



Goodbye Oscar, Hello IRA

If the New York Independent Film Critics ran the show, Miranda July would be Hollywood's most celebrated director this year

April 22, 2021 Michael Giltz

Who needs Oscar when you've got IRA? The New York Independent Film Critics Awards just held its 46th annual ceremony where it symbolically awards an IRA to its winners. One member is actually called Ira, but long-timers insist that's *not* why it's nicknamed the IRA. Hey, no one knows exactly why the Academy Award is called the Oscar either, so just deal with it.

For the third time in IRA history, a woman won best director. That would be Miranda July, whose movie *Kajillionaire* also won Best Picture. (Two years ago, Best Picture and Director were won by Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* while Nancy Savoca won Best Director for 1993's *Household Saints*.) The magnetic young Polish actor Bartosz Bielenia won Best Actor for his work as a fake priest in *Corpus Christi*. And Kate Winslet won Best Actress for her performance as a surly lesbian archeologist in *Ammonite*.

If you immediately thought, "I've never heard of those films" or "the girl from Titanic in what?" and that scares you, the IRAs are not the film awards group you're looking for. They're more indie and international-focused than the Oscars, more mercurial than the LA Film Critics and more loyal to their favorites than the Golden Globes. Check out [this list](#) of their Best Picture winners for the last 20 years. The only time the Oscars agreed with them was in 2016, for *Moonlight*.

Don't worry. It's not all arty fare. Comb through the winners and honorees for the IRAs honoring the best films of 2020. You'll find superior genre fare like the low-budget sci-fi flick *The Vast Of Night* (winner for Best Editing), the horror film *Relic* (Best Supporting Actress), and a loving homage to film noir called *The Kid Detective* (a contender for Best Screenplay, Best Supporting Actor and Best Actor). They're all movies even casual fans who succumb to the lure of Netflix's algorithm can readily enjoy.

Still, if you want to get an idea of the best films of 2020, you could do worse than start with the five movies that competed for Best Picture at the IRAs.

1. *Kajillionaire*—20 pts.
2. *Another Round*—18 pts.
3. *Beanpole*—14 pts.
4. *Ammonite*—13 pts.
5. *Corpus Christi* — 9 pts.

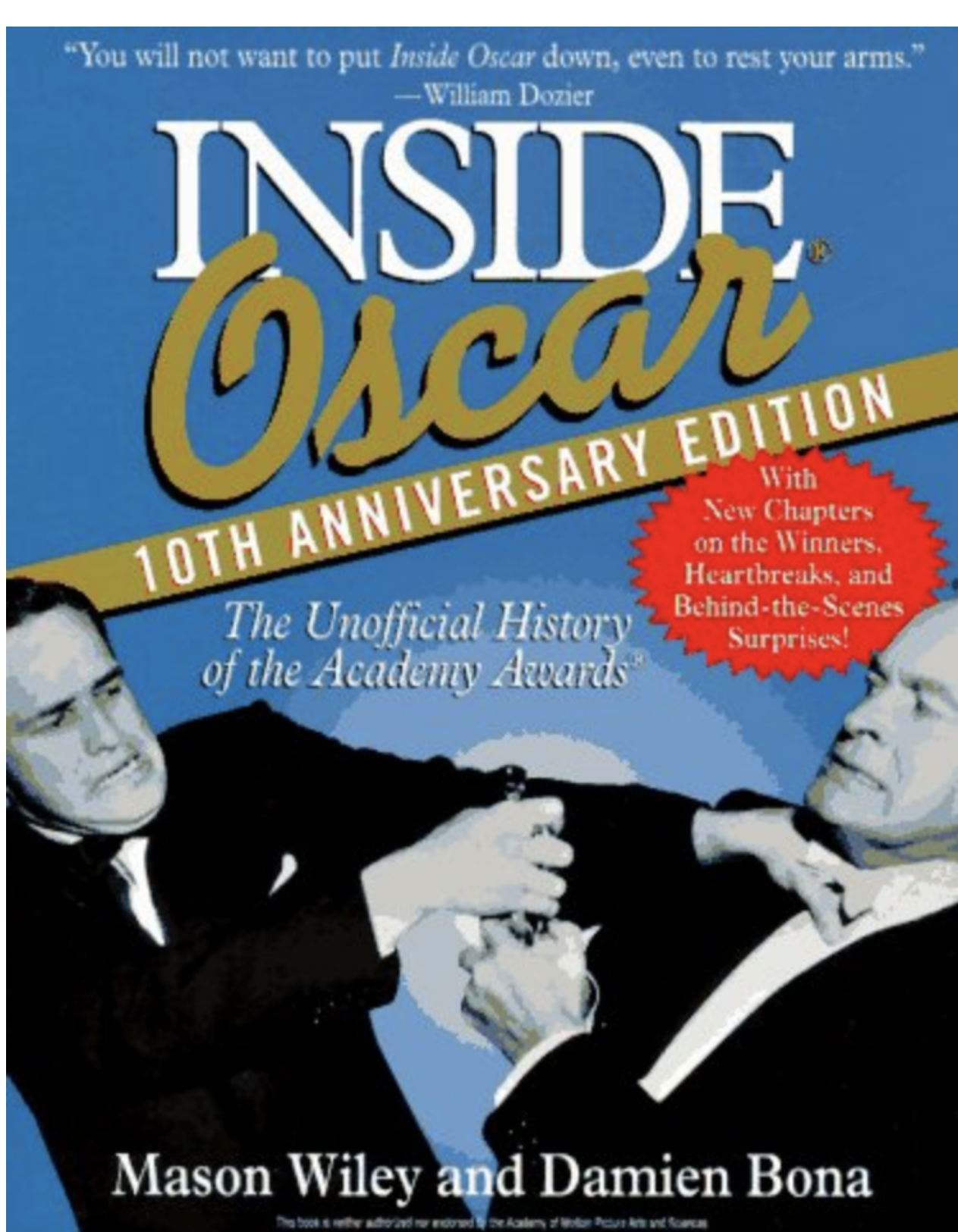
Not to mention the five movies that vied for Best Nonfiction Film.

1. *Dick Johnson Is Dead* (tie) —18 pts.
2. *My Octopus Teacher* (tie) —18 pts.
3. *Collective*—17 pts.
4. *Time*—13 pts.
5. *Crip Camp*—10 pts.

The IRAs began in the 1970s when a group of passionate film majors in New York City scoffed at the annual parade of film awards, loudly declared they could do better and then went ahead and did it. A long, drunken night of dinner and contentious argument resulted in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* being declared the Best Picture of 1976.

A pattern was struck: members prided themselves on giving (and taking) insult over one another's picks; a marked preference for indie, arthouse fare predominated; and the annual event turned movie-going into a calling as much as a pleasure. That three hour documentary about yak herding is only playing at Anthology Archives in New York City for one week? Yes, but a fellow IRA member saw it at a film festival, insists it's great and you better see it now, if only to mock that praise with a withering comment on the night in question.

The group's bible is *Inside Oscar* by Mason Wiley and Damien Bona, two lifers at the IRAs until their untimely deaths. The book is a dishy, bitchy and impeccably reported look at the Academy Awards, covering each year's awards season from the highs of great films being made to the lows of the campaigns and climaxing with a merciless depiction of each year's Big Night. Their shared masterpiece captures perfectly that IRA combination of stan love for movies and movie stars with a rigorous appreciation for getting the facts right and a deep, scholarly knowledge of film history.



Somewhere along the way, The New Yorker modestly profiled the IRA awards, so it's officially an institution. The IRAs survived deaths and marriages and work and the pandemic and continues to chug along. Former IRA members either showed films at Cannes, reviewed films at Cannes or promoted films at Cannes. They've been top editors at influential movie magazines, written acclaimed books on cinema (and Judaism and Native American issues and much more), they've taught and studied and always, every year, around February or March or this year's later than ever April ceremony, they've gathered and kvetched and debated until the wee hours of the morning over Best Cinematography and the like. Here's the list of winners.

- Best Picture: *Kajillionaire*
- Best Director: Miranda July for *Kajillionaire*
- Best Actor: Bartosz Bielenia for *Corpus Christi*
- Best Actress: Kate Winslet for *Ammonite*
- Best Supporting Actor: Glynn Turman for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- Best Supporting Actress: Robyn Nevin for *Relic*
- Best Nonfiction Film: *Dick Johnson Is Dead* and *My Octopus Teacher* (tie)
- Best Screenplay: Miranda July for *Kajillionaire*
- Best Cinematography: Benjamin Kraun for *Beats and Monsoon* and *Promising Young Woman*
- Best Production Design: Mayne Berke for *Sylvie's Love* and Sergey Ovanov for *Beanpole* (tie)
- Best Score/Use Of Music: Volker Bertelmann and Dustin O'Halloran for *Ammonite*
- Best Editing: Andrew Patterson for *The Vast Of Night*
- Best Costumes: Michael O'Connor for *Ammonite*
- Sominex Award (The Movie That Put Us To Sleep): *Tenet*
- Dramamine Award (The Movie That Made Us Sick): *Mank*
- Mechanical Actress: Elizabeth Moss for *The Invisible Man* and Shirley
- Mechanical Actor: James Corden for *The Prom*

Hang around long enough and people invariably try to say something nice about you. Look at Prince Philip! The IRAs are no exception. Like Philip, the IRAs are way too white, way too old and way too male. On the bright side, for a technically non-gay group it has a strong array of orientations, from gay to straight to undecided to undeclared. If Philip Roth's novels are better than Philip Roth the man, the IRAs will gladly concede their taste in movies is better than they are. They're generally miserable, misanthropic bastards and they know it.

Maybe that's why they care about films so much in the first place. Watch the best movies and you can dream about being funnier, braver, better looking, smarter, kinder and more compassionate. You can face up to a darker world and imagine a brighter one. It might only last until the lights come up, but it's a start.

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Tags: Ammonite, IRA, Kajillionaire, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Miranda July, Moonlight, My Octopus Teacher, New York Independent Film Critics, Oscar, Relic, Vast of Night

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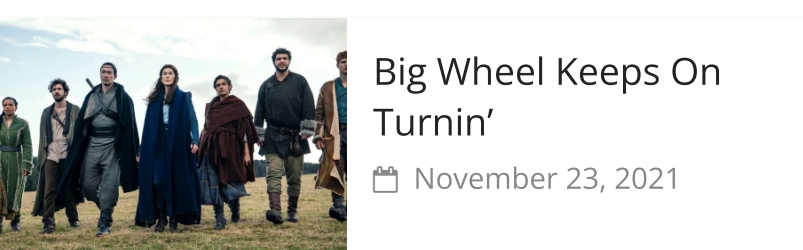
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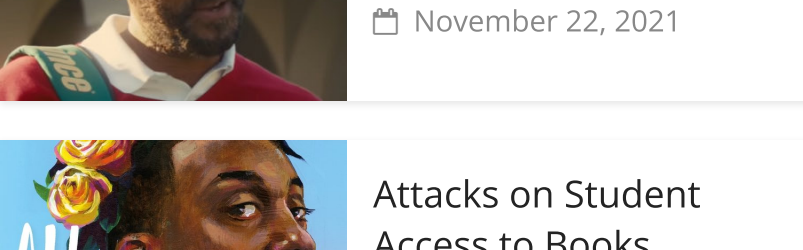
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