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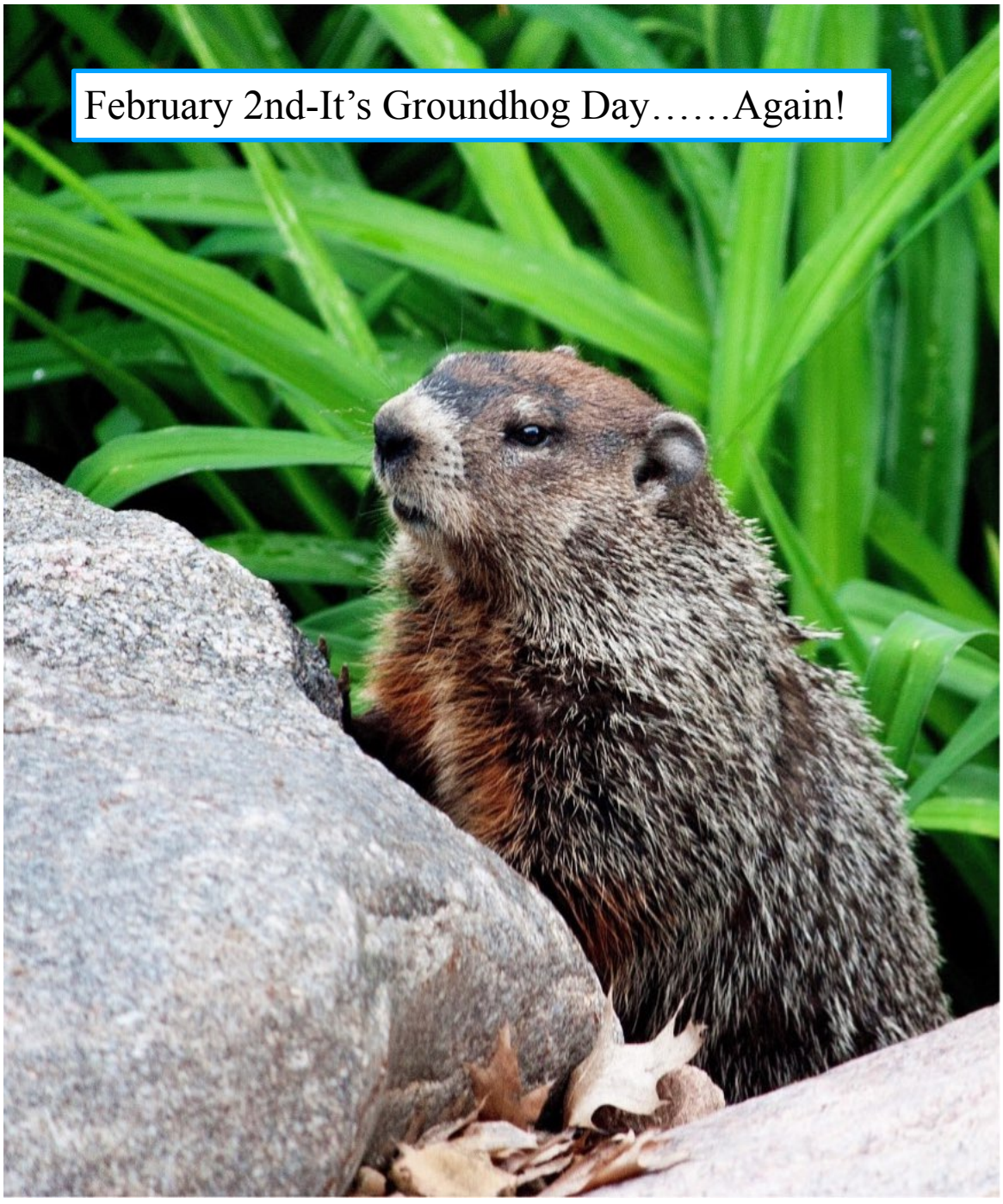

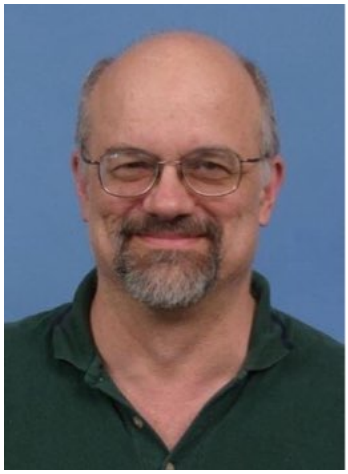

Here Awhile: Review

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One of my former students made a movie!

He's Csaba Mera (pronounced Chaw-bah Meer-ah), whose script about the Hungarian Revolution, *The Corvin Batallion*, was one of the best student scripts I've read. I remember thinking he might actually do something in the industry, a prediction that's now been realized. But his film is not what I expected.

Here Awhile is the story of a young woman named Anna (Anna Camp) who revisits her estranged brother Michael (Steven Strait) in Oregon, after an absence of many years. But the reunion is not joyous – Anna's come here to die, because she's terminal, and Oregon's Death with Dignity Act allows people with no hope of survival to go out on their own terms. She's still here awhile, but can she convince him to let her go?

As a premise, it sounds depressing. I actually put off watching it, because I found the subject off-putting. But I finally sat down to watch it on Netflix, and made a heartening discovery:

It's sweet, compelling, and unexpectedly funny.

Not overtly, don't expect belly-laughs. The story is presented with all the gravity it deserves. But announcing you plan to commit suicide is nothing if not awkward, and Csaba has a good ear for milking the scene, staging that sudden moment when you realize, this isn't something human beings are normally called upon to do. Anna shows up at Michael's doorstep, a reunion that's already awkward, and then has to broach the subject of her own pending, state-assisted suicide. Grim stuff, but (human nature being what it is) we see some lighter moments, too.

The cast is stellar. You may know Anna Camp from *True Blood*, or Steven Strait as the hard-luck spaceship captain in *The Expanse*; Anna's lesbian lover is a likeable Kristin Taylor (*My Summer as a Goth*). But the unsung hero of the film – and the reason, I suspect, it will resonate with Mensans – is the character of Gary, the next-door neighbor. Gary's got Asperger's Syndrome, a genius-level mastermind who's never learned the knack of expressing emotion, or relating to other people. Portraying him is Joe Lo Truglio from *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, and his clumsy attempts to act normal – at a time when nothing is normal – are some of the sweetest moments in the movie.

The first time he lays eyes on Anna, Gary knows something's badly wrong. Her casual façade is transparent as glass to Gary, who sees her condition with startling clarity but fumbles, badly, trying to respond to it. His attempts at conversation are childlike and misguided, but his off-center comments are never predictable, approaching the problem as no one else would. As Anna's deadline draws steadily closer, and Michael and his wife rail against fate, Gary's the one we're watching. Because his hidden courage, blunted by a thicket of misfiring neurons and poorly-worded sentences, bring the story to life. At least, it did for me.

"My friend's dog had cancer and he died," Gary tells Anna, matter-of-factly. "I'd do all the thoughts and prayers thing but I'm an atheist so, you know, good luck."

Of course, the central question of the film – is it ever okay to kill yourself? – is a haunting one. Anna's dilemma has no easy outs, no likely breakthroughs or promising medical trials. She's going to die, painfully, if nothing is done. Should she do this?

For the record, I'm not a fan of suicide. I was in a very dark place back in high school (Jesus, that was fifty years ago) when this option actually seemed tempting. But it would have been a horrible mistake, for me and the rest of the world (modest bow), and my advice to teenage me would be an emphatic "Knock it off!" Still, if there's honestly no alternative, this film argues, if it's not teen angst but a medically responsible choice – then maybe Death with Dignity should be an option, at least for the terminally afflicted.

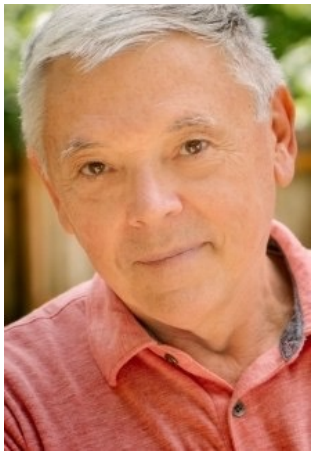
As Anna puts it, "This is the one move I have left, and I'm making it."

Here Awhile was directed by Tim True, who shares a writing credit with Csaba. (Csaba is also the film's Executive Director.) It scored 71% on Rotten Tomatoes, which in my opinion isn't nearly high enough. I was sorry to see the movie end, sorry Anna had to leave us, but I found her story thought-provoking, not depressing – heartening, not disheartening.

If you're looking for something to stream during this pandemic, a movie that's sad and funny and deeply moving, look no further. *Here Awhile* will make you want to to stay beyond the film's running time.

I just wish Anna could have.

https://youtu.be/xDZ-HMaPLQA



Csaba Mera

I have had a very fulfilling career since being selected to belong to the AOA (Alpha Omega Alpha) Medical Honor Society in my last year of medical school at Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1971/72. I graduated 13th out of 100 students at the age of 22 and had two children during my four years.

Needless to say it was great having a family at my young age and having the privilege of becoming a doctor. In 1977, I became a Mensa member and have appreciated the collegiality of fellow AOA and Mensa members over the years. I practiced clinically for 22 years and then went into healthcare management at several health plans and also did consulting for a number of years for some amazing clients, including Xerox, Time Warner, American Airlines and Western Digital, to name a few.

Meanwhile, I always had a passion for story telling. I took courses in screenplay writing as well as film production. The screenplay writing course was taught by fellow Orange County Mensa member, Terry Black. In December 2017, over an intense 10 days of writing, I completed a screenplay for a movie called *Here Awhile*. Over the next few months we rounded up our budget, completed casting and shot the film over 18 days in Portland, Oregon. The movie was featured in several film festivals and was released June 9 of this year in the US, and in October it was released in the UK. In the US, the movie is available on Amazon, Amazon Prime, iTunes, AppleTV, and Vudu.

This is the longer synopsis of the movie: Anna (played by Anna Camp) returns to Portland, Oregon after 15 years to reconnect with her long estranged younger brother Michael (Steven Strait). Anna reveals that she has been diagnosed with terminal, inoperable colon cancer and in spite of chemotherapy treatments the cancer has spread. She reveals to Michael that she plans to end her life utilizing Oregon's unique Death with Dignity Act. Michael cannot deal with this and pleads with her to reconsider, but she is adamant. Michael's girlfriend, Shonda, and Michael's brilliant, quirky neighbor, Gary (Joe Lo Truglio), and Anna's partner, Luisa, all understand and are supportive of her difficult, heart-wrenching decision. Michael continues to struggle with the thought of losing his sister, who had always been there for him, so caring and supportive during difficult times in the family. Through a series of adventures, the group gets closer and Michael finally understands and accepts Anna's decision. The group ultimately comes together to celebrate her life. When the time is right, Anna addresses each with a heartfelt goodbye as they surround her with love during her last breaths.

Please check out the *Here Awhile* website for more information and to watch the trailer. To help understand the motivation for the script and some of the elements behind the story, this is an interview with Emmy Award winning Sheila Hamilton.

I recently became a Board Member of Compassion & Choices and several of their team members helped to make sure certain elements of the story are accurately portrayed.