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Oscars: Don't Bet on 'War Horse'

This sentimental epic reminds us of the traumatic animal films our parents took us to see

posted by John Stark, May 9, 2012 [More by this author](#)



John Stark is the Articles Editor of *Next Avenue*. Follow John on Twitter [@jrstark](#).



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I was initially surprised to find *The Artist* and *The Descendants* running neck-and-neck for best picture at Sunday's Oscar ceremony. Not that they aren't worthy of the gold statuette. What I found curious is that the over-50 Oscar voters didn't seem to be going for *War Horse*. It is, after all, the sort of movie that made a big impression on us as kids.

Hold your horses: Maybe that's its problem. It's the kind of old-fashioned, family film we grew up on — and which eventually drove our generation to the shrink's couch.

I saw this Spielberg epic, about a young Devon lad who's separated from his beloved thoroughbred, shortly after its Christmas Day release. I went to the bargain matinee, which is usually filled with moviegoers my age. I was one of only three people there. I had tried to get my boomer buds to go with me, but they declined, despite their love of cinema. "We saw the previews," they told me. "No way."

War Horse falls into a genre they had hoped never to see the likes of again. From 1946, starting with *The Yearling*, until 1974 and the release of *Born Free*, Hollywood loved to make hanky-inducing films in which cherished pets either get whacked or separated from their owners. These are films that people who grew up in those years still get misty-eyed over. More than misty-eyed: They get angry. They haven't forgiven their parents for taking them.

Ask any therapist: No one who saw *Bambi* as a child has ever fully healed from the trauma of watching a helpless fawn's mother get murdered by hunters. Or how about *Old Yeller*? In this kids' flick, a boy watches his dad shoot to death his affable lab mix. Today, any parent taking his kids to see either one of those films would be hauled before Child Services. Both were made by Walt Disney, the same guy who gave us that animated film about a woman who skins dogs to make coats.

If Hollywood had made *Babe* back then, the cute little pig would have wound up on the breakfast menu at Denny's. The same goes for *Free Willy*, *Big Miracle* and all those other heartwarming movies about trapped whales that find their way back to the open seas. Had they been made when we were growing up, those whales would have been lamp oil by the time the final credits rolled. Faced with our tears, our parents would have told us to suck it up.

Twenty minutes into *War Horse* and I was a blubbing wreck. That's when the horse is taken away from his young master, Albert. For the next two-and-a-half hours, that horse endures one

heartbreaking trial after another in his effort to get back home across the battlefields of war-ravaged Europe. The horse's name alone had me reaching for the Kleenex. It's not something impersonal like *Revenge* or *Ten Gallon Hat*. It's Joey, for God's sakes.

I don't think I've cried so hard at the movies since Elsa's siblings were sent to the zoo in *Born Free*. Today, those cubs would be posing for tourist photos on the Serengeti.

If *War Horse* wins best picture on Sunday, it'll be a real upset. No, my bet is that the Oscar will go to *The Artist*, in which a spunky Jack Russell terrier gets praised for bravely saving his owner's life.

In our day, he'd have been shot.