



Edition: US

THE BLOG

DVDs: Excellent "Diary;" "Downton's" Finale Available Now and Good "Checkers"

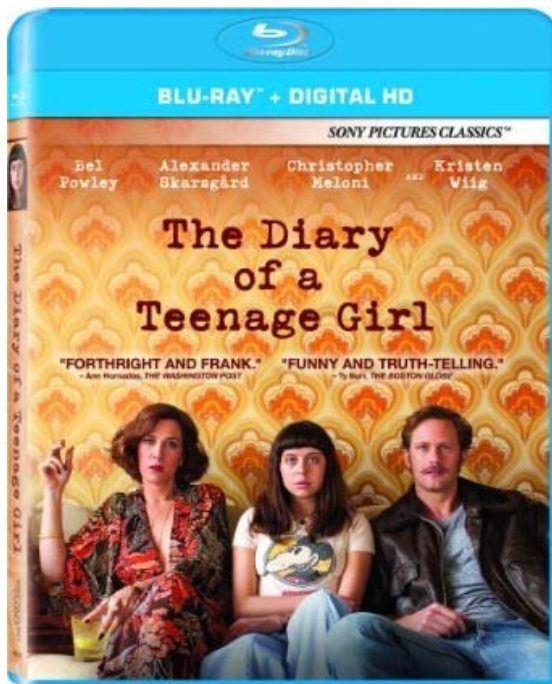
02/05/2016 06:43 pm ET | Updated Feb 05, 2016



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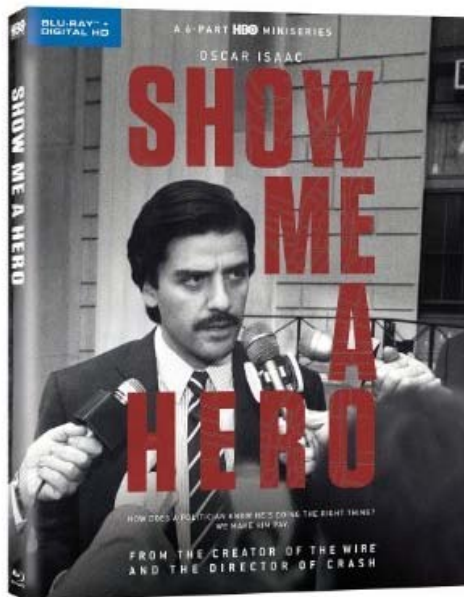
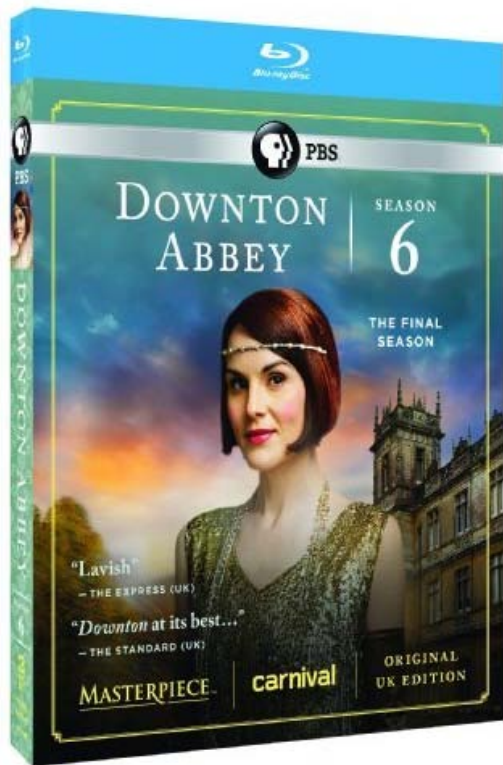
Here we go: One of the best movies of the year (*The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*), this week's edition of "the best TV show you're not watching" (*Banshee*), Spielberg's weakest in a while (*Bridge Of Spies*) and more.

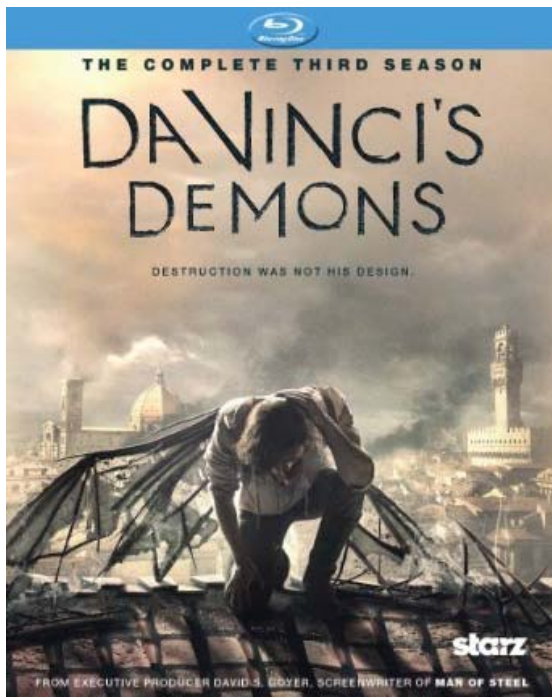


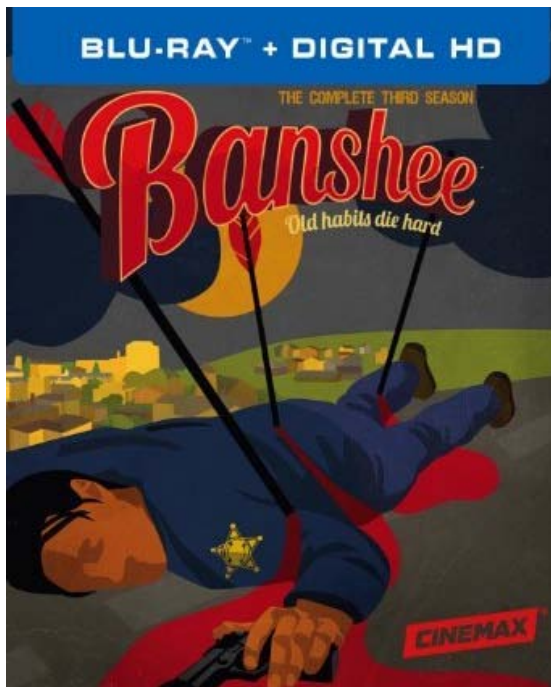
THE DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL (\$34.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

One of the best films of 2015, *The Diary Of A Teenager Girl* hits all sorts of indie-cool buttons: blunt sexuality, graphic novel teen artist, animated flourishes, statutory rape/molestation/first love (depending on who is doing the telling), drug use, San Francisco in the 1970s. If it hadn't

debuted at the Sundance Film Festival, one would struggle to wonder why. Toss in a female helmer -- director Marielle Heller making an impressive debut from her own screenplay (based on the novel by Phoebe Gloeckner) -- and you've got a perfect storm of hipness. But the movie is much better than those details, rising above the indie film clichés to craft a piercing and very well acted look at a teenager finding release from a pretty screwed up situation via her art. Bel Powley is just sensational as Minnie, the 15 year old daughter of a single mom (Kristen Wiig, okay) who flirts with and starts to sleep with her mom's hunky 30 year boyfriend Monroe (Alexander Skarsgård, also excellent). It's intriguing how often people who are taken advantage of/molested/raped by an older person hesitate or can't or won't call what happened what it is; they don't want to be a victim. (See the very good memoir *My Father, The Pornographer* by Chris Offutt for another example of this.) Sexual abuse is confusing if for no other reason that at some terrible to admit level, it can be physically pleasing and validating to the person being abused. I think *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl* captures this complexity very well and better than most any other film I've seen. It manages to not whitewash what happened without turning the abuser into a stock villain or downplaying the emotions and personal growth of the abused. For me, the key moment was when Monroe is looking at the comics Minnie has been drawing and sees one where she is going down on a penis, a hugely enlarged Crumb-like image that is grotesque and amusing in an awful way. "Are these supposed to be sexy?" he wonders aloud. Um, no they're not because what's happening is not sexy, as much as the sexual aspect of it can be confusingly positive. Which makes the movie sound like a drag. It's funny, bold, distressing and never timid in showing you Minnie's life and letting you make up your own mind. Powley and Skarsgård are really good together in what must have been a very awkward dance. I can't wait to see what director Marielle Heller does next.







DOWNTON ABBEY SEASON 6 (\$59.99 BluRay; PBS)

SHOW ME A HERO (\$49.99 BluRay; HBO)

DA VINCI'S DEMONS SEASON THREE (\$54.99 BluRay; Starz/Anchor Bay)

FALLING SKIES THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$139.99 BluRay; Warner Home Entertainment)

BANSHEE THE COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$49.99 BluRay; HBO Studios)

No, I'm not going to spoil the finale of *Downton Abbey*; I'm not a barbarian, after all. Standards must be maintained, even as the Crawley begrudgingly must acknowledge the changing times and dismiss the third parlour maid on the left as a sign of economizing. I've never been a big fan of the show; it's a very poor man's *Upstairs Downstairs* and the silly soapy fun of season one devolved into banality as plot lines were tossed about and repeated with abandon and characters behaved idiotically and so on. Nonetheless, for a moment in the final season, the first few episodes achieved a certain level of sanity and promised a good ending. (In an episode that already aired, it was a treat to see Carson and Mrs. Patmore attempt to discuss marital relations, for example.) Then of course Hugh Bonneville began spewing blood like a scene from Monty Python and the show will I fear descend again into nonsense. I am certain that after being put through the ringer that fans will be pleased with how it all ends. If you can't wait to find out, well, the final episodes including the Christmas special are there just waiting for you.

I watched Oscar Isaac in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and suddenly realized, Oh, he's not a movie star! At least, not in the action hero/comic

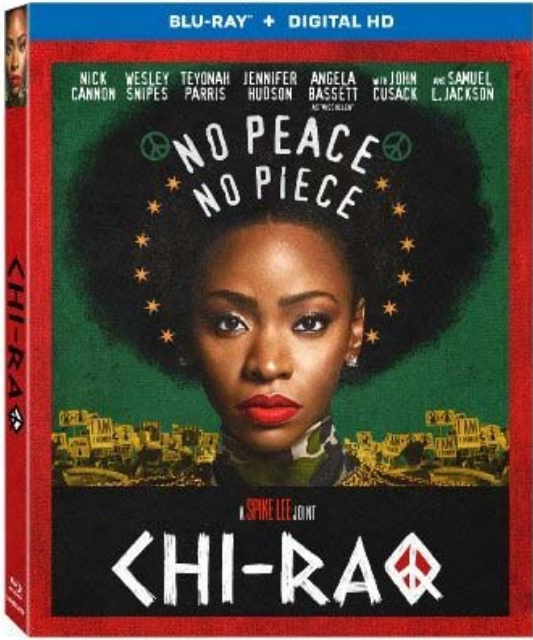
book vein. He is of course a terrific actor, but like the Seventies icons he doubtlessly admires -- Pacino, De Niro, Hackman -- Isaac belongs in dramas and comedies of an intelligent sort, not blockbusters that need a certain larger than life swagger. This isn't a criticism, just a comment on the sort of actor he is. If you want proof of how good he can be, check out the critically acclaimed HBO miniseries *Show Me A Hero*. It's about the true story of the youngest big city mayor in America (Isaacs) who finds his town of Yonkers torn apart when Isaac must enforce a federal court order and build some low income housing. De Niro and Pacino would approve. (But good lord, does a miniseries set in the late 80s and early 90s count as a period piece? God help me.)

Da Vinci's Demons never got much love. Some fans expected Leonardo to be a gay or bisexual hero when that's hardly necessary for historical accuracy in a show that includes fantasy elements. (Check out *Black Sails*, by the way.) The first two seasons had the sort of arcs one expects from dramas of this sort and were silly fun to a degree. But the third and final season has been bolloxed in every way. The decision to end a show should if at all possible come early enough for the creators to craft a finale that will work. In this case, the focus on the Book Of Leaves (the driving element of the show) disappeared while Da Vinci and friends fight off the Turks. Though it has ten episodes just like season two, the finale feels rushed, confusing and deeply unsatisfying. It was never going to be great, but at least it could have resulted in an ending that satisfied the people who actually watched.

In stark contrast, the sci-fi drama *Falling Skies* ends on a strong note, giving Noah Wylie two long-running dramas to his credit. The five seasons of this show tell one complete and entertaining story. Aliens invade earth, harvesting kids for some unknown but obviously nefarious purpose. Humans ban together (after 90% of the population has been killed off) and fight back. Wylie is Tom, a leader of the resistance and it all builds to a climax that explains everything and provides the much-needed closure folk need both in romance and TV serial dramas. If you're wondering whether to commit to this 52 episode sci-fi show, watch the first few -- if you like it, rest assured the rest will hold up. The boxed set comes with some fine extras but I especially enjoy the compact box and presentation.

Now can we get some cult series love for *Banshee*? Cinemas is HBO's little brother. HBO has often had some shows that run and run, despite modest to no attention. (I'm looking at you, *Arliss*.) Now here Cinemax has a fun drama that deserves a lot more love but hasn't received it. The fourth and final season begins in April and if the quality can be maintained, this one will be another keeper you can binge watch happily.

But wouldn't you rather be the one to have already seen the show, the one to tell others they've been missing out? The story features a con on the run who assumes the identity of a smalltown sheriff. he's been trying to win back the daughter of a gangster who wants him dead. But she's got a new identity as well. It's complicated, tense, funny and most definitely off-beat. And Antony Starr is a star in the making.







- BRIDGE OF SPIES** (\$39.99 BluRay; Walt Disney Studios)
- CHI-RAQ** (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)
- THE ASSASSIN** (\$29.98 BluRay; Well Go USA Entertainment)
- THE INTERN** (\$35.99 BluRay; Warner Home Entertainment)
- THE NEW GIRL FRIEND** (\$34.98 BluRay; Cohen Media Group)

A clutch of films that don't work but are fascinating failures in one way or another. Steven Spielberg is a great director whose major work -- like most artists -- came during a 13 year span. (I'm thinking of *Jaws* through *Empire Of The Sun*). He can deliver some very good movies after that, but the inspired burst of creativity that made his name is there. *Bridge of Spies* is one of his notably weaker efforts, despite the inexplicable Oscar love. Tom Hanks plays a lawyer somehow dragooned into negotiating with East Germany for the exchange of prisoners during the height of the Cold War. Being an aw shucks Good Guy, Hanks becomes determined not to sacrifice a minor pawn (some young guy in love who snuck over the wall) just to secure the much needed return of a man in uniform. Among the low points: the godawful shot of East Germans gunned down while attempting to climb the wall contrasted with the shot of kids in America climbing fences from one backyard to another. We get it! Also, the dreadful score by the often excellent Thomas Newman, who almost seemed to be punishing Spielberg for the absence of John Williams. The sole high point: Mary Rylance, doing such subtle quiet work as a German spy I'm flabbergasted (but delighted) that the Academy recognized it.

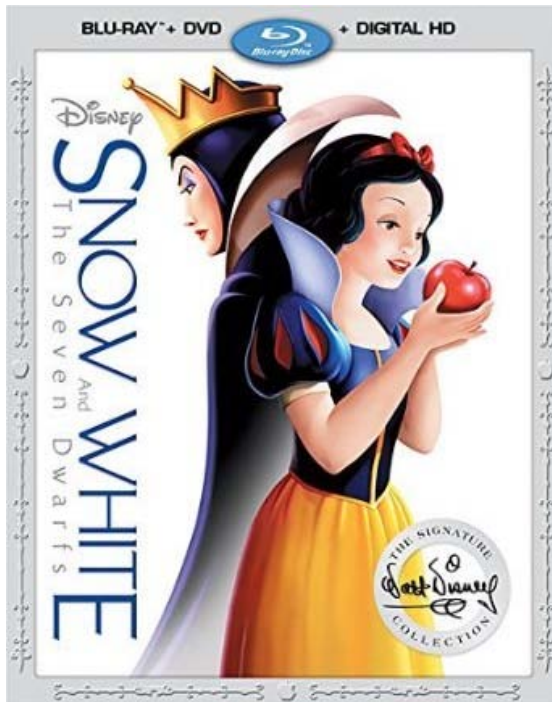
I was all down for Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq*. A modern retelling of the Greek comedy *Lysistrata*? Set in Chicago, with women sick of the endless cycle of violence demanding their money stop killing each other and get rid of their guns? With musical flourishes? Done in rhyming dialogue? And the

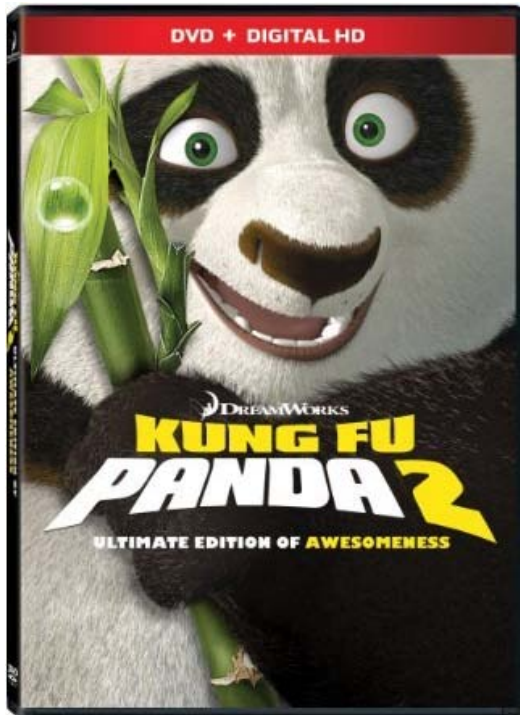
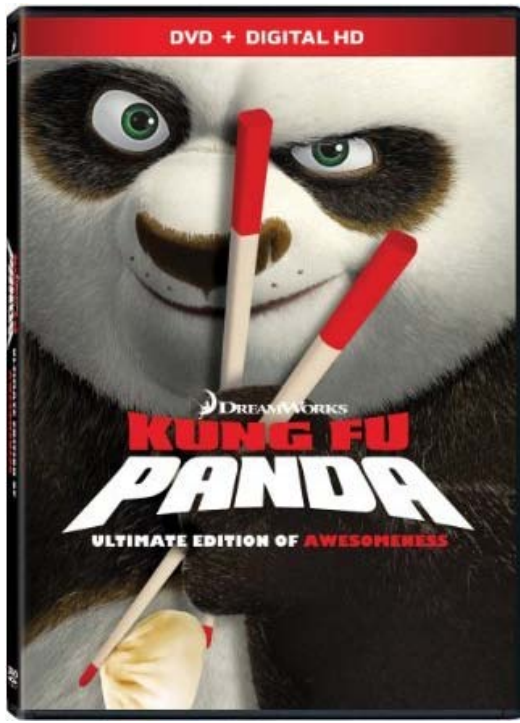
slogan "No Peace, No Piece"? I'm in. Sadly, Lee was not. I loved the roughly half an hour of the film that strove for the delirious and hilarious premise of this movie. But too often, Lee stopped to deliver a public service announcement. It's passionate and sincere and much-needed, but it doesn't make for very good drama. John Cusack (so good in *Love & Mercy*) is burdened with a costume that would be fine if his character was corrupt or buffoonish but just laughable when he's intended to be sympathetic and sincere. (He delivers a passionate, tiresome sermon at a funeral for the death of a child.) Teyonah Parris is wonderfully charismatic as Lysistrata and Nick Cannon is almost her equal as the rapper Chi-Raq. Samuel L. Jackson is a hoot as the narrator and I pray he demanded to keep those suits he's sporting. The fun bits are very fun indeed. Well worth getting so you can fast forward to the good stuff but far from what it might have been. I wish Lee had been more Preston Sturges here and less Stanley Kramer.

I suppose *The Assassin* is exactly what one would expect from a martial arts extravaganza from director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. On one level, it's utterly inexplicable. On another level, it's transfixingly gorgeous. Do NOT watch this for lots of action a la *Crouching Tiger*. Do watch it for it's beautiful pageantry.

Old people (which Hollywood considers to be anyone over 40, but here means the 72 year actor Robert De Niro) can be sources of wisdom, valuable mentors? Great! He and Anne Hathaway have fun chemistry in *The Intern* as a retired man looking for some purpose while she's a career-driven gal who needs to learn what's really important in life. Too bad director Nancy Myers strays far from this premise to waste a lot of time with Hathaway's private life. And if being older is something to celebrate, why is Linda Lavin played as a gorgon when expressing interest in De Niro? (He runs in horror even though she's just six years older than him while embracing Renee Russo, who is eleven years younger.) I suppose we should be grateful he didn't end up dating Hathaway.

Director Fran ois Ozon is one of the bright lights of French cinema. Romain Duris is clearly one of its best young actors. Somehow they both bungle -- with the best of intentions - the story of a widowed father who discovers a penchant for cross dressing. (Those straight guys! So adorable.) I think the suspect here is, in part, a not terribly good translation in the subtitles, since French-speaking friends explained a few nuances I missed. However, the overall tone is skittish, veering from sweet to schtick rather unconvincingly. *The New Girl Friend* doesn't work, but the talent of all involved makes it somewhat watchable.





GOOSEBUMPS (\$38.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS (\$36.99 BluRay; Walt Disney Home Entertainment)

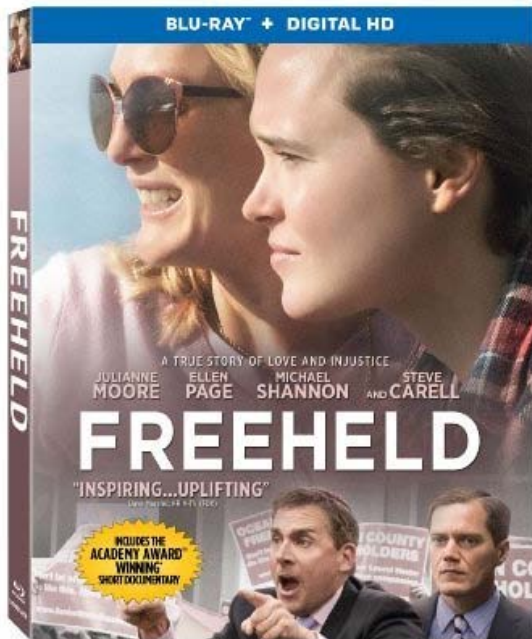
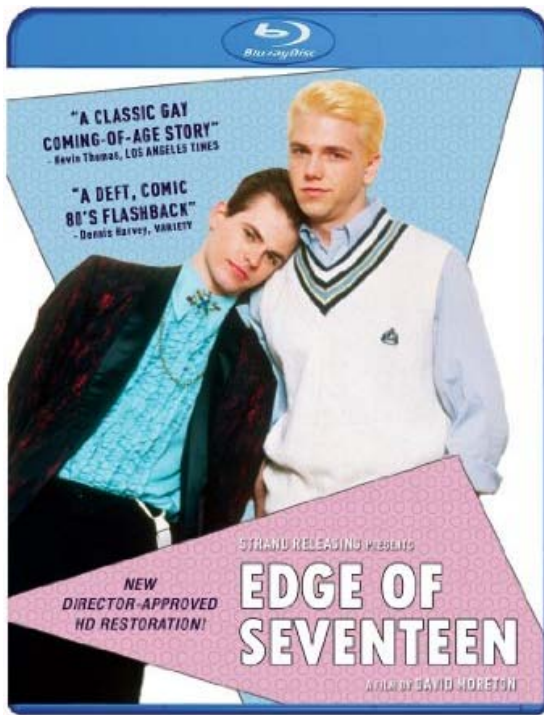
KUNG FU PANDA 1 and 2 (\$14.95 each on DVD; Dreamworks Animation)

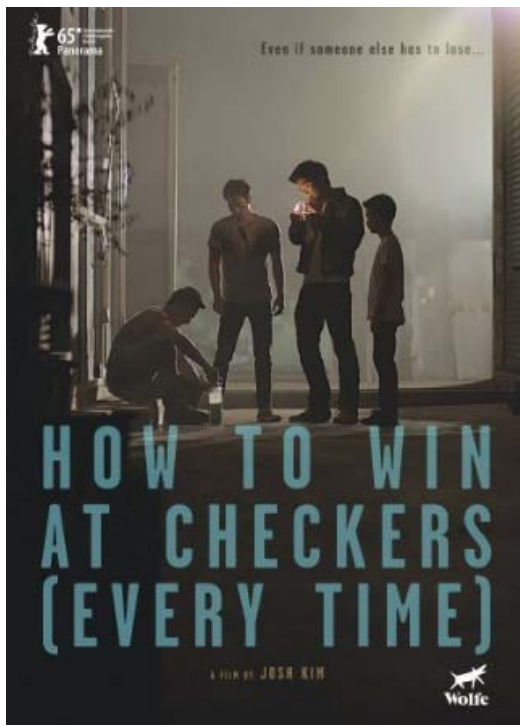
Family fun on tap! Personally, I don't consider any entertainment worthy of a kid's attention unless it can hold my attention too. Mind you, a little junk food is fine when it comes to books, if not food. I'd consider the *Goosebumps* books to be pretty disposable fun. The long-running series

by R.L. Stine offers silly but genuine chills with the comfort of knowing the terror is of the modest variety. They're readable though once you've read two or three you've pretty much read them all. He turned out hundreds of titles and now it's become a movie. The reasonable premise is that the dreamt-up terrors of Stine actually come to life and he has to save the world. Jack Black plays the writer with just the right sort of nebbishy flair and it's good to see him with a family friendly franchise. (I like to see an actor get their payday when they consistently do interesting smaller projects.) In many ways, it's a modest improvement on the books and could get even better for given the box office, a sequel is assured.

You certainly can't go wrong with the landmark animated film *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*. (J.R.R. Tolkien always fumed that it should be "dwarves" and that linguist would know.) It is a gorgeous looking movie, beautifully hand-crafted before computerized animation was an option and deserves every accolade. However, it must be said that the leads are rather bland; all the fun here is in the margins. Yet when the margins include said dwarves, that's not bad. All Disney films get re-released regularly, usually with some modest new extras to make it "new" and the same is true here. If you own a recent edition, you're fine. If you don't, by all means pony up. It will always remain an important film, though I'd rank it below *Bambi* and *Pinocchio* in terms of early Disney greats.

If you're smart, you'll head to the cinema to see *Kung Fu Panda 3* to see state of the art animation. This movie was made in cooperation with a Chinese studio and that seemed a business decision to gain easier access to the Chinese market. But Dreamworks Animation used this opportunity to have a genuine artistic collaboration. The result is a film that feels more authentically Asian than the first, with the kung fu and Chinese philosophy moving from window dressing to front and center without spoiling any of the fun. Plus the 3-D is excellent and well worth it for once. You'll be reminded how good the first two films were. And here they are in very inexpensive DVD versions, timed to the release of the new movie. The first one is great, the second one good and the third might just be the best of all, complete with some very striking animation. Uncle Walt would be proud.





EDGE OF SEVENTEEN (\$27.99 BluRay; Strand Releasing)

FREEHELD (\$39.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

HOW TO WIN AT CHECKERS (EVERY TIME) (\$24.95 DVD; Wolfe Video)

Edge Of Seventeen has a bittersweet edge on many levels. Released in 1998, it is set in the summer of 1984. Now we're watching it in 2016, so it's nostalgic on two levels. (There should be a word for that.) Notably well reviewed as a gay teen coming of age comedy/drama, it's also proven to be by far the most notable credit for most involved, from Chris Stafford as the questioning hero to Anderson Gabrych to both the writer and director. They all display talent so of course anything could happen in the future. But knowing this was their one stab at glory and they made the most of it is poignant. The only one to capitalize was Tina Holmes as the best friend, who has gone on to solid work in TV especially. You know or can guess the premise: Stafford plays the cutie wearing amusing (but never kitschy) 80s clothing with impeccable style. His best pal Holmes clearly has a crush on him...but who is that hot busboy at the theme park they're working at? It's not groundbreaking but as a time capsule within a time capsule, it's pretty fun.

Freeheld starts at a much higher level and so falls farther. It's based on the Oscar winning documentary short about a police officer who is dying and wants to leave benefits to her female lover back in the day when marriage was not an option. Julianne Moore and Ellen Page star as the two women and they have good chemistry. Unfortunately the good intentions and noble purpose of the movie get in the way of anything approaching genuine drama and surprise almost every step of the way.

The leads are the only reason to see it and not quite enough at that. Still, it's a happy reminder of how far we've come and how far there still is to go.

Who knows how the Bangkok-set film *How To Win At Checkers (Every Time)* will hold up 20 years from now? But chances are this look at a young man coming of age with sexuality just one element of the film's ambitious screenplay will hold up well. I often find gay films from other countries are illuminating: you can almost pinpoint what era they seem stuck in even when set in the current day. (That is, a film from one country might seem like they're where the US was in the 1950s while another seems set in the 1970s and a lucky few even ahead of us.) This one is only marginally about queers, with gay and transgender and the sex workers woven into the tale realistically, rather than as the tawdry trappings they often are for stories set in Bangkok. The main story focused on a young man in love who hopes to escape the dreaded army draft and how his little 11 year old brother gets swept up in the danger. Those looking for a gay-centric tale will be disappointed, but it's a promising feature debut for writer-director Josh Kim after a string of documentary and fiction shorts.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.

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