



THE BEST BACK TO SCHOOL MOVIES BY FARR

I'm experiencing that familiar and inevitable "back to school" feeling.

No matter how many years pass since the end of my formal education, I still get the same sensation every time September rolls around.

Part of it comes from seeing my own kids off for another academic year, which always makes me sad. It's not all bad, though. This annual moment of transition actually serves as a useful reminder for us parents that much as we might like to hold onto our children, ultimately they must progress and make their way on their own...as must we all.

So, on the plus side, this date on the calendar signifies fresh starts and new possibilities, a renewed desire to explore and express our own distinct talents in more effective and (hopefully) beneficial ways.

And just where do we learn to strive in this way? From our parents, certainly-but also in school.

The ultimate formative experience in my life, school was where I first began to recognize what I was good at, and where I might fit in. It shaped my friends, my interests, my career, my entire outlook.

School was also where I found my first mentors, those rare teachers who made learning fun and exciting. These were virtually the first adults outside my family that I connected with in a truly personal and meaningful way. You knew these people appreciated you for yourself, not because they happened to share your blood or like your parents. Throughout my life, these few, very special human beings have never really left me.

Given the profound significance of education in our lives, it's no surprise there's no shortage of movies on the subject. So now, I humbly submit ten of my own favorite films about school, learning, and those mostly noble souls who teach.

Goodbye, Mr. Chips (1939)- Told mainly in flashbacks, "Chips" traces the life of a beloved schoolmaster who serves over fifty years in an English public school. Reminiscing about his personal life and long

career, the shy, unassuming Mr. Chipping (Robert Donat) also recalls his unexpected courtship and marriage to his stunning and spirited wife Katherine (Greer Garson). A nostalgic paean to Old England and a deeply affecting story of honorable service, "Chips" succeeds admirably, mainly due to British actor Donat's touching performance. Donat broke the Oscar sweep of "**Gone With The Wind**" in 1939, stealing the Best Actor statuette from under Clark Gable's nose (and ears). In addition, beautiful English ingénue Garson became an overnight star in the small but pivotal role of Chips's enchanting wife. Though sentimental by today's standards, this remains a grand and moving classic for the ages.

The Browning Version (1951)- On the eve of his retirement from an all-boys boarding school where he is widely despised, ailing classics teacher Andrew Crocker-Harris (Michael Redgrave) realizes that he has failed to communicate his enthusiasm and the depth of his passions in the classroom. Scorned by his wife, Millie (Jean Kent), who's openly cavorting with popular science instructor Hunter (Nigel Patrick), Crocker-Harris appears stoically resigned to a cheerless existence. But a guileless act of kindness eventually changes him in ways no one quite expected. Anthony Asquith's mournful, absorbing ensemble drama was adapted by Terence Rattigan from his own play. Redgrave, in one of his greatest screen performances, is magnificent, communicating both the unrelenting severity and turbulent inner sadness of Crocker-Harris-who keeps a stiff upper lip about Millie's infidelities, the headmaster's disrespect for his years of service, and his own failed ambitions. With a stirring turn by young Brian Smith as Taplow, Crocker-Harris's chipper, well-meaning student, "Browning" is an outstanding drama about suffering and redemption that will stay with you long after the gut-wrenching graduation speech.

To Sir, With Love (1967)- In this triumphant urban drama, Sidney Poitier plays Mark Thackeray, a determined teacher out of his element in a tough London high school. Initially facing apathy and resistance from his students, Thackeray ditches the lesson plan and speaks directly to their inner characters, transforming his unruly charges into hopeful--and grateful--young people. Made the same year as "**In the Heat of the Night**" and "**Guess Who's Coming to Dinner**", James Clavell's marvelous film--a huge hit in 1967--succeeds largely because of its lead actor. Shattering age-old stereotypes about race in all his roles, Sidney Poitier exuded nobility, strength, intelligence, and humility. Never with a chip on his shoulder, never self-pitying, he commands respect--Thackeray's students call him "Sir"--showing anger only when provoked by others' ignorance. "To Sir With Love" is a

lasting testament to that impressive strength of character, and a demonstration of how it can be cultivated in others.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969)- Blindly devoted to her pupils and fiercely determined to imbue her gray 1930's Edinburgh surroundings with passion and color, Scottish schoolmarm Miss Brodie (Maggie Smith) is very much her own person—a spirited, eccentric freethinker given to divulging her personal life and politics in the classroom. But she soon runs afoul of the rigid headmistress (Celia Johnson), who's determined to see Brodie out the door of her exclusive girls' school. English actress Smith captivated viewers in 1969 with her Oscar-winning portrayal of the title character in director Ronald Neame's outstanding film. Based on a novel by Muriel Spark, this hit film doesn't shy from presenting Brodie's mis-guided enthusiasm for Mussolini, nor her affair with a married man (real-life hubby Robert Stephens). A poignant character study of a woman whose incomplete life and untamed spirit combine to blur her judgment, the movie is a fabulous showcase for Maggie Smith's dazzling talent.

The Paper Chase (1973)- Like most of his peers, brilliant first-year Harvard law student James Hart (Timothy Bottoms) lives in fear and awe of crusty, demanding, no-nonsense Professor Kingsfield (John Houseman). Seeking his favor and respect prove challenging to this ambitious attorney-in-training, and things get even more complicated when Hart falls for Kingsfield's daughter, Susan (Lindsay Wagner). At a time of heightened competitiveness in academia, James Bridges's "Chase" makes for relevant as well as highly pleasurable viewing. Set in one of the most demanding environments--Harvard Law School--the film portrays learning at its most intense, where the depth and breadth of the curriculum represents a marathon, testing the brain and body's endurance. Timothy Bottoms is wonderful as the student who may be in over his head, but Oscar winner John Houseman, as the remote, brilliant law professor who strikes terror in his charges, is the real reason this film scores a solid A.

Animal House (1978)- At Pennsylvania's Faber College, stiff-shirted Dean Wormer (John Vernon) is fed up with the raucous antics of Delta House, an anarchic, thoroughly debauched fraternity with no sense of decency, decorum or, apparently, brains. So he hatches a plan to strip the Deltas, who are led by a group of seniors including Otter (Tim Matheson) and John "Bluto" Blutarsky (John Belushi), of their credentials, enlisting the help of their hated, upper-crusty rivals at Omega House. The original "party animal" teen movie (despite its "R" rating), John Landis's outrageous feature-length prank has enough

gross-out humor, slapstick yucks, and all-night beer chugging to put a drunken smile on anyone's face. Matheson and co-stars James Widdoes, Peter Riegert, and Bruce McGill bring sheer lunacy to their roles as leaders of a riotous frat house for rejects, losers, and academic failures. But it's Belushi's gonzo portrayal of Bluto that remains iconic, and helped make the former "SNL" cast member a big-time comic star. Irreverent, subversive, and totally inappropriate, "Animal House" depicts the college experience most of us never had, but kind of wish we did. Watch for Kevin Bacon in a small early role as a young pledge.

Au Revoir, Les Enfants (1987)- In director Louis Malle's semi-autobiographical masterpiece, young Julien (Gaspard Manesse) dislikes the Catholic boarding school he's forced to attend by his mother (Francine Racette), but she reasonably insists that war-torn, Nazi-occupied Paris is no place for children. Indeed, the horrors of the conflict remain at a safe distance until the arrival of new student Jean Bonnet (Rafael Fejto) who carries a dangerous secret. Julien and Jean gradually become close friends, so that when the war finally does intrude on their cloistered environment, the lives of both boys are changed forever. Director Louis Malle's masterpiece is a subtly drawn, wrenching tale of childhood innocence lost to the madness of war. Malle expertly evokes this nightmarish period in his country's history, and teases pitch-perfect performances out of both juvenile leads, as their relationship evolves from one of mistrust to friendship. The film's deeply felt, highly personal quality resonates, as we discern that Julien is based on Malle himself as a boy. Among the supporting cast, Racette excels as Julien's affectionate but distracted mother, while both Francois Berleand and Philippe Morier-Genoud shine as the priests who run the school. A moving and important film for the ages.

Stand and Deliver (1988)- Based on real-life events, this inspirational drama concerns Jaime Escalante (Edward James Olmos), an Hispanic math instructor who institutes an advanced-placement calculus course in an under-resourced East L.A. public school. With a mix of humor and tough love, Escalante pushes a motley group of barrio kids to excel beyond their wildest dreams. Superbly directed by Ramon Menéndez for PBS's *American Playhouse*, "Stand" is a cut above most motivational storytelling, because it bypasses sentimentality in favor of a more complex, authentic tone. Olmos is a marvel as Escalante, a brilliant but idiosyncratic educator, and he deservedly nabbed an Oscar nomination. Among a dynamic supporting cast, Lou Diamond Phillips also impresses as the troubled youth who faces a choice between gang life and academic glory.

Election (1999)- Tracy Enid Flick (Reese Witherspoon), a compulsively anal, unapologetically driven high school student, runs for class president of her Nebraska high school, while teacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick), unable to help himself, consistently works to undermine her. Alexander Payne's smart, savage, satirical battle of wits stands out starkly from the standard run of bland contemporary comedies. Witherspoon is priceless as the cloyingly perfect schoolgirl everyone loves to hate, and Broderick also scores as the counselor who's instinctively compelled to pop her bubble. Payne, who won an Oscar nod for his screenplay and would go on to helm the critically acclaimed **"About Schmidt" (2002)** and **"Sideways" (2004)**, puts his prodigious talent on full display here, actually drawing inspiration from Budd Schulberg's **"What Makes Sammy Run?"**, a landmark 1950's TV production about a slimy, ruthless Hollywood player. This comic sleeper certainly wins my vote.

To Be and To Have (2002)- Shot in a one-room schoolhouse in rural France, this priceless documentary portrays the magical innocence of children and the loving dedication of one teacher, Georges Lopez. Set to retire after 35 years, Lopez instructs, engages, and inspires several grades of schoolchildren in the course of a school year, touching all their lives. Any parents out there should quickly lay their hands on Nicolas Philibert's sublime "To Be," an intimate and heartwarming study of hands-on education in a tiny classroom. What would be a daunting task for most of us is, for Georges Lopez, the application of a natural gift to a highly rewarding purpose. Georges's innate connection with the twelve children under his care is humbling, and the wistful expression on his face at the end of the school term will put tears in your eyes. An indelible film experience.

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