

Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Character Strengths and Well-Being, 2nd ed

by Ryan M. Niemiec, PsyD, and Danny Wedding, PhD, MPH.
Hogrefe, Boston, MA, 2014, 470 pages, \$59.00 (paper).

This hefty paperback can serve readers in several ways. For psychiatrists, it can be useful as a reference to movies, especially feature Hollywood and foreign films illustrating many positive human attributes and their opposites—character flaws, negativity, and self-defeating ways. Also included are documentaries, shorts, films for children and youth, and many lists, including best film exemplars of good character traits, Positive Psychology Movie Award winners for 2009–2012, and useful film Web sites. Indices to film titles and an index of the names of actors, directors, and characters in the movies discussed are also included. This book is *not* a compendium of films illustrating pathology. For that, see a previous book by these authors (with Mary Ann Boyd), *Movies and Mental Illness: Using Films to Understand Psychopathology*. Rather, the current book emphasizes the positive. The subtitle, *Using Films to Build Character Strengths and Well-Being*, tells it all.

The authors' schema—PERMA, for **P**ositive Emotions, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**chievement—encompasses 6 character strengths: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Transcendence, Temperance, and Justice. Within these are 24 virtues, each of which gets a chapter. For instance, within Courage are chapters on bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. Within Transcendence are chapters on appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. Each chapter starts with a Key Concepts and Related Research section, with relevant research from the psychology literature, followed by an exemplary film detailed in sections labeled Signature Strengths, Strength Dynamics, Benefits, Coping (by the protagonist[s]), and Final Comments. Many other films under the rubric of the particular virtue are briefly mentioned.

Each chapter covering a virtue contains an Overuse, Underuse, and Unhealthy Aspects section, with film examples. Also included is a Practical Applications section listing specific cognitive-behavioral positive psychology strategies to enhance the particular virtue for the student/client/reader/therapist. A discussion of relevant international cinema concludes each chapter.

For example, the chapter on humor opens with a quote from Norman Cousins' *Anatomy of an Illness*, "Hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors." For the exemplary movie, *Zorba the Greek* (1964), the authors include a still from the film, discussion of the plot at length, and the ways in which Zorba's irrepressible good nature opens up his dour British employer. Many other films are mentioned with their various types of humor as well as the dark sides of humor at others' expense; the evil cackle of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* is a graphic example. Each chapter ends with the authors' top 5 films on the topic—in the chapter on humor, they are *Zorba the Greek*, *Patch Adams*, *Amadeus*, *Murderball*, and *Ridicule*.

In summary, to quote Steve Martin in the film *Grand Canyon*, "All of life's riddles are answered in the movies." The authors agree, stating that "movies are a highly accessible art form...[which] selected carefully...can maximize...the experience of strengths and virtues" (p 383).

Appendices include positive psychology film clips, suggested study questions; a syllabus with readings, a course outline, and grading system; 100 of America's most inspiring movies; ratings of films that portray and inspire character strengths; and useful research literature references.

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