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50 Must-See Movies: Fathers

Nell Minow

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What do “Wall Street” and the “Star Wars” saga and, seemingly, about half the movies ever made have in common? They are about fathers. In “Wall Street,” Charlie Sheen plays the ambitious Bud, who respects the integrity of his blue-collar father, played by his real-life father, Martin Sheen. But Bud is dazzled by the money and power and energy of Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). The movie will up the ante with Bud’s father’s heart attack as we see him struggle between the examples and guidance of these two male role models.

In “Star Wars,” Luke (Mark Hamill) does not know until halfway through the original trilogy that (spoiler alert) the evil Darth Vader is his father. He was raised by his aunt and uncle, who are killed very early in the first film, but the father figures who are most meaningful in his life are the Jedi masters Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda. Like Bud in “Wall Street,” Luke must choose between the good and bad father figures. Like Luke, Harry Potter is raised by an aunt and uncle, but he finds a true father figure later. For Harry, it is headmaster Albus Dumbledore. In opposition is He Who Must Not Be Named. Like Luke, Harry has the opportunity for great power on the dark side, but he lives up to the example set for him by Dumbledore.

The first stories ever recorded are about fathers. The central human struggle to reconcile the need for a father’s approval and the need to out-do him is reflected in the “hero of a thousand faces” myths that occur in every culture. This book is a brief guide to 50 films about fathers -- comedies, dramas, classics, and neglected gems, from "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Life With Father," and "Parenthood" to "Unstrung Heroes," "The Incredibles," "The Other F Word," and "March of the Penguins."

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