during World War I, but neglects his e and Britain's scheming. Watch it for the cinematic grandeur. There's plenty.
7. ***Rushmore*** (1998, dir. W. Anderson). In truth, any film by Wes Anderson could be added to this list: *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic*, *The Darjeeling Limited*. *Rushmore* is where Anderson came into his own as a filmmaker, placing him squarely on the map. One could go on about the soundtrack, the performances, the subtle surrealism—a description would require too many adjectives. Just watch it. All of them.
8. ***True Grit*** (2010, dir. Coen Bros.). This is a Coen Brothers movie, which means something; watching *Raising Arizona*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* will help clarify. Based on a novel, *True Grit* is the tale of a girl on a quest to apprehend her father's murderer. To aid her endeavor, she enlists the services of a US marshal: the drunk and disheveled Rooster Cogburn. Great casting, great dialogue, great humor, great.
9. ***We're No Angels*** (1955, dir. M. Curtiz). A good one at Christmastime, this gem stars, among others, Humphrey Bogart and the inimitable Peter Ustinov. Three escaped convicts from Devil's Island fall in with a family in a nearby coastal town. Despite less than noble intentions, nobility ensues. Becoming endeared to the family they intended to rob, the three set to helping the troubled Ducotels. Delightful, funny, superb. Keep an eye on Ustinov.
10. ***Wonder Boys*** (2001, dir. C. Hanson). Prof. Tripp (Michael Douglas), who teaches creative writing at the local university, has a lot going on. In almost every aspect of his life, chaos finds him and he finds it. And resolution of these problems seems to necessitate that they get worse first. The journey is a hilarious and fun one, but details would spoil plots. "Now, that is a big trunk. It holds a tuba, a suitcase, a dead dog, and a garment bag almost perfectly."

AND SEVEN MORE:

2001: *A Space Odyssey* (1968), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Wings of Desire* (1987), *Withnail & I* (1987), *Gosford Park* (2001),

TEN RECOMMENDED ALBUMS

(In alphabetical order)

1. **Laurie Anderson, *Big Science*** (1982). Anderson combines here her gift of storytelling, atmosphere creation, and songwriting. After this, find a copy of her *The Ugly One with the Jewels*, put on some headphones, and settle in.
2. **Syd Barrett, *Barrett*** (1970). A founding member of Pink Floyd and the creative force that set that band in motion. Only with Floyd for a short while, Barrett then created a small but enchanting body of solo work before drifting into reclusion.
3. **Boards of Canada, *Music Has the Right to Children*** (1998). In one album, BoC created a genre of electronic music. Even if you're not crazy about electronic music, give this a listen. Mellow, warm, fantastic.
4. **David Bowie, *Hunky Dory*** (1971). If you're new to this guy's work—and there's much of it to explore—you might start here. His discography is extraordinary, and this early example is a kind of prologue to what followed. Brilliant.
5. **Jeff Buckley, *Grace*** (1994). Buckley left us way too soon (1966–1997) and longing for much music never to be made. But this diamond is the equivalent of ten albums by a lesser artist. It's one of those albums.
6. **Can, *Ege Bamyasi*** (1972). German experimental “krautrock” band Can. There is a lot going on here on *Ege Bamyasi*, and it's easier if you just listen to it rather than read an attempted description.
7. **Brian Eno, *The Shutov Assembly*** (1992). In the 1970s, Eno pioneered a genre called ambient music. *Shutov* is just one example; be sure to sample a few. And as you're maybe listening to him for the first time, check into his other doings.
8. **Passengers, *Original Soundtracks 1*** (1995). This was a group project headed by Irish rock band U2 and Brian Eno (see album 7), but others appear. It's not a U2 record, it's Passengers—and a thing of beauty that got overlooked. Sublime.
9. **Toots and the Maytals, *In the Dark*** (1973). Jamaican reggae. They've put out many albums, and this is a good starting point. Once you hear their cover of John Denver's “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” you'll be hooked. For life.
10. **The Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground & Nico*** (1967). One of the most influential bands in rock-n-roll history. This first album didn't do so well at first, but Brian Eno guessed that everyone who did buy it started a band. Enjoy.

AND TEN MORE:

- Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Good Son* (1990). Haunting, ballady, wonderful.
- Peter Gabriel, *Passion* (1989). A “world music” gem. So good.
- Fela Kuti, *Zombie* (1976). Nigerian Afrobeat and a musician you need to know.
- Cheikh Lo, *Ne Le Thiass* (1996). Introduced to me as “This guy is his own dog.” Quite right. A lovely record.
- Curtis Mayfield, *Curtis* (1970). Get it. Now. On vinyl, preferably.
- Willie Nelson, *Spirit* (1996). A dulcet, tender, lovely record.
- Radiohead, *OK Computer* (1997). A great band's masterwork.
- T. Rex, *The Slider* (1972). A perfect rock record.
- UNKLE, *Psyence Fiction* (1998). Various-artists project. Innovative, varied, techy, loaded with personality.
- Tom Waits, *Mule Variations* (1999). The peerless Tom Waits. Best late at night.
- Scott Walker, *4* (1969). Watch the documentary *30 Century Man*. It explains.

TEN RECOMMENDED SONGS

1. **“Cherry-coloured Funk,”** by Cocteau Twins – “Beetles and eggs and blues and pour a little everything else”
2. **“How Soon is Now?”** by The Smiths – “I am the son and heir, Of nothing in particular”
3. **“90210,”** by Urge Overkill – “Think I’m movin’ on back to Kansas”
4. **“Your Blue Room,”** by Passengers – “Never in company, Never alone, No car alarm, No cellular phone”
5. **“Tricky Kid,”** by Tricky – “Here comes a Nazarene, Look good in that magazine”
6. **“Big Science,”** by Laurie Anderson – “Howdy stranger, mind if I smoke?”
7. **“Take Me Home, Country Roads,”** [cover] by Toots and the Maytals – “West Jamaica, my ol’ mama”
8. **“Long Black Veil,”** by The Chieftains feat. Mick Jagger – “Nobody knows, nobody sees, Nobody knows, but me”
9. **“Eternal Life,”** by Jeff Buckley – “There’s a flaming red horizon that screams our names”
10. **“It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,”** [cover] by Them feat. Van Morrison – “Yonder stands your orphan with his gun”

AND ELEVEN MORE:

- **“Dum Dum Boys,”** by Iggy Pop – “I was most impressed, No one else was impressed”
- **“Black and Blue,”** by The Moondogs – “Are those teardrops on your window, baby?”
- **“Jiving Sister Fanny,”** by The Rolling Stones – “Ooh, child, you got me walkin’ down the broad highway”
- **“Strange Kind of Love,”** by Peter Murphy – “And like the doors to a wide vast dominion”
- **“Arnold Layne,”** by Pink Floyd – “Moonshine washing line, They suit him fine”
- **“Lam Lam,”** by Baaba Maal – [lyrics presumably in Pulaar]
- **“Why Didn’t You Call Me?”** by Macy Gray – “By the phone I wait, String into space”
- **“Sant Maam,”** by Cheikh Lo – [lyrics presumably in Wolof]
- **“Curtains,”** by Elton John – “I held a dandelion, That said the time had come”
- **“Here Comes Your Man,”** by Pixies – “Is a wind makes a palm stop blowing”
- **“Lightning Frightening,”** by David Bowie – “I’ve got moon, I’ve got sun”

TEN RECOMMENDED BOOKS

(Alphabetical by author)

1. **Noam Chomsky**, *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (1992). A short, good place to start for getting to know both the work of a great American thinker and the basics of US foreign policy. His analyses are based on history and logical consistency; but the facts tell an unflattering story, hence the “controversy” surrounding Chomsky. See YouTube for *many* interviews.
2. **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Dostoevsky has been described by many as more of a psychologist. And *BK* is testament to his powers of insight. Along the way, you’ll meet a cast of characters you’re unlikely to forget. Considered to be one of the greatest novels written. Correctly.
3. **Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson**, *Winner-Take-All Politics* (2010). There are a number of good books (Ha-Joon Chang’s *Bad Samaritans*) and documentaries (*Inside Job*) that have come out since 2008, explaining the realities of the last thirty years of Washington and the corporate sector hijacking the US economy. Hacker and Pierson’s is among the best.
4. **Jonathan Haidt**, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). In examining political disagreement, Haidt (pronounced *height*) basically provides an update on what we know about ourselves as humans, looking through the lenses of philosophy, psychology, sociology, evolution, and religion.
5. **Aldous Huxley**, *Brave New World* (1932). Among the early works that helped define dystopian literature, Huxley presents us with the World State, where our society’s shortcomings have been *fixed*. Pay particular attention to chapters 16 and 17—and perhaps compare them with 2.5.5 in *The Brothers Karamazov*.
6. **Michael Pollan**, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (2008). “Eat Food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” There’s more to that formula than meets the eye. Pollan’s book is a short, clear, rational explanation and analysis of where your food comes from and why the American diet became what it did. Essential reading for any American who eats food.
7. **Sister Helen Prejean**, *Dead Man Walking* (1993). Though the film does the book justice, the book is greater, in scope and quality. While focused on the death penalty, *Dead Man Walking* is a meditation on the value of human life, and an examination of poverty, racism, and power. “Being kind in an unjust system is not enough.” Prejean is an exemplar.
8. **J. R. R. Tolkien**, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). Put the movies aside. And if fantasy isn’t your thing, put that aside, too. Tolkien’s masterpiece is literature. And the fact that it features elves and wizards is the least interesting thing about it. What makes this work great is the writing, the storytelling, and its sense of humanity.
9. **Leo Tolstoy**, *War and Peace* (1869). Okay, yes, it’s long, to the tune of 1,400 pages. So, turn off Netflix and get binging this instead. You get a better story and better characters; just getting to meet and know Pierre, Andrei, and Natasha alone would make for a great novel. Upon finishing it, you’ll wish there was more. Honest.
10. **Howard Zinn**, *A People’s History of the United States* (1980). Zinn’s classic is simply a one-volume education. It’s history done the way history should be done, not how you were probably taught it in high school (and maybe college, too). Caution: reading it can get expensive if you keep giving it away, urging, “Here, you need to read this!”

AND EIGHT MORE:

- John Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (1997). Extraordinary biography of an iconic figure.
- Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*. Get this one: ISBN 978-0553328257.
- Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (1989). Entertaining, insightful, swears, superb.
- Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965). The 2021 film remake was superb. The book is a literary work of art.
- Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory* (1996). Excellent autobiography of the late and leading Holocaust historian.
- Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957). Many authors have captured America—none better than Kerouac.
- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Meet “Big Brother.” Required reading. Period.
- Marc J. Seifer, *Wizard: The Life and Times of Nikola Tesla* (1996). The genius history has neglected.

TEN RECOMMENDED SERIES

(in alphabetical order)

1. ***Abbott Elementary*** – Takes place in an underfunded grade school in Philadelphia, the series is shot in a documentary-style similar to *The Office*. This series is wonderful. The cast is superb. They could not have done better job on casting. This one's a feel-good situation. You end up wanting to know these people. The lead, played by Quinta Brunson, you will grow to adore her and cheer her on. I think this is one of the best series out there right now—like *Slow Horses* (see below).

2. ***All Creatures Great and Small*** (2021) – A reboot of the 1970s series of the same name. The original was a lovely and endearing series. The reboot is every bit as lovely and endearing. They really did a nice job here. The story revolves around James Herriot, who moves to the Yorkshire Dales and joins a small veterinary practice. The practice is run by Siegfried Farnon, who employs his lovable, knucklehead younger brother, Tristan. This show is as English as a thing can be. Beautiful countryside shots abound. Prepare to feel good—and meet Tricky Woo.

3. ***Blacklist*** – It probably ran too long, for too many episodes, but I don't care. James Spader as the inimitable Raymond Reddington is too delicious a character to tire of. He's got to be one of my favorite characters in television history. Impeccably dressed, erudite, ever so slightly sociopathic. Is he an international criminal? Sure. But, he's not selling young boys to militias, he's more into stolen art, contraband, and that sort of thing. Being the world's most wanted criminal, he turns himself into the FBI to help them work down a list—the Blacklist—of big-time criminals the Feds don't even know exist. Or are the Feds helping Red? So good.

4. ***Elementary*** – As I write this, I am going through *Elementary* for a *fourth* time. I kid you not. I love it that much. It's a reinterpretation of the Sherlock Holmes character, superbly played by Johnny Lee Miller. Lucy Liu plays *Joan* Watson, and plays her well. Holmes has left London and the series takes place in New York City. Sherlock is a consulting detective for the NYC police department. He is also wrestling with addiction (heroin). Joan is hired by Sherlock's billionaire father to be a sober companion to Sherlock. (Joan is a former surgeon—long story). Sherlock and Joan will become your friends. A great series.

5. ***Ghosts*** (US version) – A young couple inherit a huge mansion, which of course is haunted. The girlfriend hits her head and can now see and talk with the ghosts. The ghosts are from various time periods: there's one from the Revolutionary War, there's a viking, an American Indian, a Twenties jazz singer, and a Wall Street schmuck. This series is bursting with charm and is simply a joy. Lots of fun, light, well written. You'll love it.

6. ***The Good Place*** – A student of mine asked me years ago, “Harms, have you seen *The Good Place*?” To which I replied, “The what now?” So I checked it out. They talk about philosophers in it. For serious! A sitcom that talks about Plato and Kant? Can this be happening? One of the characters is an ethics professor—hence my student's curiosity. *The Good Place* is hilarious, boasts a superb cast, and equally good writing. *Please* watch it. “Jaguars rule!”

7. ***The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*** – This series was recommended to be by a close friend. And this friend (very much unlike me) is reticent about recommending things like this, but when he does, you're wise to follow up. I, on the other hand, incessantly ooh and aah and am a broken record (but I too have good taste!) So, he said that *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* was a superb piece of writing with great casting. And he was absolutely right. The series is about a housewife named Midge living in 1950s New York City (upper West Side) who becomes a stand-up comedian. This series is a pleasure. One of the best characters is Suzie, who becomes Midge's manager. I love this series; it's a joy. Great soundtrack, too. “Then you Bataan Death March me through Buckingham Palace!” Wonderful. Get on it.

8. ***Slow Horses*** – This series is among the best out there. It's about a department in MI5 called Slough House, where the agents are called “Slow Horses.” Slough House is where failed spies go to die—of boredom. But is that the case? Nothing here is what it seems. Gary Oldman as Jackson Lamb is outstanding. Do watch this series. Based on a series of books by Mick Herron. Very good—like Le Carre-level good. If you pick one series from this list, pick *Abbott*, *Maisel*, or this one.

9. ***Umbrella Academy*** – I guess it's like the X-Men: a school (that becomes a family) of kids who all possess some kind of special power. The kids are raised and trained by a most unpleasant billionaire. The kids get older (except for one) and they all grapple with their own experiences under these most unusual circumstances. The series is quite funny and unique. Don't let the X-Men comparison distract you. This is *not* that. It's just sort of similar. You'll see. There are great characters here. Klaus and Number Five are among my favorite. An excellent series. Two seasons, a third on the way.

10. *Westworld* – This one should not be neglected. Westworld is a theme park for rich adults. The park you start with in the series is based on the American Old West, and the parks are populated by “hosts,” that is, *very* convincing androids. You can shoot them, and romance (if that’s the word) can commence. You can do whatever you want. Westworld is a consequence-free environment. And that’s the point. Explore your darkest urges, but you’re only dealing with androids, right? But, of course, it’s never that simple. The plot *seriously* thickens when a few hosts become sentient and self-aware and start feeling pain. Don’t miss this series.

AND SEVENTEEN MORE (Okay, I binge many series):

- *The Alienist* – Sherlock Holmesy detective situation oriented around a psychiatrist in New York City. Quite good.
- *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* – The show is very well written, impressively diverse, and quite forward-thinking. Hilarious.
- *The Bletchley Circle* – Four female former Bletchley Park analysts become detectives.
- *Community* – A group of oddballs who become friends at a community college. Fun to watch it evolve.
- *Counterpart* – A mix of sci-fi and spy thriller, but mostly spy thriller. Fantastic. Got ignored. Le Carré-level good.
- *Derry Girls* – A group of Catholic secondary-school girls living in 1990s Derry, Northern Ireland. They are delightfully weird and ever so unsound of mind.
- *Killing Eve* – Wonderful dark comedy. Jodie Comer’s performance is outstanding. This one’s good.
- *Miss Scarlet and the Duke* – Female Sherlock Holmes-like character. Good atmosphere, well crafted. Fun.
- *Only Murders in the Building* – Delightful. Selena Gomez and Martin Short deliver. Nice atmosphere, fun, well written.
- *The Queen’s Gambit* – I know everyone’s seen this one already. Nice to see everyone get it right.
- *Reservation Dogs* – Ne’er-do-well teenagers on an Indian Reservation. Funny and delightfully odd.
- *Silo* – Dystopian sci-fi series that is superb. Rebecca Ferguson is outstanding in *Dune* and here, too.
- *Sleepy Hollow* – Lots of fun here. Good humor. And avoids corniness, which it could have easily degenerated into.
- *Suits* – I shouldn’t like this series, but I do. Good writing that sucks you in big time. You’ll love Harvey, though you shouldn’t.
- *Superstore* – A sitcom in a Target/Wal-Mart kind of store. Great cast, good fun.
- *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* – Also a Tina Fey product. Quite funny and likable.
- *Vienna Blood* – A psychologist befriends an inspector in early twentieth-century London and they solve crimes together. Okay, fine, it’s Sherlock Holmesy. And quite good.