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# Perfectly Happy, Even Without Happy Endings

By CARRIE RICKEY

LOS ANGELES

SEEING Lindsay Doran on a midafternoon stroll near her office in Culver City, Calif., you might wonder about this woman with the flowing curls and contemplative smile. Art historian? Massage therapist? Micro-financier? A little of each.

Ms. Doran is in the movie business, and her résumé runs from production executive on “[This Is Spinal Tap](#)” and “[Ferris Bueller’s Day Off](#),” to producer of “[The Firm](#),” “[Sense and Sensibility](#)” and “[Stranger Than Fiction](#),” to president of United Artists Pictures, and now an independent producer.

What’s not on her résumé is just as intriguing: script doctor, for one, and anti-smoking advocate who helped lead the effort to eliminate on-screen puffing. But the biggest position missing from the official CV is her role as a missionary for mood-elevating films. Terry Rossio, a writer whose credits include “[Shrek](#)” and the “[Pirates of the Caribbean](#)” movies, playfully describes her as a “Pied Piper, leading all those ratty, bleak and violent screenplays in town over a cliff.”

Ms. Doran is an omnivore who likes movies light, dark and in between. But when she attended the Austin Film Festival last year, “something I found both terribly sad and terribly sympathetic,” she recently recalled, “is that aspiring screenwriters ask again and again, ‘What can I write that a financier wants to make?’ Not, ‘What can I write that fills me with joy?’ ”

After reading the book “[Flourish](#),” by Martin E. P. Seligman, a catalyst of the positive-

psychology movement, she began rewatching films through the lens of what Dr. Seligman identifies as the five essential [elements of well-being](#): positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. (He refers to these elements collectively as perma.)

The results surprised her. And they inspired a stealth campaign to reverse the Hollywood superstitions that a “movie is only art if it ends badly, and that you’ll only win an Academy Award if you write or direct a movie about misery or play someone miserable,” as she put it. During the past six months, at a symposium and in a series of presentations to filmmakers, she has strongly advocated the concept of cinematic [Zoloft](#).

“What shocked us,” said Dan Lin, a producer of the Sherlock Holmes films whose team recently watched a Doran presentation, “were Lindsay’s points about what audiences care about most — relationships and the positive resolution of those relationships. We had previously thought what was most important was the lead character winning at the end of the movie.”

Reflecting at her home here in December Ms. Doran said: “Some people say I’m just talking about formula filmmaking. What I wanted to know is: Why is the formula the formula?” She analyzed box-office hits and critically acclaimed movies on the American Film Institute’s favorites lists. She broke down their emotional components, isolated the elements of mood elevation and tested her findings against those of market researchers. She concluded: Positive movies do not necessarily have happy endings; their characters’ personal relationships trump personal achievements; and male and female viewers differ in how they define a character’s accomplishments.

Ms. Doran had long been drawn to “funny dramas and comedies that make you cry,” she said. Now she knew why.

In a July presentation before the Second [World Congress](#) of the International Positive Psychology Association in Philadelphia Ms. Doran recalled her first “aha!” moment, when she recognized that the perma elements of well-being that Dr. Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania professor, had identified were the basis of the movies that made her, and others, happy. She showed how these five factors were embedded in films as far-flung as “Ferris Bueller” (characters who displayed positive emotions throughout), “[The Godfather](#)” (characters fully engaged in what they’re doing throughout) and “[The Karate Kid](#)” (a character completely focused on accomplishment).

“It’s no surprise to say that American movies specialize in stories of accomplishment,” she told her audience, adding later, “When Jennifer Grey finally dares to make the scary leap at the end of ‘Dirty Dancing,’ when the Karate Kid performs the impossible kick that wipes out his opponent, or when King George VI gets through his wartime speech without stammering — those accomplishments are among the great pleasures of cinema.”

Ms. Doran’s second “aha!” moment came when she consulted a veteran market researcher who oversees hundreds of previews annually. “I listed the five elements of well-being, and he said, ‘I can already tell you one thing: Audiences don’t care about accomplishments.’” She was thunderstruck. Wasn’t the Hollywood ending about accomplishment?

No, he said, adding: “Audiences don’t care about an accomplishment unless it’s shared with someone else. What makes an audience happy is not the moment of victory but the moment afterwards when the winners shares that victory with someone they love.” So she mentally rewound the concluding scenes of these “accomplishment” films. Ms. Grey leaps into the arms of Patrick Swayze at the end of “[Dirty Dancing](#),” and after that she reconciles with her father. Jaden Smith performs that impossible kick at the end of “[The Karate Kid](#),” but afterward makes peace with his opponent and shares the moment with his mother and trainer. Colin Firth conquers his stammer at the end of “[The King’s Speech](#),” and then shares his victory with his wife, daughters and the crowds cheering outside the palace. The film closes with a title card that reads that the king and his speech therapist remained friends for the rest of their lives.

“Three generations of psychiatry and psychology have been suborned by finances to the misery agenda,” Dr. Seligman said in an interview, explaining why there is not much government grant money to support research on mood-elevating films. “Movies are a form of soma,” he said, referring to the idea of an uplifting drug, and he hypothesized that “more perma-like movies would make people’s lives better, but nobody’s researched that.”

Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia professor of psychology and the author of “[The Happiness Hypothesis](#),” said, “People not only use movies and music as soma to feel good, they use it to open themselves to others.” It may follow that watching narratives

about positive relationships in a darkened room alongside others is elevating.

Not long after Ms. Doran's insights about the nature of movie accomplishment and relationships, she realized that relationship movies were gender-specific. In movies aimed at men and boys, she said, "there is the goal, the thing the hero is trying to accomplish." Then, she continued, "there's the relationship, usually with a woman, child, friend or father. Usually at the end the hero realizes the relationship is more important than the accomplishment." But in most movies geared toward women, she realized, the relationship is the accomplishment.

"Some would say that this is patronizing to women," Ms. Doran said, but she saw it differently: "Maybe it just means that women have figured it out."

When she shared this with some female producers, she said, they were surprised.

The actress Emma Thompson said in an e-mail, "My initial reaction to Lindsay's presentation was a bit like when you read something in a book and think you've always known it," but then you realize "the only reason you thought you knew it is because it's so well put and so clear." (Parenthetically she added, "Sometimes a comedy like 'Spinal Tap' is as good as a double dose of paracetamol.")

Ms. Thompson, who has worked with Ms. Doran on five movies including "Sense and Sensibility," was struck by three of her conclusions. First, some of the most elevating American movies "are about people desperate to achieve something that they do not get to achieve." (George Bailey in "[It's a Wonderful Life](#)" doesn't get to travel the world, Atticus Finch in "[To Kill a Mockingbird](#)" doesn't win an acquittal for his client.) Second, many of the greatest romances ("[Roman Holiday](#)," "[Casablanca](#)") are about lovers who can't or don't remain together. And in many of the most successful movies of all time accomplishment is accompanied by incalculable loss: In Ms. Doran's words, "Obi-Wan dies, Dumbledore dies, Gandalf dies, 1,500 passengers on the Titanic die, thousands of Pandorans die." The protagonist may be happy at the end, "but his smile," she said, "is laced with the loss that's come before."

What this suggested to her is that "the accomplishment the audience values most is not when the heroine saves the day or the hero defeats his opponent." Instead, she said, "the accomplishment the audience values most is resilience."

So where does Ms. Doran go from here? As she continues speaking with filmmakers and studios, she said in an e-mail: “I think the thing that they’re getting out of it is that the ‘happy ending,’ the one that is most memorable and might make people go back to see the film a second time, might not be about winning. It might be about *not* winning, about finding something deeper that means more than victory.”

“A lot of people seem stunned,” she added, that ending with a character who survives loss “might be both the more inspiring and the more commercial way to end a movie.”

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