

# Bad endings

Lately I've become really conscious of bleak endings in movies for people who have mental illnesses. It's true that often we do have nasty endings but films can tell the stories without the quick and tidy jump off the bridge, roof top, the hanging, the overdose....it happens often enough. But I think that when screenwriters don't choose more creative endings for their protagonists, we, as people with illnesses that come with a fair dollop of hopelessness built in, are encouraged to accept suicide as an appropriate end. Movies have a very persuasive role in our world and it's important to realize what we're being taught.

I've shown some that have jarring endings; *ANGEL BABY*, *CURTIS' CHARM*. *ORDINARY PEOPLE* and *DEAD POET SOCIETY* dealt with suicide as did *ROLLERCOASTER*, *TASTE OF CHERRY*, *ABOUT A BOY*, *MR JONES*, and even *THE FULL MONTY*. In fact most films that approach mental illness realistically appropriately demonstrate that suicide is an often present threat.

But the implications of how movies handle the topic of suicide struck me when the filmmaker and psychiatrist, Dr David Dawson, recently gave us a look at his new feature, *DRUMMER BOY*. It is a story of a young man becoming ill with schizophrenia. Typically he was on the run, paranoid, confused, unable to cope with the torment. It's an engrossing journey, but he sends him off the top of a building, in the last frames falling backward to his death. Damn!

I was incensed that this film had become another in the genre I have dubbed "Schizophrenia Snuff Films". Dr Dawson's earlier film called *MANIC* had a similar outcome. Another, a British film *CAN YOU HEAR WHAT I'M THINKING* starring Judy Dench and her husband as the parents of a young man, almost an identical plot had our protagonist filling his pockets with stones (Virginia Woolf style) and walking into a lake. Bummer. *WE DON'T NEED THAT!*

A new film at this year Vancouver Film Fest *SEE GRACE FLY* sounds promising (not) and the current choice in the Frames of Mind equally dismal: *REVOLUTION #9* "...desperate attempts to get him help are frustrated by the Kafka-esque workings of the American mental health care system - leading to tragic results." Oh no - here we go again.

Dr Dawson made the point that we must realize how dangerous these illnesses are. But, please, not by knocking off the person we've spent the last hour and a half getting to care for. In *GIRL INTERRUPTED*, a secondary character succumbs, but we see that our main, empathetic character survives, even wrote her story.

The people around us from doctors, parents, kids, neighbours, fellow workers, friends don't need to learn from popular entertainment that suicide is our inevitable outcome.

Some "true" stories like *SHINE* and *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* are somewhat embellished but were breakout films that inspired many to look at mental illness in a whole different way.

*AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE*, Janet Frame's biography, is one of the most honest films, ending with a humble writer's lifestyle after a harrowing early life of madness and positive adventures too. We're impressed with her resilience.

During the discussion following his film *WALTER* I brought up the statistic that I've learned from schizophrenia presentations that people who have the illness as young adults tend to improve as (and if) they reach middle age. He hadn't heard of that. *IT'S IMPORTANT!* That's the kind of message that should be in the forefront of presentations of films on this topic, not a tidy death.

I was nearly one of those fatalities. But having survived and finding my life turned around as I never imagined it could when I was suicidal, I now seek out positive models of success to support my recovery. I can see the power of movies in our society and from those perspectives it's clear we've got to be careful what templates we put out there for people balancing on the edge.

I'll be showing *THE HOURS* in October and we'll be talking about it. Maybe in context of our presentation we can balance the "positive" aspect of suicide with some hopeful alternatives. It's a challenge.

I'll be looking for films like *DELUSION\** and the Schizophrenia Digest's Summer 03 issue *Finding Inspiration*. ([www.schizophreniadigest.ca](http://www.schizophreniadigest.ca)) That's stuff to live by and to aspire to.

"This is a beautiful, clear-eyed and tender film about schizophrenia. It follows two young Dutch men over a period of six months and is as full of daylight and colour as Cronenberg's new Spider is dark and dank.

Years ago, Reiner listened to the music of Jon & Vangelis and heard a female voice in the music. He asked the voice to come into his body. Now 27 years old, Reiner can't get rid of her; he's tried everything, but she refuses to budge from her lodgings deep inside his gut.

Twenty-six-year-old Carlos cannot separate reality from fantasy. Every day he sits at his typewriter and bangs out a few film scenes, and then sends them off to the film companies. He finds his inspiration in meetings and the innumerable gangster moves he has seen over the years. In *Delusion*, one of Carlos' film scripts has got the green light...

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Boudewijn Koole brings a rare sensitivity to his exposition of the interior and external worlds of these two thoroughly engaging, and relatively high-functioning people with schizophrenia. One has to ask whether our support system would serve them so well. As the film's closing quote allows them to drive home: "I don't mind being mad. I do mind being called mad." This is something we can probably all relate to in our own way, and the Dutch clarity of light and form on view here allows us to feel for the demons of delusion while doing a great service in demystifying a malaise that haunts our streets and dreams.

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Recently we screened *MY NAME IS WALTER JAMES CROSS*, that described one man's life that had become defined by his schizophrenia illness. It talked about the hardship and isolation, friends lost to suicide, and near scrapes. But the man is a survivor, a whole person with personal integrity. His life's not great but he finds positive people and times in his life. When we were both 19, I lost my best friend to suicide. His brother killed himself a few years earlier. He had a model.

I felt that way about my sister's death after her protracted battle with manic depression. I think our whole family accepted that. Twenty five years later I witnessed a young woman at a conference talking about how a community she had found with appropriate supports and an art therapy program that really engaged her had turned her life around. I broke down sobbing like I never had for my sister as I realized it didn't have to be a death sentence for her. Schizophrenia can be a much worse thing to live with but again, there have to be good, attainable models for success.