

The Best Christmas Movies Ever

They're part of what shaped you; they're artifacts of the long-vanished era in which you grew up.



by Bruce Bawer

Critic, schmitic. How can you pretend to be engaged in objective aesthetic appraisal when you're talking about movies that you first watched decades ago in your childhood living room, while your late mother was trimming the tree and your long-dead dad was setting up the Nativity scene? The feeling that washes over you the moment the opening credits begin has relatively little to do with these movies' actual merits, if any. *Of course* they get to you: They're part of what shaped you; they're artifacts of the long-vanished era in which you grew up; like Proust's bite of madeleine, they trigger

tsunamis of precious memory; like attending a midnight Mass on Christmas Eve or a Yuletide performance of the *Messiah*, watching them is a cherished ritual, carrying meaning through time and underscoring the irretrievable nature of the past even as they make the past feel, briefly, just a bit less irretrievable.

Take [Meet Me in St. Louis](#) – which, mind you, was already a nostalgia piece when it came out in 1944. It tells the charming, lightly plotted story of a nice upper-middle-class St. Louis family during the run-up to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. It gives us Judy Garland, as Esther Smith, belting out "[The Trolley Song](#)," crooning "[The Boy Next Door](#)," and – in the film's centerpiece, which is what qualifies it as a Christmas movie – introducing the all-time favorite "[Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas](#)." The major conflict, such as it is, involves the question of whether the paterfamilias (Leon Ames), a banker, will accept a promotion that would compel his wife and children, against their wishes, to move with him to New York – and thereby miss the exposition. Anyone remotely familiar with the cinematic formulas of the day knows that none of them will ever leave town. Indeed, the film ends at the exposition, where Esther, taking in the glorious spectacle with her parents and siblings, [delivers](#) the film's closing line: "I can't believe it! Right here where we live – right here in St. Louis!"

It may not sound like a killer ending, like, say, "[Louis, I think this the beginning of a beautiful friendship](#)," or "[Auntie Em, there's no place like home](#)" (which, of course, was also Judy). But even though I've never been to St. Louis, except to drive through it, that line always hits me like a punch to the gut. It recalls a time when Americans were sincerely proud of where they lived; when even relatively well-off folks didn't travel so much as to be jaded and world-weary; and, above all, when America's incipient greatness was obvious to everyone and St. Louis one of the jewels in its

crown (instead of being, as it is now, a byword for urban decay and violent crime). Yes, the St. Louis of *Meet Me in St. Louis* was a backlot Technicolor burg that never existed in reality. But the film's depiction of turn-of-the-century Midwestern life delighted enough wartime moviegoers to make it MGM's best-earning picture ever.

On to [White Christmas](#) (1954). Dismiss it, if you will, as a lightweight commodity, a saccharine confection, with innocuous gags and a "feel-good" story cynically calculated to pull at your heartstrings. Fair enough. But it's also a solid chunk of movie magic packed with top-drawer Irving Berlin tunes. And it's an endearing time capsule, capturing the upbeat mood of America's golden age.

It's also a family movie, although two of my fave moments must've bored and/or baffled the tykes in the 1954 theater seats. First, there's the "[Choreography](#)" number, in which Danny Kaye, in black beret and unitard, parodies the Agnes de Mille-type modern dance that was replacing old-fashioned vaudeville-style hoofing on Broadway. (Among other things, the lyric is a dig at Rodgers and Hammerstein, whose musicals, thanks to de Mille's terpsichorean innovations, were considered cutting-edge, whereas Berlin's shows were viewed as a tad old-fashioned.) Second, the unforgettable Rosemary Clooney puts over the first-rate torch song "[Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me](#)" while four ultra-fey male dancers – also in tight black outfits – execute a series of pretentious turns and poses of the sort that Kaye played for laughs but that now, a half hour further into the picture, are plainly meant to be taken seriously. This contradiction makes no sense – and no, neither of these sequences has anything whatsoever to do with Christmas. But so what? It's all terrific. If this isn't entertainment, what is? And what's better than [the ending](#), with the giant tree, the snow that starts falling on cue, and the four principals warbling the immortal title song?

What other old Christmas movies yank at my heart, even if my

mind may not always be fully on board? Well, I grew up endlessly rewatching the [1951 British version](#) of *A Christmas Carol*, in which Alistair Sim is perfect as Scrooge. Even as a kid I remember almost resenting the [1938 American adaptation](#), in which every little difference from the Sim version felt wrong (starting with the star, Reginald Owen, who mugs it up terribly). Then there's [Miracle on 34th Street](#) (1947), which won Edmund Gwenn an Oscar for playing the kind, white-bearded old man who's hired to be Macy's Santa Claus (back when there was only one Macy's) and who may or may not be the real Kris Kringle. Maureen O'Hara is mighty fine as the '40s-era professional woman who hires him, and Natalie Wood, as her daughter, Susan, is the rare 9-year-old actress who actually gives the impression of being a real-live 9-year-old human being. (The film, by the way, was horribly [remade in 1994](#), with the obnoxious Mara Wilson turning Susan into the usual Hollywood brat.)

Next up: Frank Capra's [It's a Wonderful Life](#) (1946). Do I really need to sing the praises of this, the ultimate Christmas movie, in which a suicidally distraught George Bailey (James Stewart) – who's been tied down all his life to his dusty little hometown, Bedford Falls, by his sense of duty to the family business – is afforded a glimpse of what the world would've been like without him?

First of all, the movie shouldn't work. It begins by compelling us to buy into a cosmology whereby a dozen or so intercessory prayers on one's behalf are enough to trigger serious action by one's celestial overseers, whose conversations cause various galaxies to twinkle in the night sky. Observing the extraordinary effort that Clarence (Henry Travers), George's guardian angel, goes to on his behalf, one might wonder: How often, in the world of this film, does this sort of seraphic intervention occur? If George merits such aid, who else does? Are the angels up to this sort of thing on pretty much everybody's behalf all the time? If so, how come

nobody down here on Earth ever mentions it to anybody else? If not, what makes George so special?

Do these questions cross our minds when we watch *It's a Wonderful Life*? Of course not. Somehow we buy instantly into the frankly ridiculous premise. It works. Big time. At the end, we're in tears. Why? What is it about this movie that moves us so much? How to sum up what it leaves us with?

It's a perennial question. And every year at around this time, there's a new wave of pieces professing to answer it. Depending on whom you read, *It's a Wonderful Life* is a [celebration](#) of human interdependence; a [reminder](#) that life has purpose; an oppressive Christian [argument](#) for excessive self-sacrifice; a beautiful Christian [affirmation](#) of the healing value of self-sacrifice; a complex [reflection](#) on "the relationship between morality and banking"; a [paean](#) to [capitalism](#); a [brief](#) for socialism; an [argument](#) for Keynesianism; a [defense](#) of New Deal economic reforms; or a [tribute](#) to community economic development. Then there's the adieu from Clarence that George, in the last [few seconds of the film](#), reads on the flyleaf of a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that's appeared out of nowhere: "Remember, *no* man is a failure who has *friends*."

In 2001, Gary Kamiya amusingly [pondered](#) Pottersville, the town that Bedford Falls would have become if George had never lived and that we're supposed to find decadent. In fact, contended Kamiya, Pottersville – unlike the "snooze-inducing" Bedford Falls – has a jumping nightlife, complete with burlesque shows, a dime-a-dance joint, a billiard hall, and saloons with names like the Midnight Club and the Bamboo Room. In the same vein, there's the witty 2018 article in which Daniel Savickas [made](#) the case that the film's real hero isn't the "anti-market, anti-capitalist" George, head of the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan, but Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), the supposedly evil president of the bank across the street:

We learn fairly early on in the film that Potter is a board member and stockholder in the Building and Loan. In all likelihood, the small Building and Loan is not a publicly traded company. Thus, it stands to reason that Potter was able to become a stockholder by giving Peter Bailey capital. If Potter truly wanted the Building and Loan to go under, he could have withheld his significant wealth from it. Instead, he invested, and later pushed for its liquidation because it was not making healthy business decisions or making a profit. This is counter to the Baileys' narrative that he is a monopolistic pig who treats little people like cattle.

Food for thought. All I know is that every time I watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, I get choked up at least half a dozen times along the way, and by the time [everybody starts singing](#) "Auld Lang Syne," I'm reduced to a burbling mess.

Incidentally, I can't imagine how many times I've seen the damn thing. When I was a kid in New York it aired repeatedly at Christmastime on several channels, owing (as I learned years later) to a [failure to renew](#) the copyright properly. I watched it every time. By contrast, as far as I can recall, I've only seen Ingmar Bergman's [Fanny and Alexander](#) twice – first, when it came out in 1982 (it went on to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film) and second, last Thursday. Clocking in at over three hours (with an even longer version out there somewhere), it's an extraordinarily tender movie about the Ekdahl family, who reside in Uppsala, Sweden, at around the same time that the Smith family reside in St. Louis, and who are based partly on the family in which Bergman grew up.

Even better off than the Smiths, the Ekdahls lead a happy life in sumptuous surroundings, with plenty of servants and a beautiful house full of beautiful *objets*. Oscar (Allan Edwall), the father, runs a small theater company (the Ekdahls' money, one assumes, is inherited, as is the case with

a lot of well-off urban Swedes even in the present day), and his holiday speech to his co-workers – in which he breaks into tears speaking about the dear little world that they share, at once holding up a mirror to the larger world and providing an escape from it – reveals his goodness and sensitivity. His elegant mother, Helena (Gunn Wållgren), comes off as a cold fish until we see her at the house window watching her children and grandchildren walk home from the theater. “Here comes my family,” she says in a way that catches at your heart.

All is perfect until Oscar suffers a stroke. On his deathbed, he tells his wife, Emilie (Ewa Fröling): “Nothing separates me from you all. Not now, and not later. I know that.” The acting, as throughout the movie, is magnificent. His son, Alexander (Bertil Guve) – who’s about 11, whom Bergman based on his own boyhood self, who’s every bit as sensitive as his father, and who provides the eyes through which we observe much, if not most, of the film’s action – is brought into the room to say farewell to his dying dad but retreats in terror. Next thing we know, his mother, like David Copperfield’s mother, has married a bully. This one is a bishop, Edvard Vergérus (Jan Malmsjö), who demands that Emilie, Alexander, and Alexander’s little sister, Fanny (Pernilla Allwin), leave behind their lavish way of life and live in spartan fashion with him and his pious, and sour, mother and sister. We follow these distressing developments from the perspective of Alexander, who (shades of *Hamlet*) keeps seeing his dead father hovering in the background, helplessly observing his beloved wife and children under the cruel thumb of their new patriarch.

I loved this poignant, magical movie when I first saw it 40 years ago. I love it far more now, in a time when I think a good deal more than I did then about the preciousness of life, the mystery of death, and the bottomless tragedy of loss. My late mother-in-law loved it, too. When she gave birth to a son

a few years after the movie came out, she named him Alexander.

How to segue from Bergman to the sweet silliness of [Home Alone](#) (1990) and [Home Alone 2: Lost in New York](#) (1992), both directed by Chris Columbus from scripts by John Hughes? Well, as Walt Whitman [put it](#), I contain multitudes. No, you might not expect to have the cockles of your heart warmed by a picture in which the 8- and then 9-year-old Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin), left by his exceptionally absent-minded parents to fend for himself on two successive Christmas holidays, protects himself from the machinations of a couple of small-time crooks by subjecting them to an array of Torquemada-like torments. But these borderline psychopathic depredations, which in real life would've ended with the robbers in the ER (at best) and with the poor lad himself under heavy sedation (and, for the next few years, in intense therapy), are deftly bundled up, improbable though it may seem, in two genuinely heartwarming packages that – thanks mainly to touching subplots involving a lonely old widower (in *Home Alone*) and a lonely old bird lady (in *Home Alone 2*) – convey admirable lessons about human kindness.

(Since I've mentioned the revisionist takes on *It's a Wonderful Life*, I might as well put in a good word for the hilarious 2015 YouTube [video](#) in which Culkin plays a grown-up – and hopelessly screwed-up – Kevin, who, after bending a stranger's ear about the childhood traumas that ruined his chances of ever living a normal life, puts a would-be carnapper through a punishment that leaves Kevin covered in the guy's blood. This one isn't for the kiddies.)

In closing, I will make no great claims for [National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation](#) (1989) as a high point of seasonal sentiment (although it makes a feeble gesture or two in that direction); I will only say that watching Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) staple all those miles of lights to his house – and almost kill himself in the process – never, ever stops being funny. Apropos of which, remember: No man, or woman, is

a failure who gets from one Christmas to the next without a few big laughs.

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