

Bad Endings

Bruce Saunders

Bruce is the force behind *Movie Monday* and the *Reel Madness Film Festival* in Victoria. His bipolar condition has twice hospitalized him in the *Eric Martin Pavilion* at *Royal Jubilee Hospital*, which houses the 100-seat *Movie Monday* theatre. Bruce is also a landscape maintenance gardener

For more information on *Bruce and Movie Monday*, see islandnet.com/mm

We sat there riveted, watching the SWAT team taking positions. A 'manic-depressive' had taken a hostage, had taped a sawed-off shotgun to a terrified woman's arm, aimed at her head. The SWAT sharpshooter finally dispatched his target. We breathed a sigh of relief. At the same moment I was struck with the irony that we were all sitting there in our gowns after snacks in the *Eric Martin Pavilion* (Victoria's psychiatric hospital). It was a pivotal moment that led me to start my film series in the auditorium downstairs, in the same building. I always look to that as an example of poor programming. It inspired me to do better than that in my series.

Lately I've become very conscious of bleak endings in movies about people with mental illness. It's true that too often we do have nasty endings. But in films that are fiction, stories can be told without the quick and tidy jump off the bridge or rooftop, the hanging, and the overdose as convenient plot devices. They happen often enough in real life. I was nearly one of those suicide 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. They are persuasive, and it's important to realize what we are being taught. When screenwriters don't choose more positive endings for their protagonists, we, as people with disorders that come with a fair dollop of hopelessness, are encouraged to accept suicide as an appropriate end. We've got to be careful about what templates we put out there for people balancing on the edge.

For 12 years now I've been showing films in my weekly *Movie Monday* series in Victoria's psy-

chiatric hospital, using the opportunity to explore film depictions of mental illness and recovery.

Movie Monday screenings like *Ordinary People* and *Dead Poets Society* deal 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 demonstrate that suicide is an often-present threat.

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

I was incensed that this film revealed itself to be yet another in the genre that I have dubbed "schizophrenia snuff films." An earlier film by Dr. Dawson, *Manic*, has a similar outcome. *Can You Hear Me Thinking?*, a film made by

Christopher Morahan for British television, stars Judy Dench and her husband as the parents of a young man who fills his pockets with stones (Virginia Woolf-style) and walks into a lake. Another bummer. We don't need that!

A recent release, *See Grace Fly*, sounded promising. Not! The filmmakers tried to craft an ambivalent ending, but it seemed pretty clear to me: another 'jumper.' *Revolution #9*, a choice in UBC's *Frames of Mind* series, was equally dismal "leading to tragic results" as the program read. Oh, no! Here we go again... People around us—doctors, kids, parents, neighbours, co-workers, friends—don't need to learn from popular entertainment that suicide is our inevitable outcome.

In contrast, in the film *Girl Interrupted*, a secondary character dies by suicide, but the protagonist survives, writing her story from middle age.

"True" stories about brilliant people who have mental illness, such as *Shine*, and *A Beautiful Mind*, are somewhat embellished, but they are break-out films that inspire many to look at mental illness in a different way.

An Angel at My Table, Janet Frame's biography, is a more realistic film, ending with the subject living a humble writer's lifestyle after a harrowing early life of madness coupled with some positive adventures. We're impressed with her resilience.

During the discussion with Dr. Dawson following his film, *My Name Is Walter James Cross*, I raised something I've learned from various schizophrenia presentations: people with the illness as young adults often tend to experience significant recovery as (and if) they reach middle age. He hadn't heard that.

Dr. Dawson argues that we must realize how dangerous these illnesses are. But I say, please, don't do it by knocking off the person we've spent the last hour getting to care for.

I'll continue to screen films like *The Hours* and even Dr. Dawson's *Manic*. But we'll incorporate discussions. It's a challenge for people with mental illness to build a hopeful outlook into their treatment plan, and in the context of our presentations we can balance the 'inevitable' spectre of suicide in film with some hopeful alternatives. ■

related resource

for more information on Vancouver's *Frames of Mind* Series, see www.psychiatry.ubc.ca/cme/film or call (604) 822-7610