

100 Best Transformational Movies

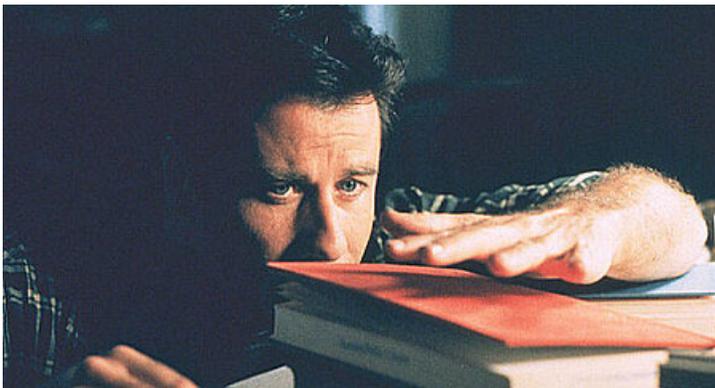
by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

Transformational movies reveal the astonishing ways in which human beings can be changed and set on a new path. Spiritual writers Jeff Zaleski and Tracy Cochran have described this kind of renewal as “something like a seed that cracks open and blooms just when the right pressure is applied.”

Our lives, values, habits, and personalities can be transformed by ten thousand different events or circumstances: a brush with death, a divine epiphany, a moment of awe, an encounter with the oneness of all things, pain, hitting bottom, a creative high, the surge of love in an intimate relationship, a magical moment in solidarity with others at a demonstration, sexual ecstasy, the encouragement of someone who believes in you, the miraculous turn of an enemy into a friend, a change of heart, an unexpected gift of meaning that arrives unannounced, liberation from the prison of the past, or the adventure of hitching a ride on our imagination into a bright new future.

As the wise theological seer Sam Keen put it:

“The great metaphors from all spiritual traditions – grace, liberation, being born again, awakening from illusion – testify that it is possible to transcend the conditioning of my past and do a new thing.”



Transformational movies train us in the art of dealing with both small and systemic changes. Many of these films depict the everyday challenges people face as they struggle to move beyond bad habits, addictions, and worn-out beliefs. Others begin with the personal and then turn political, depicting the struggle to bring about real and lasting changes in the world of business, politics, government, and institutional power.

We salute these 100 Best Transformational Movies for introducing us to many inspiring and soulful agents of change and artists of life; we are drawn into their stories as they muster the creativity and the courage to transform their own lives and the lives of those around them.

We bow to the directors from around the world who are determined to make us connoisseurs of change in times when we need more deepening and more empathy. And we hope that you will make the most of our list by sharing this resource with others and setting up groups to discuss them as part of your informal spirituality study at home.

Click the film titles to go to our full reviews.



The Accidental Tourist is a spritely romantic comedy that offers an engaging look at the many meanings of love and change in the lives of a travel guidebook writer and a dog trainer.

“Everything in your life is there as a vehicle for your transformation. Use it!”

— Ram Dass in *One-Liners*



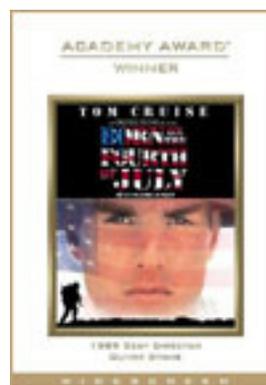
Antwone Fisher is a heart-felt drama about an African American's search for his origins that turns out to be more life-changing than he ever expected it would be.



Blame It on Fidel offers a compelling portrait of change in the life of a nine-year old girl in France where her world is rocked by the radical politics of her parents.



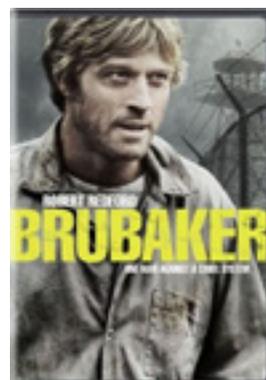
As Good As It Gets is about the process through which a very irritating man opens his heart and proves to be full of surprises. It challenges us not to judge people too quickly.



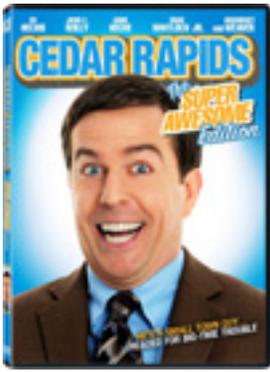
Born on the Fourth of July is an explosive and emotionally riveting film about an angry Vietnam veteran whose patriotism was lost in battle overseas and reborn in political protest.



Australia revolves around the transformations an aristocratic woman and a stockman experience in the big beautiful country they call home.



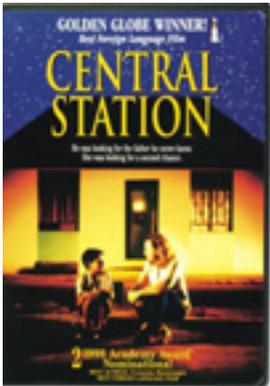
Brubaker charts the challenges and the triumphs of a warden who sets out to transform a badly functioning prison and to honor the dignity of all convicts.



Cedar Rapids is a comedy about a naïve insurance agent from Iowa whose wild and unexpected experiences at an convention turns him into a different person.



A Civil Action explores the major changes that take place in the life of a small-time person injury attorney when he represents some working-class families in a big case involving two of the nation's largest corporations.



Central Station depicts the miraculous transformations in the life of cynical and selfish former schoolteacher when she embarks upon a cross-Brazil journey to reunite a young boy with his father.



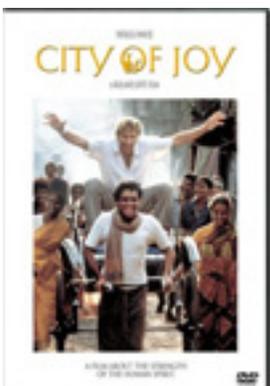
Come Early Morning probes the attempts of a lonely and self-destructive Southern woman to derail the transformative relationship she has with a new man in town.



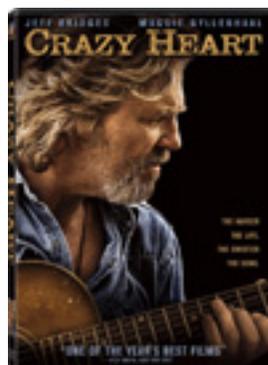
Changing Lanes illustrates how troubles and being caught in an uncomfortable place can propel us toward transformation; in this story, two men are changed due to an automobile accident.



Coming Home focuses on the transformations precipitated by the Vietnam War on a career officer, his subservient wife, and a paraplegic veteran.



City of Joy proves that life can be enhanced by caring, commitment, and community. The characters discover that doing the right things for the right reasons can be life transforming!



Crazy Heart examines the attempts of an unhappy country music singer to put his love life and career into turnaround after being inspired to write some new ballads by a pretty journalist.



The Doctor is about how a woman dying of a brain tumor restores a doctor with cancer of the throat to life by helping him find a new vision of what it means to be a caring physician.



Duck Season, a Mexican film, is a breezy portrait of adolescence spiked with observations on time, sexuality, and the discovery of meaning through brief, everyday encounters.



The Door in the Floor depicts the emotional education of a young writer working for a famous author of children's books; he discovers the transformational power of love and loss.



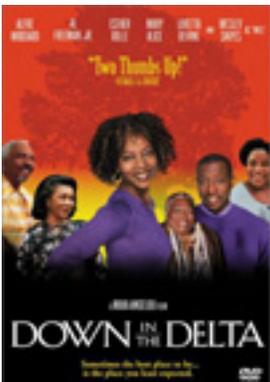
Echoes of Paradise is a riveting tale of spiritual transformation that dashes the myth of island paradises and the dream of an existence unencumbered by adult responsibilities.

"It is the closing of the heart far more than the closing of the mind that keeps folk from transformation."

— Jean Houston in *Search for the Beloved*



Everything Must Go is a compelling drama about unexpected transitions in our lives which offer us the chance to re-evaluate our work, our relationships, our failings, and our addictions.



Down in the Delta celebrates the spiritual possibility of transformation and the truth that every family has the potential for resiliency and growth, no matter what their problems.



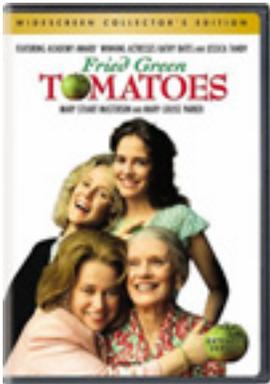
Field of Dreams uses baseball as a launch pad for musings on human aspirations, righting old wrongs, going the distance, and the imagination as a key to transformation.



The Fisher King bears witness to the universal search for wholeness in the relationship between two wayward and wounded souls who through caring and a few good deeds transform each other.



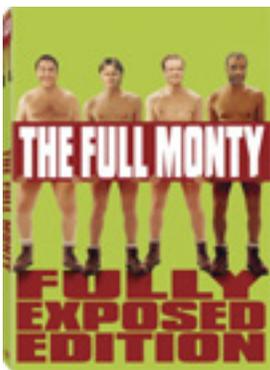
Gran Torino is an extraordinary spiritual movie about an angry, lonely, bigoted old man whose heart is transformed through his relationships with members of a Hmong immigrant family who live next door.



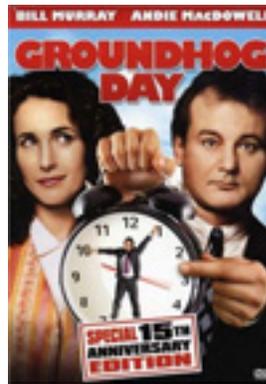
Fried Green Tomatoes reveals how women's lives can be transformed through the power of storytelling and the alchemy of friendship.



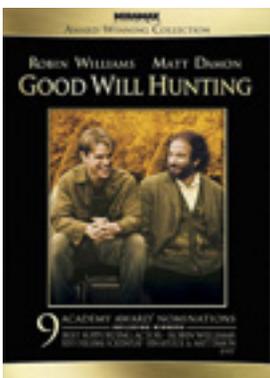
Greenberg is a fresh romantic comedy about a difficult person who is trying to get unstuck from his bad habits, cynicism, and fear. He desperately wants to change his ways and become a new person.



The Full Monty is a funny and fetching story about a band of unemployed steel workers who turn their lives by baring their bodies and their souls.



Groundhog Day is a romantic comedy about a self-centered TV weatherman who keeps re-experiencing his least favorite day of the year until he gets his relationships right. Change is hard when habits are strong.



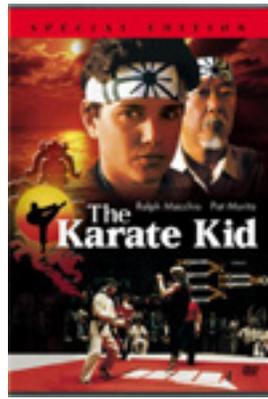
Good Will Hunting is about three soul friends who enable a troubled young man to find his place in the world. As a first step, he must shed his cocoon.



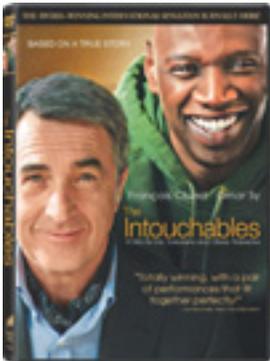
Hope Springs is a funny and sensitive drama about the changes that must be made to renew intimacy in a burnt-out marriage.



Hugo is a magical and free-floating winner that touches the heart as it depicts how through a mutual interest a young boy brings about transformations in a mysterious filmmaker.



The Karate Kid lifts our spirits with the story of a scattered, cocky, and unhappy boy whose life is set on a new path through training in the martial arts by a quiet, humble kung fu master teacher.



The Intouchables is a playful and compassionate French film about an unconventional caregiver and the quadriplegic man he looks after. In their relationship both men are transformed.



Invictus is an entertaining movie about the importance of sports, the power of forgiveness, and the reconciliation of the races. Best of all, it gives a well-rounded and realistic glimpse of the spiritual art of transformative leadership.



I've Loved You So Long is a literate and lithe drama that enables us to see the little steps, actions, and gestures that results in the spiritual transformation of a woman who has spent 15 years in prison.



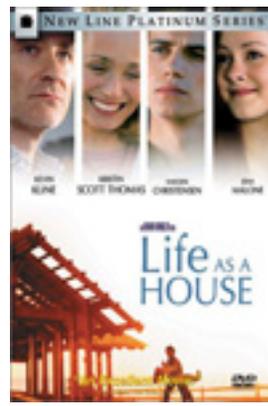
The King's Speech measures the transformations in the life of King George VI brought about by the unorthodox speech therapist who helps him get rid of his stuttering.

“Buddy Miles, by way of introducing me to composition, told me, ‘It doesn’t matter how far you go out, it only matters how you get back.’ We are not so concerned with how Lassie, a thousand miles from home, got where she is now, but how she finds her way back again. Meaning and value derive from the transformational effect of the long journey.”

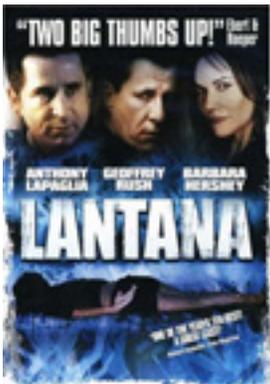
— W. A. Mathieu in *The Musical Life*



The Land Girls tells the story of a varied group of women during World War II assigned to do farm work in England; the intoxicating freedom they feel in this new environment is life-transforming.



Life as a House is a soulful drama about the courage and persistence of a very alienated dying middle-aged man to give birth to himself in the world before leaving it. The process of creating something beautiful proves to be transformative.



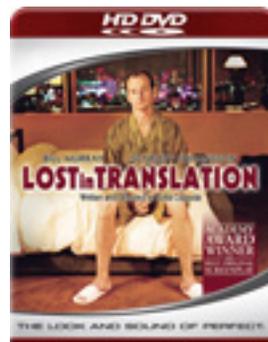
Lantana is an engaging psychological drama set in Sydney, Australia, where a group of men and women flounder in their love relationships and persist in believing that change will bring the happiness they yearn for in their hearts.



The Lives of Others is a riveting German film about spying and the fear, distrust, and betrayal that come with it, but the real hub of the drama is the transformation of a seasoned member of the secret police in East Germany in 1984.



The Last Samurai is set in 1876 Japan when an American military veteran goes there to train fighters and ends up experiencing an inner transformation brought on by his exposure to the samurai way.



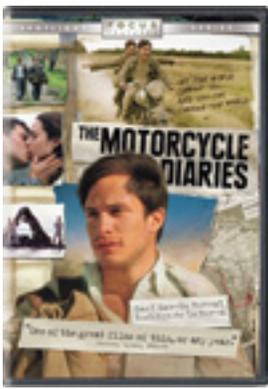
Lost in Translation portrays a cross-generational friendship between a washed-up actor in Tokyo and a young married woman who doesn't know what to do with herself: they are both yearning for some kind of transformation of their lives.

"The ultimate goal is to transform the world into the kind of world God had in mind when He created it."

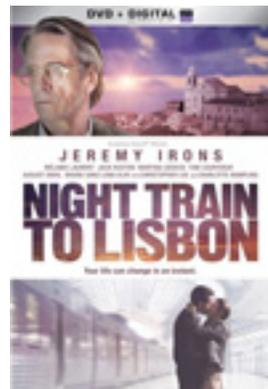
— Harold Kushner in *To Life!*



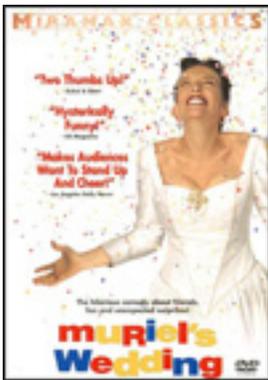
Monster's Ball is a strangely entrancing drama about the transformative power of love in the life of a racist Southern corrections officer who is imprisoned in his anger and hatred.



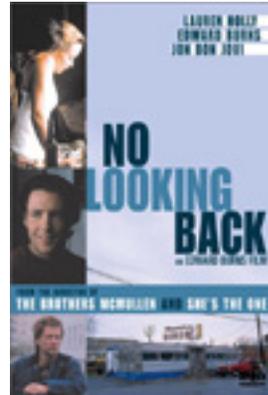
The Motorcycle Diaries registers on the heart and mind as an extraordinary depiction of the spiritual transformation of a sensitive young man as he is exposed to a world of terrible suffering and deep poverty.



Night Train to Lisbon shows how a middle-aged professor's life is transformed by a philosophical book that falls into his hands and propels him on a quest from Switzerland to Portugal.



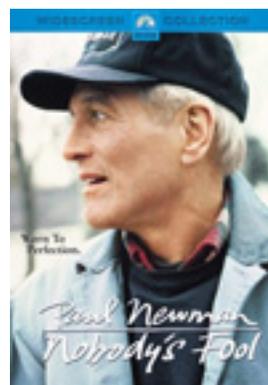
Muriel's Wedding charts the ways in which a chubby misfit reinvents herself while remaining impervious to the many assaults on her appearance and character.



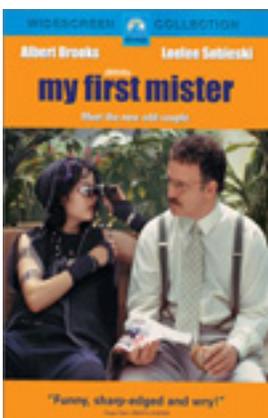
No Looking Back follows a man who is trying to reconnect with a lover he abandoned years before. It explores the ways in which intimate relationships can serve as spurs to personal growth and transformation.



My Brother Is an Only Child is a thought-provoking drama about an Italian young man who chooses politics as the most viable path for him to personal transformation.



Nobody's Fool makes it clear that it is never too late to stir the ashes and to transform your life with the glow that comes from the love of family and friends.



My First Mister shows how some friendships can be transformative -- releasing us from the prison of fear, expanding our hearts, and opening us to the redemptive power of love and forgiveness.



Norma Rae is an inspiring portrait of a heroic ordinary woman who with becomes a leader in the fight for a union at a textile mill. Taking a stand proves to be transformational for herself and her community.

"It is this tender heart that has the power to transform the world."

— Chogyam Trungpa in *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace* by Jack Kornfield



The Painted Veil is a beautiful and very believable story, set in China in the 1920s, about the personal transformation of a married couple who begin to see each other anew.



Nurse Betty is a clever comedy that enables us to imagine the surprising ways in which a person can be transformed and set on a new path.



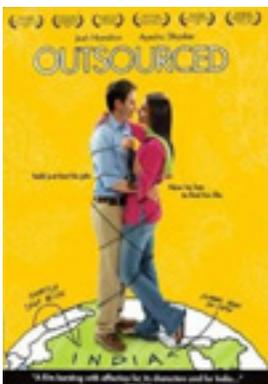
Party Girl shows how even a spunky party animal can create herself anew with proper discipline and devotion finding new life in an unexpected place.



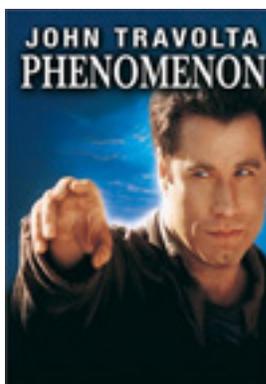
Open Hearts is a Danish drama that hits the mark with its many layered exploration of love and loss in the story of two strangers who transform each other's lives.



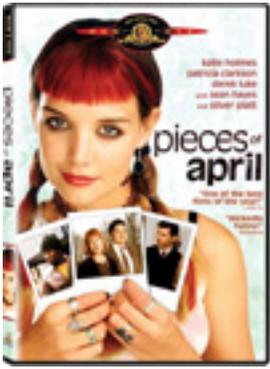
Passion Fish presents a compelling portrait of two burnt-out women who reach out to each other and inch their way back to life. Their story reveals how imperceptible genuine change can be.



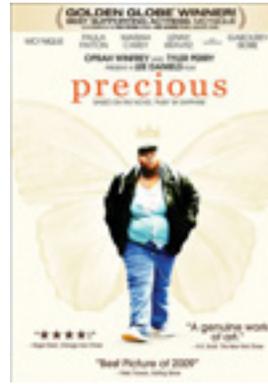
Outsourced is a tour de force comedy/drama about the positive effects of cross-cultural understanding and spiritual openness on a young American sent to Bombay by his company.



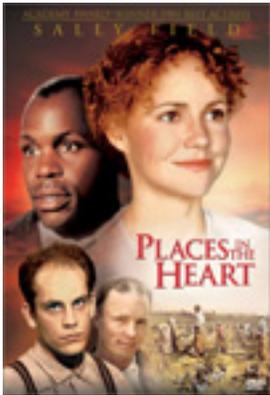
Phenomenon tells the story of a mechanic in a small town who is knocked over by a flash of light from the sky and transformed into a wunderkind demonstrating selfless love, seeing clearly, serving others, and honoring the connections between all things.



Pieces of April revolves around a Thanksgiving dinner and illustrates the deep desire many people have to transform their strained relationships with family.

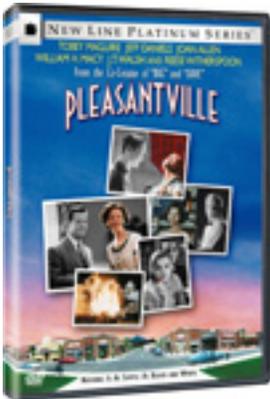


Precious is an inspirational film about one young African-American woman's transformation thanks to the care, concern, and compassion of those who take her under their wings.



Places in the Heart depicts the courage and resilience it takes for a poor widower to make a go of her small farm. We watch with admiration as she struggles to transform herself into a miracle worker.

“To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed very often.”
— John Henry Newman



Pleasantville affirms the spiritual uplift of transformation as an animating value in the lives of free spirits who are never satisfied with a monochrome world and choose to celebrate the many-colored splendors of life.



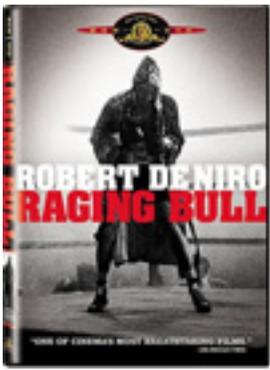
The Queen takes us behind-the-scenes following the death of Princess Diana in 1997. The screenplay humanizes Queen Elizabeth as she tries to get in touch with her heart during this time of crisis and change.



Potiche is an emotionally appealing French film about a trophy wife who becomes a transformative leader.



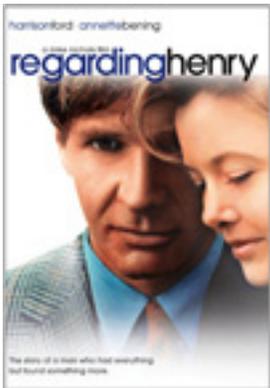
Queen to Play is a delightful and bountiful French film about one woman's passion and the ways in which it transforms her life and the lives of those around her.



Raging Bull is a powerful biopic that reveals the indomitable spirit of boxer Jake LaMotta who wins, then loses, and then gets himself reborn again.



Run & Jump is a transformational film that shows how uneasy and challenging periods in our lives can lead to positive changes that renew our bodies, minds, and souls.



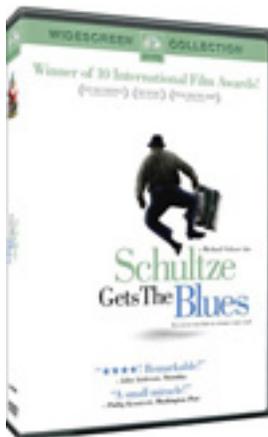
Regarding Henry depicts the spiritual transformation of an aggressive, successful, and amoral New York lawyer into a person who values love, play, intimacy, tenderness, and compassion.



Schindler's List explores the mystery of transformation and goodness in the astonishing drama of a one-time scoundrel's amazing acts of bravery and selflessness.



Ruby in Paradise probes the inner life of one sensitive young woman as she ponders the meaning of love, loneliness, fear, intimacy, and independence. She is determined to transform her life on her own terms.



Schultze Gets the Blues is a delightful oddball German comedy about a retired mine worker's musical quest and the strange ways in which our lives can be transformed and turned in a totally new direction.

"We are all mystics on one level or another – and now we are discovering that our capability for individual spiritual growth may be limitless."

— David Cooper in *Entering the Sacred Mountain*



Seaside offers a splendid examination of the power of place and its power to shape and alter the lives of people through small changes.



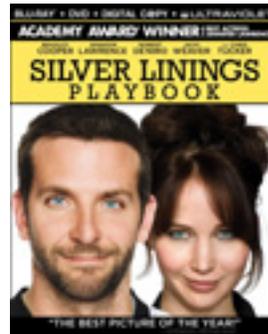
Secondhand Lions is a coming-of-age film that salutes the odd ways in which eccentric individuals can inspire us to turn out lives around and become all we are meant to be.



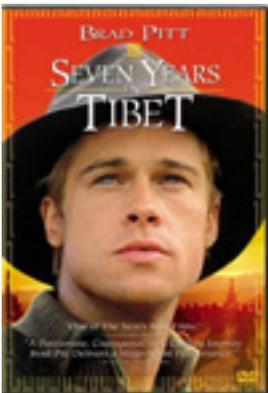
The Shipping News depicts the changes that overtake a man mired in loss who has been a doormat for most of his life and is transformed into a sensitive father, a caring relative, and a talented reporter.



The Secret Life of Walter Mitty unfurls the story of a man prone to escape the present moment through wild fantasies who is transformed when he discovers his courage.

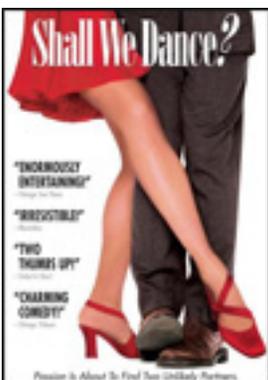


Silver Linings Playbook is a funny, credible, and joyful movie about two damaged souls who reach out in the darkness of depression and discover that looking on the bright side of things is a key to personal transformation.



Seven Years in Tibet subtly conveys the spiritual transformation of an egotistical mountain climber who is exposed to the marvels and the mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism.

“Nothing is more crucial to our lives or more central to the heart of God than the transformation of the human personality.”
— Richard J. Foster



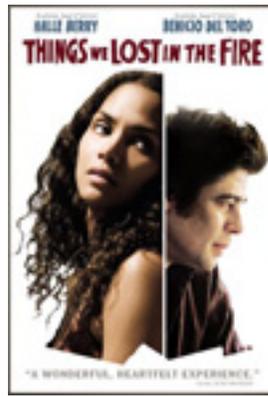
Shall We Dance? is an enticing Japanese film that shows how desire is a force field that takes us beyond ourselves and enables us to transform our lives.



Son of the Bride is a heartwarming comedy about the personal transformation of a middle-aged man, thanks largely to the example of his very romantic parents.



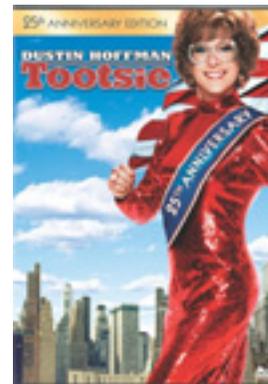
The Song of Sparrows is an Iranian film about an ostrich wrangler turned taxi driver who through an accident discovers how breakdowns can open the door to personal renewal.



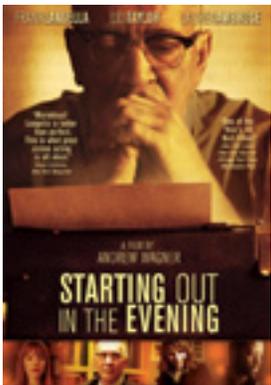
Things We Lost in the Fire is a deeply emotional film that gives us a deeper respect for those trying to recover from the loss of a loved one or from enslavement to addiction. The journey back to the land of the living involves taking small steps.



The Spitfire Grill is a soul-satisfying film about the spiritual process of turning pain into joy and bringing new life out of darkness. Two women welcome an outsider who then transforms their small community.



Tootsie is a rousing comedy set in New York City that deals with the agonies and ecstasies of the acting profession, the confusion of sexual roles, the importance of lovers being friends, and the changes which alter our lives.



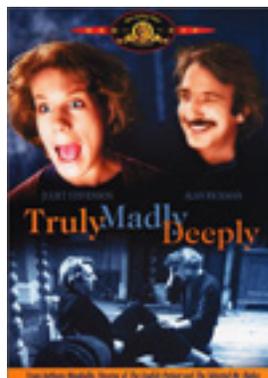
Starting Out in the Evening introduces us to a rigid and physically limited novelist whose world is rocked by a female graduate school student who opens him to the transformation he needs to stir up his creative juices.



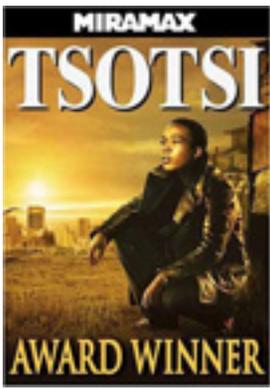
The Tree of Life is an unconventional film that itself can be a transformative experience for moviegoers as it explores nature and spirit, past and present, and the abstract story of the universe set alongside the intimate story of one family.



The Station Agent explores all the curious ways in which transformative friendships can abound, express love, turn us around, and take us to places we never imagined.

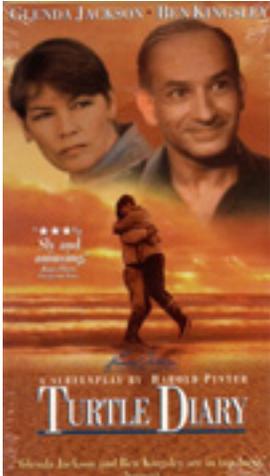


Truly, Madly, Deeply is a thrilling transformational film about an English woman who travels to the far country of grief and almost doesn't make it back after her lover appears in her flat as a ghost with a body.



Tsotsi is a spiritually riveting film about a nasty thug in a Johannesburg shanty town whose violent and selfish life is totally transformed when he finds a baby in a car he's stolen.

“Only the images by which we live can bring transformation.”
—Helen Luke in *The Way of Women*



Turtle Diary is a touching and tender film about two strangers who try to change their lives through the adventuresome project of releasing some aquarium turtles in the ocean.



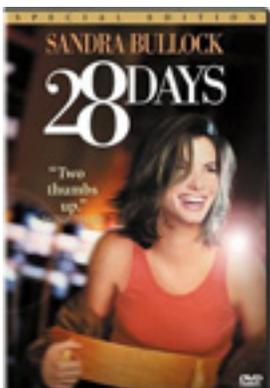
Unfinished Song is a touching story of an elder couple who discover the heart dimensions and transformative power of singing.



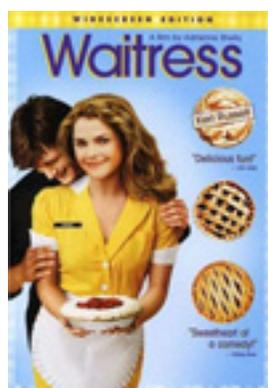
Twelve and Holding is a mesmerizing film about three adolescents overtaken by grief and struggling with loss who find that is a catalyst to personal transformation.



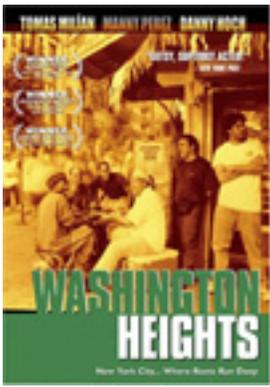
The Visitor reveals how the alchemy of music and friendship transforms a burnt-out professor's life and how it opens his heart to fresh possibilities.



28 Days zeroes in on the courage and discipline it takes for a young woman attending a rehab program to stop her addiction to alcohol and mood enhancing pills.



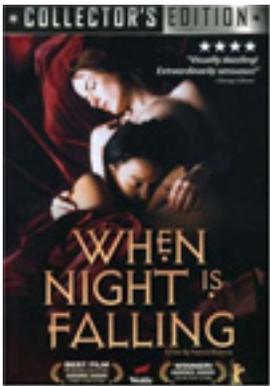
Waitress is a romantic comedy in which a young woman stuck in a terrible marriage discovers that her pie-making skills provide a path to a new life of freedom and fulfillment.



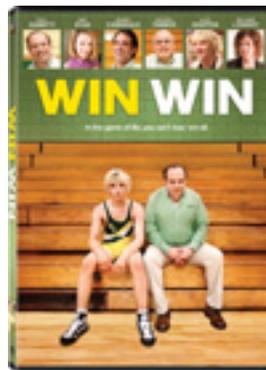
Washington Heights is a fine Latino film exploring the transformation of a conflict-ridden relationship between a Dominican-born owner of a store, and his intense son, an aspiring comic book illustrator.



The Willow Tree is about an Iranian professor who gets his sight back after years of being blind. As a result, he goes through a series of transformations: physical, emotional, and spiritual.



When Night Is Falling depicts the love affair of two very different women from diametrically opposed worlds as they struggle to live out the transformation of their relationship.



Win Win is an emotionally satisfying drama about sports, family, and money problems in which everyone gets a second chance – a chance to really change.



The Women on the 6th Floor is the story of how a middle-aged Paris stockbroker's life is transformed after he goes gaga over his Spanish maid and all things Spanish.



Yi Yi (A One and a Two) is a Taiwanese film about a multi-generation family. We see how love and work are the bearers of meaning and transformation.

“I have come to be suspicious of any religion or form of therapy that focuses exclusively on cultivating the interior life or saving the soul and that does not include a celebration of the senses, an ecological vision, and a concern for social justice. We can aspire to care for and transform this world only if we trust that spirit is incarnate in flesh and dirt. This world is our home. We are in the right place.”

— Sam Keen in *Hymns to an Unknown God*