

SAFETY

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Life & Tradition

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BBKAKEWICH



Block parties help to turn neighborhoods into communities.

COMMUNITY

Building Stronger Neighborhoods, One Block Party at a Time

Block Party USA brings neighbors together for the common good, through good old-fashioned fun. Here's how you can, too.

By Jeff Minick

For Vanessa Elias, a childhood memory sparked an idea that has the potential to build stronger communities all across the United States.

Her family moved many times when Ms. Elias was growing up. At one point, they lived in Saint Louis, Missouri, for 18 months on a cul-de-sac near a farm. It was there that one special summer evening gave her an instant sense of belonging to a community.

"We had a block party," Ms. Elias said. "Kids were running around after dark,

playing flashlight tag, chasing fireflies, running everywhere. Our parents were chatting. Someone pulled out a big steel trough, like cattle drink from, and filled it with water and made it a swimming pool. There's this photo I have of my dad getting in there with his suit on, full on with a tie, and my expression as a 9-year-old of just pure joy. That was a magical night for me."

Fast forward several decades, and we find Ms. Elias hard at work spreading that magic through Block Party USA, hoping that neighborhood get-togethers will cast a similar spell over children and adults around the United

I believe gathering for a block party just once a year can have a profound ripple effect.

Vanessa Elias, founder, Block Party USA

States while binding communities closer together.

'Connection Is What Matters'

In 2015, spurred on by what she saw in the breakdown of families and communities and by a crisis in her own family, Ms. Elias became a mental health activist, a certified parent coach, and a speaker and writer. She is the founder of Thrive With a Guide, where her mission is to "guide parents to discover their power—to transform their lives and bring deep connection and joy back into their families." A resident of Wilton,

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Fantasy Films Worth Watching

These 5 films not only entertain but also inspire

By Walker Larson

When I was growing up, my family practiced a ritual every New Year's Eve: We watched the entire "Lord of the Rings" trilogy in one day (about nine hours of screen time). I wasn't allowed to watch the films any other time of year, and so I anticipated the annual New Year's viewing marathon with a year's worth of pent-up excitement. These were—and perhaps still are—my favorite films. Eye fatigue and excessive candy consumption aside, that yearly tradition formed me in important ways I still haven't fully comprehended. Like all good fantasy films, director Peter Jackson's trilogy transports you to another world, but,

no matter how imaginative and "other" it may be, it remains a land where the features of our world are clearly discernible—perhaps even more clearly than they are in our daily lives. We watch fantasy in part to better understand our reality.

We suffer from a dearth of great fantasy literature and fantasy films, however. Fantasy crafted without a strong sense of universal moral and philosophical principles easily slips into the realm of the absurd or even perverted, where the "fantastic" elements are merely the grotesque productions of a twisted imagination. True fantasy, on the other hand, reflects reality and promotes the good,

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▲ Cary Elwes as Westley and Robin Wright as Princess Buttercup in "The Princess Bride."

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Fantasy Films Worth Watching

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the true, and the beautiful, which can sometimes be distilled and magnified in fantasy and myth better than in other fictional works.

Here are five fantasy or fairy tale films that meet that qualification.

'Cinderella' (2015) Directed by Kenneth Branagh

The brilliance of Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of the timeless fairy tale is that Mr. Branagh resisted the temptation to do something "original" or "modern" in his retelling, a trap so many modern fairy tale films fall into. He simply retold the traditional story in a traditional way with dazzling visuals and pitch-perfect casting (much as he has done with Shakespeare adaptations). Lily James embodies the innocence and kindness of Cinderella in a simple and believable way. Mr. Branagh has an eye for spectacle, and the sets, costumes, and landscapes beam gorgeously on screen. Most importantly, the production champions the virtues of courage, kindness, humility, and generosity—an astonishing characteristic for a major Hollywood picture produced in the past 10 years. The film works because Mr. Branagh puts his exceptional directorial talents to work at the service of a story with universal truth and timeless appeal, rather than arrogantly trying to dominate or subvert the tale, as so many modern directors do.

Like all the best art, Mr. Jackson's epic fantasy trilogy is about everything: friendship, courage, life, death, loss, war, peace, and hope.

'Jack the Giant Slayer' (2013) Directed by Bryan Singer

Here is another rare modern film that eschews the subversion of a beloved tale or hammering it into a box of political messaging in favor of just telling a lively story of adventure and romance. The film retells and substantially develops the fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk." In this version, when Jack goes to rescue a beautiful princess, who happened to be in his house when it was carried aloft by a beanstalk of unusual proportions, he discovers the land of the giants and their plan to invade the kingdom below. Though in a supporting role,

Ewan McGregor adds just the right dash of humor and swashbuckling swagger. The script and character development are not particularly profound, but that's partly because the film doesn't take itself too seriously, and complicated human psychology is not the proper subject matter of a simple fairy tale of this flavor. It's about the courage of the protagonist and the clear-cut representation of good versus evil.

'The Princess Bride' (1987) Directed by Rob Reiner

How many 1980s fairy tale movies do people still watch on repeat, with generation after generation joining the ranks of its fanbase? The fact that children raised in the 2000s and 2010s can not only name but extensively quote "The Princess Bride" stands as proof of its cult-classic status. What's



▲ Aslan, a main character in "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe."

COMMUNITY

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Connecticut, and married with three daughters, she is a former president of the Wilton Youth Council, co-founded the Wilton Mental Health Task Force, and is a founding member of the Wilton Coalition for Youth, which seeks to bolster the connections between organizations serving young people and their families.

This deep dive into the politics and culture of her adopted town brought an increasing awareness of the need for stronger bonds in the community. In 2018, Ms. Elias and others started what she called Wilton's Big Block Party Weekend.

"We had a two-pronged goal of connecting neighbors face to face and encouraging free play for children," she said. "It's all about micro-connection, local connection, and so, that first weekend we had 40 different block parties involving about 1,200 people. It gave people permission to reach out to their neighbors. And since then it's been a Wilton tradition."

Ms. Elias followed up by conducting a

case study of one of these blocks.

"What's grown out of it is beautiful in terms of kids getting jobs, meals for families with a new baby, roasting s'mores together in the winter. ... It's the epitome of your community and your neighborhood and feeling connected and taken care of," she said.

This success inspired Ms. Elias to launch Block Party USA. Her dream, as she explains on her website, is "to achieve connection, civility, and community—and especially to foster free play for kids. ... Neighbor talking to neighbor, away from devices and enjoying face-to-face time. I believe gathering for a block party just once a year can have a profound ripple effect."

Throw Your Own Block Party
"Keep it simple. We're not looking for pony rides and bouncy castles. We want to keep it simple so that it feels doable."

That piece of advice is the heart of the block party as envisioned by Ms. Elias. As for her other suggestions and tips, they are eminently practical.



▲ Ms. Elias encourages kids' free play.

COURTESY OF VANESSA ELIAS

MOVIESTILLSDB



▲ Ewan McGregor, Eleanor Tomlinson, and Nicholas Hoult in "Jack the Giant Slayer."

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▲ Sean Astin and Elijah Wood in "The Fellowship of the Ring."

MOVIESTILLSDB



▲ Cinderella attends the royal ball in a pumpkin transformed into a coach in "Cinderella."

the magic ingredient that accounts for this wild success? In his tale of a young man who sets out to rescue his love from her uproariously awful fiancé, Mr. Reiner flawlessly blends several genres: comedy, romance, fantasy, and satire. "The Princess Bride" is a swashbuckling adventure and, at the same time, a nostalgic, affectionate satire of swashbuckling adventures, à la Errol Flynn. In the words of film critic Brian Eggert, "Few films have ever walked the thin line between earnestness and irony so flawlessly."

'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' (2005) Directed by Andrew Adamson

While aimed at a younger viewership, like the first entry, Mr. Adamson's "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" will

hold some appeal for adults as well, particularly if they grew up reading the classic C.S. Lewis novel that the film adapts. There's no substitute for reading the Narnia books, by the way, but as far as film adaptations of the series go (and there have been several), this one is the best. Like Mr. Branagh's "Cinderella," Mr. Adamson holds true to the spirit of the original story and takes only minor creative liberties. Moreover, he takes the fantastic seriously in this tale of four siblings swept away to another world where they're destined to become kings and queens; there's no condescension toward a child audience or "childish" subject matter. Without making his film heavy, Mr. Adamson understands the seriousness of Lewis's vision. And by 2005, the filmmaking industry had the tools to bring that vision to life with outstanding visuals.

'The Lord of the Rings' Trilogy (2001–2003) Directed by Peter Jackson

I kept the best for last. Though I believe all the films on this list are worth watching, none of them come close to touching the profound beauty and power of this trilogy. Mr. Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's novels is a pure cinematic masterpiece, and I find myself judging other films by the standard of these. Not many, in my experience, have equaled it. Like all the best art, Mr. Jackson's epic fantasy trilogy is about everything: friendship, courage, life, death, loss, war, peace, and hope. I always come away from these films with a suddenly widened perspective, not just on my own life, but on human life in general, and particularly the very real combat between good and evil that swirls around us and will run on to the end

of time. It's as though I've stood on top of a tall mountain for a little and seen all the valleys of the world stretched out below me, cradled in grandeur and tragedy. I've reached through and touched something fundamentally true about the nature of reality. Frodo's journey to destroy the epicenter of evil is, somehow, the journey of each one of us.

Prior to becoming a freelance journalist and culture writer, Walker Larson taught literature and history at a private academy in Wisconsin, where he resides with his wife and daughter. He holds a master's in English literature and language, and his writing has appeared in The Hemingway Review, Intellectual Takeout, and his Substack, The Hazelnut. He is also the author of two novels, "Hologram" and "Song of Spheres."

Benefits and Byproducts

In addition to being fun, block parties, as Ms. Elias notes, also cultivate a culture where we show up for our neighbors if they need us, help strengthen the connections between generations, and can often lead to employment—babysitting, pet sitting, raking leaves, mowing lawns—for teens.

"When we get together face-to-face," she said, "we realize that we have more in common than we are different."

On her website, Ms. Elias writes, "My town is proof that you can get along with your neighbors who vote differently than you, that you may disagree on many issues but you can still laugh together and offer a helping hand."

"We as humans underestimate our impact," Ms. Elias said, "and the potential of the difference we can make in someone else's world, and how it makes us have joy, how it makes us feel good. This is actionable, and you can start now, this summer, start a tradition and carve out a life for yourself and your family and your community."

It is, as Ms. Elias said, "a win, win, win for everybody."

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of nonfiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va.



Invite Your Neighbors

Some people may feel shy or uncomfortable floating the idea of a block party to their neighbors.

"What is helpful is to share Block Party USA and the website when you invite people. Explain it as part of a movement, and this is why you're doing it makes people a little more comfortable," Ms. Elias said.

She recommends inviting 30 to 40 neighbors—"Not everybody's going to come"—by putting flyers on their doors.

"You include the date and time, and your contact information, and a reminder to bring lawn chairs. The easiest thing is for everyone to bring a cooler and food to share—I recommend finger foods—and BYOB. The way I like to do it is from four to seven, which is getting into dinner time but not too late for those with young kids," she said.



Offer Name Tags

She also recommends name tags and a sign-in sheet, where everyone can enter their email addresses.

"I think the name tags are key," Ms. Elias said. "They can put their address and street number there, and that really helps solidify the connections. And you can follow up by sending an email to all the people that signed up. You can put together a contact sheet."

Ms. Elias also reassures those hosting the block party not to worry about the number of people who end up coming. At one of her Wilton block parties, which she organized at the last minute, only 12 people showed up.

"Normally, we'd have 30 to 40, and someone said to me, 'Where is everybody? Aren't you upset?' No, the 12 of us got to talk. We had more time together. Anything more than four is a success," she said.



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY BIBA KAYEWICH

Include Everyone

As Ms. Elias makes clear, these neighborhood parties are for everyone. She especially encourages parents to bring along their teens and young adults.

"Get them to carry the cooler or set up the sidewalk chalk for younger children or something like that," she said. "It's really important to include the whole family. Our young adults are struggling with isolation and loneliness more than any other group, so it's not an opt-out option, right?"

We had a two-pronged goal of connecting neighbors face to face and encouraging free play for children.

Vanessa Elias, founder, Block Party USA