



### Good Read

## Screen Time

LAST SUMMER, ELIZABETH McCRACKEN AND HER DAUGHTER VOWED TO SEE AS MANY MOVIES AS THEY COULD. THEY FOUND A WAY TO BOND FOR LIFE.

**SOMETIMES I WANT** to say to my children, “What you need to understand is that I grew up in the past.” The past, of course, is where all parents come from. In my particular past, telephones were attached to the wall, you were allowed to smoke anywhere, you had to go to the bowling alley to play a video game and even then it was *Pong*, and you could only see movies one of two ways. The movie could come to you via your television, possibly in black and white, chopped up with commercials, and only at the time that the TV station decided. Or you could go to the movies.

**Hours sitting in the dark was bliss, watching double and triple features, acquainting myself with the theaters, velvet chairs or rough polyester that bounced when I fidgeted.**

My childhood theater was the Paramount, in Newton Corner, Massachusetts. By the time I met it, the balcony had been walled off and converted into a second screen. The Paramount was what was known in those days as a second-run theater, showing movies a few months or a few years old for cheap, with creaky seats and a dreamy concession stand. Many weekends of my childhood, my parents would hand me a few dollars for a matinee and snacks, and I would walk the two blocks to see *Born Free* or *Clarence, the Cross-Eyed Lion*. In the summer, I sat in shorts, shivered in the air-conditioning, and felt the round bottom rim of the popcorn bucket press into my thighs. That's the thing about movie theaters. It's not just the giant screen that looms over you—it's a complicated sensual experience that you give yourself to. You submit to the schedule of the movie theater; you eat its cuisine (Milk Duds shaken onto buttered popcorn for me); you sit in your seat; you don't wander or pause.

For many years moviegoing was my solitary pleasure. Sometimes I went with friends or my older brother, but more often by myself. The Greater Boston of my childhood was full of movie theaters, first-run, second-run, revival house. I was, to say the least, not an athletic child. Hours sitting in the dark was bliss, watching double and triple features, acquainting myself with the insides of the theaters, velvet chairs or rough polyester that bounced when I fidgeted, the lit exit sign over the doors, the faded glamor of the old theaters and the catchy premovie jingles of the new. I didn't become a cinephile or a cineaste; I had no intention of a future in the film industry, which would require working with other people when all I wanted to do was sit in a movie house with them. (I might have wanted to act, but years of auditioning for school plays had landed me a single, non-speaking role as an oyster in a production of *Alice in Wonderland*.) I didn't want to analyze movies for a magazine or newspaper. I was merely, and happily, a moviegoer.

**BY THE TIME** I was a grown person, I saw most movies alone. I lived by myself in an un-air-conditioned walk-up



apartment and didn't always have a nine-to-five job, so I went to matinees for cool quiet. I would have said this was my ideal: I didn't have to have the conversation afterward in which you reveal to your companions your feelings about what you've seen, and they agree or don't. If somebody hates a movie I love, I don't want to hear about it, and even more so vice versa.

Then I had children.

Sporty families, I have heard, strap skis onto their tiny offspring and send them down the mountain. Bridge-playing families deal in their kids as soon as their little hands can fan the cards. I have taught my children to sit in the dark.

Gus, who is 12, likes movie theaters the way an ordinary person does. That is, he watches trailers ahead of time and makes judgments. He'll only go to what interests him. But Matilda, who is 10, simply loves going to the movies, everything about it: the dark, the snacks, the all-encompassing feel of sound and light coming over you in waves. She'll see anything—documentaries (especially if they're about strong women), comedies both new and old, talkies and silent films, superhero movies (which her brother detests), and cartoons. She's a game girl.

We live in Austin, Texas, a good place to be a moviegoer. Alamo Drafthouse, a chain where you can get food and drinks delivered while you watch, started here. The Draft-house has comfy stadium seats—there's never a big, strange head blocking the view of a certain young audience member or her stumpy mother—and enforces an absolutely delightful no talking, no texting policy. (Years of solitary moviegoing has made me a maniac on the subject of other

people's intramovie conversations.) There's the Austin Film Society, founded by the writer-director Richard Linklater. That's where we go to see documentaries and Buster Keaton and Hayao Miyazaki movies.

And in the summertime, there's the Paramount Summer Classic Film Series. Austin's Paramount Theatre, like the Paramount of my childhood, was a vaudeville house, but it remains gloriously unmolested by updates. It has velvet curtains and murals and, legend has it, actual ghosts. Most of the year it hosts musical acts and comedians, but every summer it shows old movies. You can attend single screenings or buy a punch card or become a Film Fan, which gets you a badge and lanyard: You're given free popcorn and admission to the balcony, with its vertiginous pitch and spectacular views. Of course Matilda and I are Film Fans. The more rituals, the better. Sometimes we plan ahead, and sometimes we check the schedule, hop in the car, and go.

**LAST SUMMER, MATILDA** and I decided to see as many movies as we could in as short a time as possible. This meant the occasional real double feature at the Paramount, but also double features we assembled on the fly. For instance, one day we saw *Time Bandits* at the Austin Film Society and then, when it was over, jumped into the car and went to see Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* at the Paramount. We saw *Stormy Weather* and *The Bank Dick*. We watched new blockbusters (*Solo* had recently come out) and documentaries (we kicked off our spree with *RBG*).

Afterward we talked about the movies—characters and plot, funniest moments, what we liked and what we didn't. The first movie I ever saw in the theater was Chaplin's *The Circus*, and if I'd envisioned parenthood I might have thought, "I will take my kids to see silent comedies whenever I can." I would have thought of it as something I was giving them. I didn't know how much it would mean to me, to discuss Keaton versus Chaplin with my daughter.

"You can tell Charlie Chaplin's acting," Matilda said. "But Buster Keaton looks like things are happening to him."

We both prefer Keaton.

Sometimes Matilda's father and brother would join us, but mostly this was something we'd do together. If there was a movie, we would see it. We kept up our

streak for 13 days. Matilda and I were once in such a hurry to get from a birthday party in a bowling alley to an afternoon showing of *My Neighbor Totoro* that only when we were standing in line to buy tickets did I look down to see that Matilda was still wearing her rented bowling shoes. (We returned them after the movie.) The only failure was *The Great Escape*. Matilda fell in love with the characters, and then, one by one, they died. She suggested the sequel be called *The Great Mistake*.

Every now and then another parent, upon hearing about Matilda's love of the movies, of sitting still, unbothered by the passing hours and the loudness of the sound system and—OK, I'll say it, I hate to brag—her spectacular attention span and cinematic curiosity, will sound a little wistful. "I wish I could get my kids to go to the movies," they'll say. I usually point out that their children played on soccer leagues in nursery school, whereas in my family we excel in the sedentary sports.

Sometimes the wistful parent will say, "Maybe she'll grow up to be a director!"

Well, maybe, I guess, if she wants to. I'm always a little puzzled by the modern tendency to provide on-the-spot career counseling to children. I was blessed with parents who never exactly told me that one day I would have to work for a living. But what I really think is: What's wrong with learning to be an audience member? To learn that some essential art is available only outside your house and best enjoyed surrounded by other people? The world needs more spectators than makers of spectacles. I feel this way about art in museums, and dance performances, and live music, and stage musicals, and we go to all those things too. But a movie ticket is cheap, and there's always something playing, and it turns out that if you go with a fellow moviegoer, a dear one devoted to the dark, it's even better. Soon enough she might decide that she wants sunlight or the company of friends or—this is a cinematic impossibility for me, despite my motherlove—to see horror movies. For now, we're rapt, side by side, elbow to elbow, awash in light.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth McCracken is the author of six books, including *The Giant's House*, a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Bowlaway*, her most recent novel. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her family.