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Subject : Tom Cruise and the insanity of the Oscars

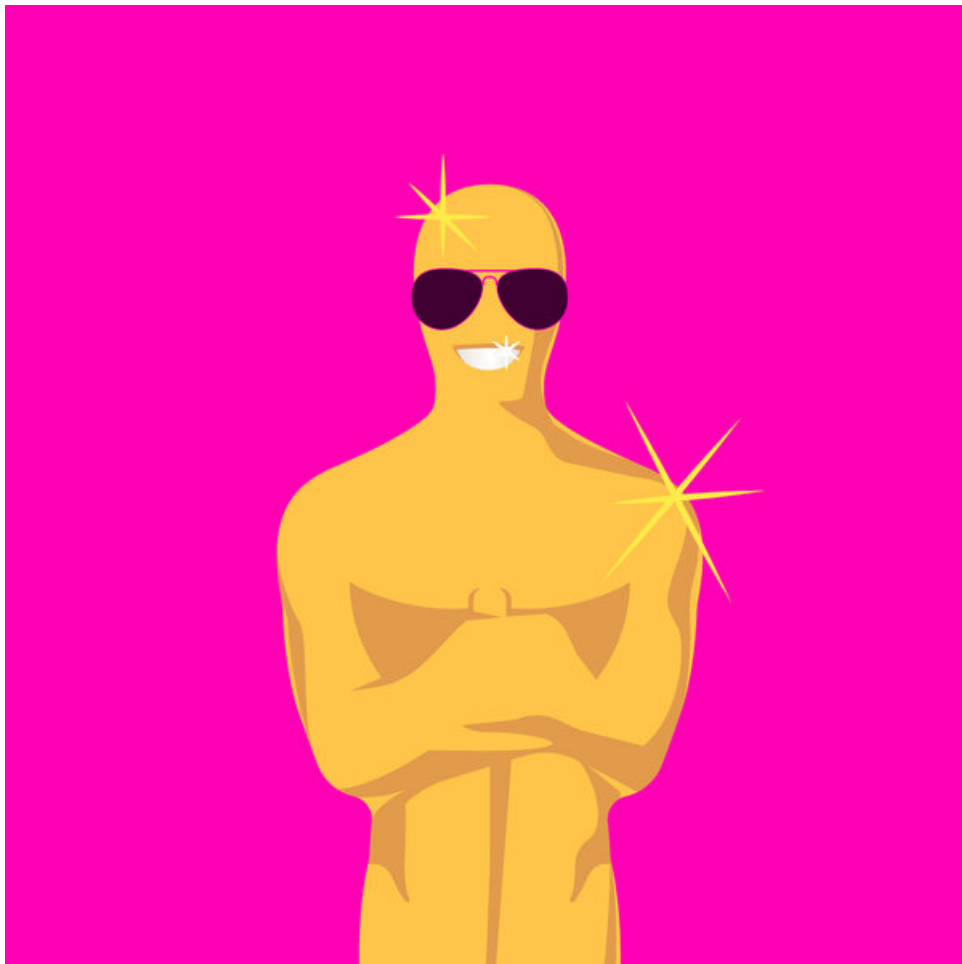
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Frank Bruni

OPINION

FOR SUBSCRIBERS | JANUARY 19, 2023



Ben Wiseman

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Commerce? Craft? The Academy Awards have never figured out what exactly they honor.



By Frank Bruni
Contributing Opinion Writer

Did Tom Cruise give an honest-to-goodness performance — one that involved disappearing into a character versus reveling in his own ageless and sinewy glory — in “Top Gun: Maverick”? I missed it. Maybe I was blinded by his toothy gleam.

I write that as someone who enjoyed the movie, appreciates a cocky fighter pilot as much as the next guy and believes fully in Cruise’s talent, which is among the reasons I’ve seen “Jerry Maguire” a half-dozen times. In that movie, he shows range. In “Maverick,” he shows off.

And yet there’s apparently [an outside chance that he’ll land a best actor nod](#) when Academy Award nominations are announced on Tuesday. Whether that happens is one of the more intriguing bits of Oscar suspense. Another is whether an unusual and impassioned grass-roots campaign to get Andrea Riseborough a best actress mention for the independent movie “To Leslie,” which you’ve probably never heard of, will pay off.

Together, those story lines illustrate how nonsensical the Oscars are — and why it’s nutty that I and many other people get so worked up about them.

“Maverick” [grossed more than \\$700 million](#) in theaters in the United States on its way to a worldwide total of nearly \$1.5 billion. Its proponents cite or allude to that box office bonanza as an argument for accolades. Isn’t commercial success a legitimate metric of achievement? Evidence that a project has resonated — and for reasons that surely include craftsmanship?

If you read between the lines delivered by the Cruise boosters, you detect the suggestion that he’s sometimes disregarded artistically because of his sheer profitability, along with the assertion that he represents an endangered species — the true-blue, old-fashioned movie star — that must be protected, like [a Tapanuli orangutan](#).

“To Leslie” grossed [less than \\$30,000](#) worldwide. It’s now streaming. It’s not about a bad-boy hunk swaggering back to his cockpit. It’s about a sad-sack drunk staggering toward dignity.

Riseborough’s performance in that role — *not* nominated for a Golden Globe, *not* nominated by the Screen Actors Guild — has recently become a cause célèbre among her fellow actors. As [Chris Gardner wrote](#) in The Hollywood Reporter last week, “Jennifer Aniston, Charlize Theron, Sarah Paulson and Edward Norton have hosted screenings, with more recent showings booked by Gwyneth Paltrow and Courteney Cox.” Paltrow [said on Instagram](#) that Riseborough “should win every award there is and all the ones that haven’t been invented yet.”

[Dozens of additional celebrities have expressed similar adoration](#), in a sort of chain reaction powered by the conviction that Oscar voters shouldn’t overlook great artistry just because it’s not staring down at them from the bright lights of a multiplex marquee.

But Oscar voters *routinely* overlook such artistry. When movie critics’ lists of favorite movies and performances diverge almost completely from the Oscar nominees, it’s not simply because those critics are flaunting their refinement (though there’s some of that). It’s because they’ve sampled and considered all that’s out there, while many Oscar voters have assessed only what readily

caught their eyes.

Those voters can never quite decide how much heed to pay to a movie's popularity or accessibility. That's how you wind up with absurd best picture races like the one in 2010 between "The Hurt Locker" and "Avatar." ("The Hurt Locker" won.)

"Avatar: The Way of Water" and "Top Gun: Maverick" — call them the colon movies — are [strong contenders for best picture nods](#) next week, but then so are "The Banshees of Inisherin" and "Tár," which have no colons, limited commercial appeal and deliberately challenging narratives and tones. Putting all four movies in the same contest is like contriving some athletic competition that pits football players against a water polo team. They ply different elements.

But then the Oscars are a paradoxical amalgam of mercantilism and vanity, protection of the status quo and virtue signaling, pageantry and quirk. They take into consideration so many different things that they wind up meaning almost nothing.

I bet that neither Cruise nor Riseborough receives the recognition that they're hoping for. They lie at opposite ends of the blockbuster-to-boutique spectrum. Oscar is comfiest in the mushy middle.

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Words Worth Sidelining

My storehouse of valuable advice is finite. I'll run out before long. But from a top shelf I pluck this: When somebody says "long story short," make a bowl of popcorn, settle into a comfortable chair and brace for an epic. A very long story is about to unspool, or an already-long story is about to grow longer.

"Long story short" exists at the oxymoronic intersection of self-awareness and self-deception. Its utterers know enough to acknowledge their tale's length but pledge an abbreviation that they're incapable of. That "long" and that "short" are in unresolved tension. If the phrase were a lyric, it would be scored by the musician [Fatboy Slim](#).

"Forgive the interminable story." "I know I should stop talking but I can't." "I've taken you hostage and the ransom is listening to me for another 15 minutes." These are honest alternatives to the fiction of "long story short." And I'll stop there, to keep a short item short.

"Words Worth Sidelining" appears every month or so. Thanks to Sandra Dirks of Egg Harbor, Wis., and Bruce Monastersky of Williamstown, N.J., for suggesting "long story short."

For the Love of Sentences



Bob Odenkirk as Saul Goodman in “Better Call Saul.” Greg Lewis/AMC/Sony Pictures Television

In an article in the North Carolina magazine *Our State*, [Mark Powell described](#) a church famous for its frescoes: “St. Mary’s is a tiny thing, a toy box of white clapboard and green trim, a leftover scrap of true faith and right angles that sits on a country road just past an Ingles and a Dollar General. When a truck rumbles past, the chestnut boards creak like a ship at sea.” (Thanks to Steve Welker of Mount Airy, N.C., for nominating this.)

In *The Guardian*, [Stuart Heritage took particular issue](#) with the Golden Globe for best actor in a drama series. Bob Odenkirk, the star of “Better Call Saul,” lost to the “Yellowstone” patriarch Kevin Costner, “whose performance was so one-note that you suspect the man needed a team of technicians laden with ropes and pulleys just to change his facial expression.” (Carrie Costello, Aberdeen, Wash.)

In [an essay in *Esquire*](#) that’s perhaps the most thoughtful of many reflections on the announced closing of the revered Copenhagen restaurant Noma, Jeff Gordinier recalled his surprise years ago when he met its affable and voluble creator, René Redzepi: “I guess I was expecting to chat with someone scolding and morose in the Scandinavian mode, sort of like the figure of Death in Ingmar Bergman’s ‘The Seventh Seal.’” (That nomination comes from me.)

In *The New Yorker*, [Helen Shaw reviewed](#) a new London stage production based on — and named for — a classic Virginia Woolf novel whose protagonist is treated as male at the start but female in the end: “I had been particularly eager to see ‘Orlando,’ which slots into the current gender discourse with a nearly audible click.” (John Todd, Northampton, Mass.)

Reflecting on the House Republican leaders’ maneuvers so far, the Washington Post columnist [Dana Milbank noted](#): “As Business Insider pointed out, there will be more guys named ‘Mike’ running committees — six — than there are women in charge of them (just three of the 21 chairs). The old boys of the House Republican caucus might benefit from a Mike drop.” (Theresa Vinic, Norfolk, Mass.)

Focusing on Kevin McCarthy’s serial moral surrenders, [Nick Welsh wrote](#) in *The Santa Barbara Independent*: “As we all saw, McCarthy sold his soul to the

devil so many times that the devil sued to get his money back. It turns out it's only a small claims case." (Laurel Allen, Carpinteria, Calif.)

In *The Times*, [Maureen Dowd pondered](#) a prince's overexposed overshares: "Harry thought he'd find closure in disclosure. He will never feel the crown's heaviness, but was his burden so unbearable that it needed multimedia unburdening?" (Barbara Sloan, Conway, S.C.)

[Bret Stephens also took Harry's measure](#): "He embodies the worst characteristics of his former and current home countries: the unmerited entitlement of a secondary British royal and the self-pitying exhibitionism of a grifting California arriviste." (Constance Nathanson, Manhattan, and Cindy Kissin, New Haven, Conn., among others)

Also in *The Times*, [Issie Lapowsky asked](#) whether a certain tech behemoth was ever going to follow through with a plan to help alleviate Bay Area traffic: "Even before Facebook became Meta in 2021 and started downsizing late last year, this was a company best known for moving fast and breaking things, not moving slowly and building them." (Julie Rolland, Quincy-sous-Sénart, France)

*To nominate favorite bits of recent writing from *The Times* or other publications to be mentioned in "For the Love of Sentences," please email me [here](#), put "Sentences" in the subject line and include your name and place of residence.*

What I'm Reading



Bonnie Garmus Frances F. Denny for *The New York Times*

- My feelings about the blockbuster new novel "Age of Vice," by Deepti Kapoor, fall somewhere between the rapture that Ron Charles described in [his review in *The Washington Post*](#) and the strongly tempered regard that [Dwight Garner expressed](#) in *The Times*. A tale of brutal poverty and organized crime and doomed romance and violent retribution in modern (and modernizing) India, it's richly imagined, suspenseful and, in key passages, poignant. But it often spins its wheels: I grew weary of the

inventory of alcohol and cigarettes consumed by the playboy Sunny and the journalist Neda and feared for these lovers' livers and lungs.

- One of the publishing sensations of last year, “Lessons in Chemistry,” by Bonnie Garmus, maintains a more consistently fleet pace and has an irresistible buoyancy, along with a deliberately sharp bite. Garmus’s novel focuses on a female scientist whose ambitions are impeded — and then rerouted — by a world not yet ready for her, and its potent appeal was captured perfectly by [Elisabeth Egan’s assessment](#) in The Times.
- I’m eager to read the just published memoir “[Life on Delay](#),” by the Atlantic writer and editor John Hendrickson, about the ways in which he and others have been shaped by their stuttering. Hendrickson is the one who got Joe Biden to talk about his stutter for [a moving, memorable magazine story](#) in 2020.

On a Personal Note



Frank Bruni/The New York Times

I love my North Carolina neighborhood, which is a very lucky thing, because I moved here during the real-estate craziness of mid-2021 and bought my house in a panicked state, based on an iPad tour, a friend’s drive-by and satellite imagery. I treasure the abundance of trees; the mix of manicured yards and wilder ones; the nearness of woodland trails that Regan and I can (and do) follow in any number of directions.

But I don’t love the neighborhood’s name. I don’t understand why it has to have one. “The Highlands”? We are not in Scotland. We are not near Scotland. And, [having once visited the Scottish Highlands](#), I can say that we bear none of its traces — not the mountains, not the sea, not the sheep. In place of Loch Ness, we have a slender creek with a menagerie of creatures that no one would call monsters. But “The Highlands” is indeed etched into a stone wall at one of the two entrances to our modest lattice of about 10 blocks. What loopy fantasy and ludicrous pretension.

We're not alone. A half mile away are a bunch of attached townhouses identified by a nearby sign as "Vineyard Square." The townhouses occupy Cabernet Drive, Chateau Place, Napa Valley Way and Sonoma Way. They are not in California. They are not in or near any wine country. They are not proximal to a chateau. And while I try never to underestimate the gullibility of people, I doubt that any inhabitants of Vineyard Square are under the delusion that pinot noir is being made just a grape's throw away.

Aspirational labels are of course a big part of marketing, but I don't understand the point of them when they wander this far from the truth, and that journey is especially comical when residential developments and streets are being named. Elsewhere within about a five-mile radius of my house: Silver Creek and Sunset Creek (when you lack rivers, you romanticize rivulets). Bayview Drive (nowhere near a proper bay). Mimosa Drive (known for its boozy brunches?). Orchard Lane (you probably won't be picking apples there anytime soon).

And near you? If there are amusingly and discordantly named enclaves and byways, please share those appellations, along with some remarks about *why* they're so discordant, by [emailing me here](#). (Please put "Neighborhood Names" in the subject line and, at the end of the email, your full name and city or town of residence.) If I gather enough good examples, I'll publish them in a future newsletter.

Meantime, in the spirit of a fitter, healthier 2023, I'll commit to more runs through my neighborhood, from Inverness Way toward Lochlaven Lane and then over to Skye Drive. I'll do a full tour of the Highlands! Perhaps, in place of my running shorts, I should wear a running kilt.

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