

FILM & BOOK REVIEWS

Films

Documentary

Taxi to the Dark Side. 2007

In 2002, Dilawar, an Afghan taxi driver, was arrested as a suspect in a rocket attack on a US base. Five days later, after being hung by his arms and repeatedly beaten at Bagram—a military detention center with an even worse reputation for torture than Guantanamo—he was dead. His story provides the framework for this chilling documentary, which includes uncensored images from Abu Ghraib. The grim metaphor in the title comes from a statement by Vice President Cheney: “We have to work sort of the dark side. It is a mean, nasty, dangerous, dirty business out there.” The film makes it clear that torture was sanctioned at the highest levels of the Bush administration. *Taxi to the Dark Side* won an Academy Award for Best Documentary.

DVD Drama

Persepolis. 2008

Based on Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels about a young girl growing up in Iran, who goes to Vienna and later returns to her home country. A fascinating story, both amusing and disturbing, which gives a picture of life in a society often condemned in the US on the basis of total ignorance. The action includes the 1979 Revolution and its effects on the heroine and her family. The striking black-and-white animation is based on the original books, but the greater space provided by the big screen has enabled the filmmakers to give more depth to the backgrounds. French with easy-to-read English subtitles.

French with English subtitles (a dubbed English version is also provided).

DVD Documentaries

Helen's War: Portrait of a Dissident. 2005

This film has grown increasingly relevant since it was made. Dr. Helen Caldecott is an Australian writer, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, who has campaigned against nuclear proliferation for over 30 years. The film, made by Caldecott's niece, gives a vivid portrait of a vital, passionate personality. The message is sobering yet not despairing. In spite of failures and frustrations, Helen Caldecott describes herself as an “optimist.”

Conviction. *Directed and Produced by Brenda Fox. 43 minutes. Available from Zero to Sixty Productions at www.ztsp.org*

Conviction is the riveting story of three radical non-violent activists who take the proliferation of nuclear weapons in this country personally and are willing to pay with their lives. Wisely contextualized with information about our nuclear stockpile, the film describes the motivations, action, and trial of three Plowshares Activists, all Catholic nuns, who symbolically and non-violently “beat swords into plowshares” by entering military sites and performing disarmament actions.⁽¹⁾

In *Conviction*, Fox masterfully contrasts diverse voices including federal prosecutors, Dr. Helen Caldecott, and the sisters themselves, particularly on the day of their sentencing. The film presents clearly the defendants' argument for their actions. Despite their impassioned defense, the nuns were found guilty. They were convicted and served between 30 and 41 months in federal prison.

⁽¹⁾Over 180 Plowshares actions have occurred around the globe, the latest in New Zealand on April 30, 2008.

Books

The End of America: Letter of Warning to a young Patriot. By Naomi Wolf. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007

This short, well-organized book begins with a quotation: “As nightfall does not come all at once, neither does oppression.” Wolf describes the ten steps which, based on the evidence of history, lead to political oppression. These include the invoking of an external or internal threat; the establishment of secret prisons; the surveillance of ordinary citizens; the muzzling of the press—and six other developments, all of which are becoming ominously familiar in the US today.

Free Lunch: How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense (and Stick You With the Bill). By David Cay Johnston. Portfolio, 2008

The title describes what the book is about. The superrich, in the US and elsewhere (but especially in the US), consistently rely on public handouts while preaching about “free markets” and “wasteful” entitlement programs. Free Lunch describes this phenomenon in telling detail. In the last part of the book, the author proposes solutions. Unfortunately, more radical changes will be needed than what he suggests. In particular, an appeal to CEO’s to “ask themselves how much they are willing to sully their reputations” is unlikely to have any effect at all.

The Three Trillion Dollar War: The true cost of the Iraq conflict. By Joseph E Stiglitz and Linda J Bilmes.

W W Norton & Co, 2008

This is the first book to provide a full account of the current and future cost of today’s wars. The war in Iraq is the most expensive since World War II, in terms of total costs; in some ways, however, it is far more extravagant. The US has already spent close to a trillion dollars. There are enormous bills still due, including staggering costs to care for injured veterans. Stiglitz and Bilmes give a very precise picture of what has been spent, the ways in which money is being provided, and how the leaders of the country have evaded giving a true accounting. The picture of irresponsibility that emerges is chilling. The authors include the costs, still being paid, for the Gulf War. In the last part of the book, they provide suggestions for avoiding such gargantuan sums in the case of future wars. If readers find the prospect of yet another military conflict intolerable, these recommendations do at least give further insight into the present and the recent past. Stiglitz and Bilmes claim repeatedly that the figures given in the book, while enormous (and illustrated with charts), are in fact “conservative.”

JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It matters. By James W Douglass. Orbis Books, 2008

A new examination of the Kennedy assassination and its meaning today for the struggle for peace. Douglass describes the journey that led JFK, in the course of three years, from his position as a traditional “Cold Warrior” to a new determination to break with the logic of the Cold War and lead the world in an entirely different direction. This led his adversaries in the military and intelligence establishment to view him as a virtual traitor who had to be eliminated. It is the first of a series; later titles will deal with the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The author is a longtime peace activist and writer.