



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

The application format has been changed since this application was submitted. You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

Project Title: *The Best Years of Our Lives*: The Forgotten Film that United a Postwar Nation

Institution: None (Independent Scholar)

Project Director: Alison Macor

Grant Program: Public Scholars

The Best Years of Our Lives: The Forgotten Film That United a Postwar Nation

Alison Macor, Ph.D., Independent Scholar

Significance and contribution

By the late spring of 1946 when production began on *The Best Years of Our Lives*, director William Wyler had something of a reputation in Hollywood. Nicknamed “40 Take Wyler” or even “50 Take Wyler” (depending, as several biographers have noted, on who was telling the story), the filmmaker was a stickler for striking just the right note with a scene.¹ And on *Best Years*, although Wyler moved quickly and decisively through many of the scenes without dialogue, he took his time when shooting others, particularly those with Harold Russell, a bilateral hand amputee with zero acting experience save for his “role” in a military training film that instructed other World War II amputees how they, too, could adapt to life without their limbs. Russell’s can-do attitude and easygoing personality made him a natural poster boy for the War Department’s rehabilitation campaign. Wyler, however, needed Russell to be able to mine his character’s anger and grief over his missing hands to play up the tension in *Best Years*, a drama about three veterans readjusting to life after World War II. At one point during filming, Wyler even threatened to send Russell to an Army hospital for several weeks to get him “unadjusted” and, Russell later joked, to “rehabilitate my rehabilitation.”²

My book project will be the first narrative history about this 1946 blockbuster and Best Picture Academy Award winner that mainstreamed the national conversation about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This project will explore the making of this much-heralded film, one that General Omar Bradley, writing to independent producer Samuel Goldwyn, believed would help “the American people to build an even better democracy out of the tragic experiences of this war.”³ This book will trace the effect the film had on the national perception of what we now call PTSD and explain how the movie paved the way for contemporary films to depict characters challenged by similar issues. BEST YEARS the book will also examine why the film, which became the second highest-grossing movie of its era after *Gone With the Wind*, has all but faded from popular memory today. Finally, the book will suggest how *Best Years* can still illuminate and inform the current public dialogue about PTSD.

The project’s focus on what historian David Gerber has called the “veterans problem” makes it an especially good fit for the National Endowment for the Humanities’ initiative “Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War.”⁴ The book will contribute to advanced research about World War II’s impact and a better understanding of the military experience in a number of ways. Its focus on the making of *Best Years* will provide an opportunity to reflect on the immediate postwar readjustment of the film’s cast and crew, most of who had served in some capacity during the war and were deeply changed by their experiences. Like Russell, for example, Wyler had sustained a debilitating injury during the war when he lost hearing in his right ear, and co-star Myrna Loy had left Hollywood to take a top administrative post with the American Red Cross. This project will also provide context for Hollywood during the war by examining the complex relationship between the film industry and the federal government. As Roy Hoopes, Thomas Schatz, and other film historians have noted, this relationship would shift in the postwar years, a time of tremendous upheaval and change as the Department of Justice renewed its anti-trust cases against the major film studios and a senate committee resumed its

pre-war investigation of Communist influences inside Hollywood. By chronicling the film's production, my project will more closely illuminate the role independents like Goldwyn and Wyler, who had recently joined filmmaker-founded Liberty Films, played in the postwar industrial landscape. Finally, the promotion of this book through a variety of events, such as bookstore readings and revival screenings of the film followed by post-screening panel discussions, will offer additional ways to connect with and support veterans and their families.

Methodology and Work Plan

This narrative history will draw on a variety of primary and secondary materials. The Samuel Goldwyn Papers and the William Wyler Papers are both located at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles. An additional collection of primary materials related to William Wyler and his films is housed in the Special Collections at UCLA's Charles E. Young Research Library. Other archival materials, such as oral history interviews with director William Wyler and cast members Harold Russell, Myrna Loy, and Teresa Wright, are contained in university collections in Boston, Dallas, and New York.

Secondary sources include biographies, cultural histories of Los Angeles and the film industry during the 1940s, and scholarly and general interest articles about the film and its principals, the history of PTSD, and World War II. With the exception of Sarah Kozloff's monograph about *Best Years* for the British Film Institute Film Classics series, most of the scholarship about the film privileges textual analysis, with little contextual analysis of its production and impact. Even Kozloff's book, intended for a scholarly audience, focuses primarily on a discussion of the film's themes and aesthetics while only briefly touching on its reception and influence. With its deep-focus cinematography by Gregg Toland and realistic art direction by Perry Ferguson, *Best Years* is certainly notable for its groundbreaking, documentary-inspired visuals. And as David Bordwell has written of this and other films of the period, "In both masterpieces and unheralded programmers . . . narrative innovations went mainstream. Once there, they shaped what contemporaries and successors could do. They would persist for decades."⁵ But my project seeks to go beyond textual analysis to explore the production, distribution, and reception of this overlooked landmark film to expand existing cinema studies scholarship. More specifically, I aim to use this exploration as a way to answer a series of questions around the aforementioned "veterans problem," such as: How did the cast and crew's experiences during World War II shape the story that made it onto the screen? How did the film's promotion, especially in light of Harold Russell's personal appearances at screenings for veterans' groups and other civic organizations, impact public discussion about veterans' issues at the time? And finally, what effect, if any, did the film's success have on legislation concerning veterans, reintegration, and mental health?

The book's introduction (see attached writing sample) begins with the shooting of the film's most challenging and intimate scene, one between Army veteran Harold Russell and ingénue Cathy O'Donnell. This introductory chapter offers context for the production, its principals, and the film's discussion of PTSD within the years immediately following the end of World War II. It also reveals the film's impact on contemporary movies such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), a thread that will be explored throughout the book to emphasize the influence *Best Years'* themes and aesthetics have had on later films about PTSD and related war traumas. Chapters 1 and 2 will focus on life in Hollywood before and during World War II and the industry's role in the

war, providing context for a more general discussion of the film's influence and impact. These chapters will also examine the history of PTSD as a medical condition, primarily through the experiences of Wyler and Russell, to offer a greater understanding of the film's impact on public discussion and treatment. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 the story will follow the development of the project, initially inspired by a two-page article in *Time* magazine, as it becomes a book that then gets adapted into a screenplay. William Wyler called *Best Years* "the easiest picture I ever made," but the production was far from smooth. These chapters will recount the challenges faced during 100 days of principal photography, such as multiple FBI investigations concerning suspected "subversive" screenplay content. Chapter 6 will examine the film's triumphant, if unexpected, success. Chapter 7 will trace *Best Years*' slow fade from public view in later decades, even as it made its way onto canonical "Best of" lists such as the American Film Institute's Top 100 Films, where the film stands at Number 37. This chapter will explore the tension between *Best Years*' influential legacy and its status today as a "dimly" remembered film.⁶ This final chapter will also revisit *Best Years*' influence on how contemporary films address PTSD in ways that mirror the earlier film's technical and thematic authenticity. By telling the powerful story of how this film came to be made, *BEST YEARS* the book will offer context for the current "veterans problem."

This book is under contract with University of Texas Press, and I began work on the project in early 2018. I have completed research of the secondary literature and the oral histories, and I am in the process of finishing drafts of Chapters 1 and 2. After securing permission from the estate of Samuel Goldwyn to use the Herrick Library's Goldwyn archive, a restricted collection, I made two visits to Los Angeles in late 2018 to begin research in this collection as well as in William Wyler's archives at both the Herrick and UCLA. I will return to Los Angeles this summer to complete archival research for the project. I am requesting a Public Scholars grant to fund a six-month period from September 2019 to February 2020, when I will work full-time to complete the manuscript's remaining chapters, due to UT Press in early spring 2020.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

I am the author most recently of *Rewrite Man: The Life and Career of Screenwriter Warren Skaaren* (2017, University of Texas Press), a *Publishers Weekly* Staff Pick. This biography profiles one of Hollywood's top script doctors who worked behind the scenes to revise scripts for blockbusters like *Top Gun* and *Batman*. *Rewrite Man* uses Skaaren's story to examine the underexplored subject of screen credit arbitration and how it complicates issues of film authorship. I have successfully promoted *Rewrite Man* at events and across media that appeal to a range of audiences, from film buffs and legal scholars to retirees and book clubs. My first book, *Chainsaws, Slackers, and Spy Kids: Thirty Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*, won the Peter C. Rollins Award for the best popular culture book in 2012, and it continues to appear on "must-read" lists, especially during internationally recognized events like the South by Southwest Film Festival. I worked as a newspaper film critic while pursuing a Ph.D. in film history, which I credit for helping me to develop an accessible writing style informed by rigorous scholarship. I taught at the college level for nearly two decades, and I also spent several years teaching film classes for the general public on topics like "Hitchcock in Hollywood." Given *Best Years*' versatility as an independent production, a war film, and a blockbuster, I included it in a range of courses and am therefore very familiar with the film. Semester after semester, I also witnessed *Best Years*' powerful ability to connect with a new generation of viewers.

Final Product and Dissemination

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES: THE FORGOTTEN FILM THAT UNITED A POSTWAR NATION is scheduled for publication in Fall 2021 to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the film's release. This will be my third book with UT Press, and my editor Jim Burr has written a letter of commitment that accompanies this proposal. I am confident in the Press's ability to promote its publications to specialized and general interest audiences alike. In the past the Press's marketing efforts have earned my books reviews in both scholarly and mainstream publications as well as invitations to internationally recognized events such as the South by Southwest Film Festival, the Austin Film Festival, and the Texas Book Festival.

I have a strong network within the film industry thanks to my prior experience as a film critic and as an author who interviewed more than 200 industry professionals for my book about the Austin film scene. These connections will help not only with marketing opportunities—especially tied to the film's 75th anniversary—but also with advance reviews of the book itself. Additionally, I have military contacts through my freelance work that could help ensure the book gets in front of high-ranking personnel and non-commissioned officers for similar press and promotional opportunities. Organizations and bookstores with whom I've partnered to promote my earlier books, such as the Austin Film Society and Interabang Books in Dallas, have already expressed interest in scheduling events around BEST YEARS the book.

This narrative history will remind readers of *Best Years*' startling power while introducing new audiences to this groundbreaking film. The book's national appeal will be bolstered by the ongoing conversation about PTSD and the alarming statistics that keep it in the news: One in five veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have been diagnosed with PTSD, and every day approximately 20 veterans and active duty military take their own lives.⁷ Examining how *Best Years* the film influenced public attitudes toward PTSD at the time of its release and beyond will provide a new lens through which to view not only the film but also the country and its shifting attitudes toward war, the armed forces, and mental health.

¹ See Jan Herman, *A Talent for Trouble: The Life of Hollywood's Most Acclaimed Director, William Wyler*, A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography*, and Sarah Kozloff, *The Best Years of Our Lives* for discussions of Wyler's tendency toward multiple takes of the same scene.

² Harold Russell with Victor Rosen, *Victory in My Hands* (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1949), 208.

³ General Omar Bradley in a letter to Samuel Goldwyn, December 12, 1946, *Best Years* Correspondence File, Samuel Goldwyn Papers.

⁴ David Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, (Dec., 1994), 545.

⁵ David Bordwell, *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.

⁶ Francis Davis, "Storming the Home Front," *The Atlantic* (March 2003), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/03/storming-the-home-front/302681/?utm_source=eb.

⁷ Statistics based on multiple reports. See for example "Face the Facts USA," <https://www.facethefactsusa.org/facts/the-true-price-of-war-in-human-terms>. See also the National Center for PTSD, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>.

The Best Years of Our Lives: The Forgotten Film That United a Postwar Nation

SELECT MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

- Samuel Goldwyn Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.
Harold Russell Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.
William Wyler Papers 1925-1975, Arts Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA.
William Wyler Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

SELECT PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

- Affron, Charles and Mirella Jones Affron. *Best Years: Going to the Movies, 1945-1946*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- Berg, A. Scott. *Goldwyn: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Bordwell, David. *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Friedman, Matthew J., M.D., PhD. "History of PTSD in Veterans: Civil War to DSM-5." National Center for PTSD. <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/basics/history-of-ptsd-vets.asp>.
- Friedrich, Otto. *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Gerber, David. "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, (December 1994): 545-574.
- Harris, Mark. *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Herman, Jan. *A Talent for Trouble: The Life of Hollywood's Most Acclaimed Director, William Wyler*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.
- Hoopes, Roy. *When the Stars Went to War: Hollywood and World War II*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Jones, Franklin D., et al., eds. *War Psychiatry*. Army Medical Department Center and School, US Army Health Readiness Center of Excellence, 1995.
- Kantor, Mackinlay. *Glory for Me*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1945.
- Koppes, Clayton R., and Gregory D. Black. *Hollywood Goes to War*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *The Best Years of Our Lives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Kozloff, Sarah. "Wyler's Wars." *Film History*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Politics and Film (2008): 456-473.
- Leider, Emily. *Myrna Loy: The Only Good Girl in Hollywood*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Madsen, Axel. *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973.
- Myers, Charles S., M.D. "A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock." *The Lancet*. February 13, 1915: 316-320.
- Rollyson, Carl. *Hollywood Enigma: Dana Andrews*. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Russell, Harold with Victor Rosen. *Victory in My Hands*. New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1949.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Shephard, Ben. *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Spoto, Donald. *A Girl's Got to Breathe: The Life of Teresa Wright*. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- Taylor, John Russell. *Strangers in Paradise: The Hollywood Emigres, 1933-1950*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.
- "The Way Home." *Time*. August 7, 1944: 15-16.
- Wyler, William. "No Magic Wand." *The Screen Writer*. Vol. 2, No. 9 (February 1947): 1-14.