

GET TO KNOW THE COLORADO TALKING BOOK LIBRARY



High Plains Library District

CommUNITY

DECEMBER 2024

Talking Book Library

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And More
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The Spirit of **Cagemas**

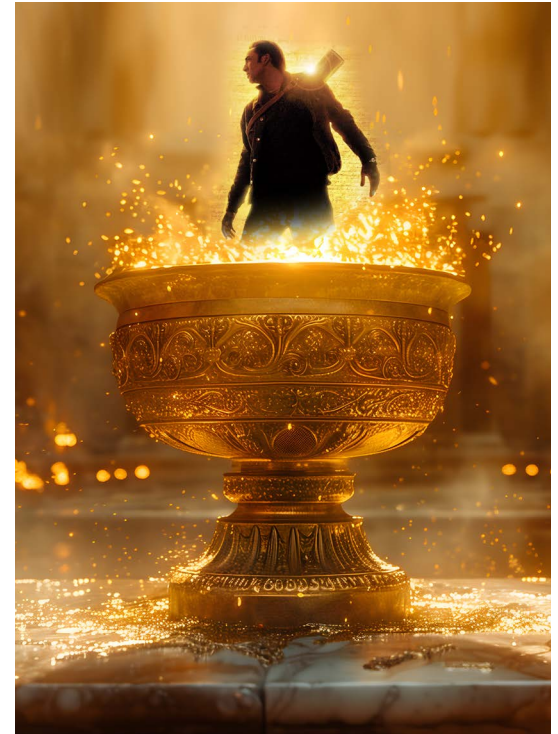
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Wonder Play Socialize
Bibliotecas Experience
Imagine Laugh Dream
Build Explore Connect
Maktabaduhu Create Share Games
Make Read Experience

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Get To Know The **COLORADO** *Talking Book Library*

Gratitude becomes a popular thing this time of year. Lots of us become reflective and try to focus on things we're grateful for, like the one joke in *Hot Frosty* that references *Mean Girls*.

Hey, it's been a slow year for some of us on the gratitude front.

One thing I'm super, mega grateful for is The Colorado Talking Book Library. While I'm a big fan of all the services

and access HPLD provides, CTBL serves those who can't read typical print, and the services they provide run deep.

I got the chance to sit down with Nicolle Steffen, CTBL Director and Colorado State Publications Library Director, and Lorrie Spoering, Patron Services and Reader Advisor Librarian with CTBL, for a little chat about what CTBL does, how it does it, and how what they do might benefit you!



High Plains Library District: Let's start with a quick couple of sentences that describe who you are and what you do.

Lorrie Spoering: The Colorado Talking Book Library provides audio, large print and braille for anyone who can't read typical print, so that covers blindness, visual impairments, physical disabilities where you can't hold a book, learning disabilities like dyslexia. And we serve the entire state of Colorado, free of charge, for all qualifying residents.

Basically, when people feel like they're going to lose their ability to read, we say, No!

Nicolle Steffen: We're part of the National Library Service For The Blind and Print Disabled, and there is a library like ours in every state and most of the territories now, so we're in American Samoa, Guam and Puerto Rico. We're everywhere! And we serve all U.S. citizens, even abroad.

HPLD: And your branch, The Colorado Talking Book Library, is based in Denver, but you serve the whole state?

LS: Yes! We send everything through the United States Postal Service. So nobody has to try to get to our location in Denver. We can get things all the way to Grand Junction, all the way up to the corners of the state. I don't even know what's up in the furthest north corner. Like, once I pass Greeley, I don't know where I am anymore, but we provide everything anybody could need to keep reading.

HPLD: Shout out to our newest Grover Branch, which just

so happens to be right up there in that upper corner!

I know you all work with audiobooks a lot, and most people today are probably using something like Libby to download and stream audiobooks. What are some of the primary differences between how CTBL operates and something like Libby or Hoopla?

LS: Well, because we serve only the disabled and we have agreements with several of the largest publishers, a lot of the differences in downloadable and streaming audio are in the licensing. We can have infinite copies of an audiobook instead of needing to pay for each copy. So, if you are a patron of ours, you don't have to wait for a copy to come up, where with a service like Libby, the library has a limited number of copies, and you might have to wait.

When we got *My Name is Barbara* and everyone wanted it, everybody in the entire United States who is part of the National Library Service could read it at the same time.

In fact, with that one, the library service had to come up with a special way of uploading it. Barbara Streisand, Babs, actually did break our system for about three days. They had to reconfigure some stuff.

HPLD: You heard it here, folks: Barbara Streisand ACTUALLY broke the internet.

NS: Libby and Hoopla are mostly app-based. We have an app, too, and in addition to our app, we've got a couple of different audiobook machines which are for folks who can't

READ All Year Long

Challenge yourself to read 12 books in a year with the Adults Read On program and earn prizes along the way! Adults (16+) can participate by picking up a paper log at any branch, by downloading the Beanstack Tracker App and following the instructions, or by visiting highplains.beanstack.org/reader365. For more details, check out www.MyLibrary.us/aro.

ADULTS READ ON

Complete 12 books in 12 months. Redeem prizes at your local HPLD location, after you've read

Book No. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Title

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use a smartphone screen. They've got features like louder players and breath switches, large, tactile buttons. We try to meet everybody's needs. We also have an eBook reader, which is a device that can take a text eBook and turn it into Braille.

LS: The device is 8 sections across, and the Braille text streams across the device. Each section has the dots built in, so as the text streams, the dots come up so you can feel the Braille. [HPLD: Imagine a piano keyboard, but with smaller keys. Each key has a series of blunt pins that can raise and lower, creating Braille text. The overall device is maybe the size of an iPad. It's a bit hard to describe, [but here's a link to a video that shows you a bit about how it works](#)]

HPLD: So kind of like a reverse keyboard where your fingers feel the keys, but instead of typing, you're reading?

NS: Right. What's great about it is that it puts Braille readers on the same footing as someone who is a Kindle reader. For someone who reads Braille, it's a breakthrough, it's revolutionary.

[Lorrie then broke out a single volume of a printed Braille book, and it is HUGE.]

LS: A lot of typical novels are 4 or 5 of these volumes in Braille. So the Braille eReader can hold thousands of books in that one little package. These large print, printed Braille books are very light, the paper is light so that the book isn't as heavy as a book of that size typically would be, but it's still a lot to manage.

HPLD: That's audio and Braille covered. Do you have any other formats?

LS: We do have large print. To count as large print, the type has to be at least a 14 point font, and we have a VERY large collection of those, everything from baby board books to all kinds of novels and non-fiction. Nicolle, do you know how large our collection is at this point?

NS: Yes, I do! Over 38,000 titles. I'm fairly sure it's the largest collection of large print in the state, and those are books we can lend to other patrons, so not just our patrons, but to other public, academic, or school libraries.

LS: Sometimes we also lend portions of our large print collection to libraries to help refresh their collections, too. A library might have a smaller large print collection, their large print readers go through them, and then the library

will send those back to us and we'll send them another 20 books to keep it looking fresh. Large print can be a challenge because when a book is printed in large print, it's often only printed once, so those books can end up being rare and hard to come by.

HPLD: You mentioned Braille board books, which kind of touches on another question I had for you: I think a lot of people see the services you offer and think of an aging population, but you also have things for kids, teenagers, and younger adults?

LS: We have patrons from, you know, babies all the way up to...I think our oldest patron right now is 102 because another state stole our 103 year-old. She moved to be with her family, but I'm like, but she was our oldest patron!

HPLD: So rude of another state to steal your oldest patron!

LS: But, yes, absolutely, blindness can affect anyone, and there are people who are born with conditions that may cause their vision to deteriorate over time, or sometimes it's a sudden illness. We also get frequent referrals from teachers and reading specialists for kids who have dyslexia or tracking issues and things like that. So we have a vast amount of things that they can read and get ahold of, we have lots of YA/teen. We do have quite a few younger patrons at this point, and that group is growing as more teachers and librarians get to know about our services.

HPLD: So if, say, a teacher is reading this interview and thinking they might have a student who has something that prevents them from reading things in our classroom library, they should reach out?

LS: Yes! We aren't usually going to have things like textbooks in audio, there's another resource for that, but for novels or books to keep them reading for enjoyment, or if they're reading something like *The Great Gatsby* in class, we definitely have that covered. I tend to tell people what we have is usually more recreational than deep research-oriented material.

HPLD: I saw you have some magazines available as well, and I was looking through and seeing you have a lot of fun stuff in there. I think sometimes people come into the public library or use a service like yours and feel a strange sort of guilt, like they're putting someone out by asking for things that might just be for fun. But it doesn't all have to be serious-minded stuff or 800-page Russian novels about the human condition?



NS: It's usually not! We'll get you your literature if that's what you want, but we also do things like providing movies with descriptive audio where a narrator tells you what's happening on the screen.

HPLD: So I shouldn't feel silly if I want to watch *Infinity War* with descriptive audio?

LS: Absolutely not! It's about equity and making it so you can sit around and talk smack about the royal family when everyone is reading Prince Harry's *Spare*, so you're not left out of the conversation. Accessing those sorts of things is about getting to be part of the community.

HPLD: I was browsing your website and saw you're also involved with something called Beep Ball. What is Beep Ball?

NS: It's softball for the blind. My understanding is that it was developed in Colorado Springs decades ago, and it was developed by an engineer working with two children, one sighted and one not, and that's how it came to be. It's not exactly softball, there are three bases total, including home, and the pitcher is on the same team as the batter. So things play out a little differently and the challenges are a little different, but it is a hoot to watch. I highly recommend it.

We host one of the groups that makes the balls. They drill into standard softballs, insert a beeping device, and then insulate it. They also have special bases that crunch and give more audio and tactile feedback. The balls get shipped all over the country. They also use our machinery to do repairs and things, and I like to tell people we're the only talking book library with a drill press.

HPLD: If someone was reading or hearing this and they don't need your services but would like to help out, [I gather there are lots of opportunities to do that?](#)

NS: We have volunteers who fix our machines, we've got volunteers who record books. We have about 140 volunteers who help keep everything running. Audio production people, narrators, drill press operators.

LS: We have people who do data entry, circulation, newsletters, packets of information, we have someone who comes in and repairs our large print books, and she's just so good at making these books look great again. You've seen a large print book, they crack very easily because they're so big.

We love having people here and having people help us out. It's really fun to meet people who are interested in this sort of thing. They might not necessarily know anyone who is blind, but they're excited to make sure that people are able to read.

We have a small staff, but our volunteer program is vast and wonderful, and they take care of so many things. We had to work without our volunteers for about a month due to some construction, and we had to do SO MUCH! It was

so hard without them! They're a really incredible group.

HPLD: I'm sure a lot of folks associate you all with recording audiobooks. Tell me more about that.

LS: We have an awesome recording studio here. We're one of only 30 network libraries that has its own studio. We have volunteer readers who come in and read books for us, and it takes 6 months to a year for a typical-length book to be recorded and prepared and ready. So we have narrators, and we have people doing the computer work, the cataloging, the paperwork.

NS: The books we record ourselves are primarily by Colorado authors or authors with a Colorado tie. Books by and about people from Colorado, the state in general, and sometimes the west, like right now we're recording a book about cowboys who work ranches in the late 20th century. So we don't have someone come in and read the latest John Grisham, we get that commercially. I want to manage the expectation there.

LS: We also do record the Blue Book every election so our patrons have access to the long descriptions of everything.

NS: That person who reads the Blue Book, they are probably one of the few people who read EVERY SINGLE WORD of that Blue Book!

HPLD: I saw that if someone did want to volunteer as a narrator, there's an audition process. Is that intimidating? What's that like?

LS: I don't think so because I think people who want to do it have a realistic expectation. It's not like reading to your kids at night, it involves a lot of homework. One of our librarians here is also a narrator, and she works an hour each week on a book, and she's excited if she gets 10 pages finished in that hour. She always has to go back and re-record certain things, you have to make sure you're pronouncing things correctly. So I think most of the people who want to do it are aware of the commitment, and we do have some people who are professional narrators or were professionals and want to keep doing that.

NS: Everyone involved is really nice, but they have to be realistic because it's just not for everyone. It's not easy, it's very persnickety work. It takes 6 months to a year to do one book, and we try not to have to change narrators on a book or a series. We have just a couple of books we've recorded with multiple narrators because the narrator just couldn't finish, usually because they moved away or something like that.

HPLD: How important is the narration for an audiobook? How much of an audiobook's appeal is narrator-based?

LS: People definitely have their favorite narrators, and they'll listen outside of their favorite genres just to hear more of their favorite narrators. Also, people have narrators they hate, so we have to remove those narrators from their selection lists so they never have to hear that

person's voice again. Everyone has a narrator they hate. I am still mad at the one who narrated a book that I really liked. I liked the book, but I hated the narrator and I'm still mad about it.

NS: Me too!

HPLD: Yep, same!

NS: You spent 10 or 15 quality hours with them, and that's enough!

LS: That's part of it, too. You have to have a voice that people can listen to for that amount of time. I wouldn't do it, I don't want to hear my own voice that much, and I definitely wouldn't make anybody else do it. We're really lucky that our collection is full of really well-done books, all read by humans. Sometimes, in other settings, they do use computerized voices, but all of ours are professionally done by humans.

HPLD: I bought a gift for someone a couple years back, a streaming audiobook service that's pretty well-known, and the place it fell really short was in the support for the recipient. You kind of buy it, and then they expect you to just figure out how to do it. I gather you all have a different ongoing support philosophy.

LS: Oh, absolutely. That's really what the Readers Advisors are for. We're here Monday through Friday, and patrons can call or email and ask us to help them find books, or if they're having trouble figuring out how to download, we're very well-versed in helping people over the phone.

The support is a big part of it. Lots of our patrons may not have been technologically savvy to begin with, or they may be having trouble with vision loss, so we'll spend as much time as someone needs to work through the issues they're having so they don't feel like they're left to flail or wait for a grandson to come over and help. It can be uncomfortable for some people to ask for that help, but it's very normal to need some help, it's not like most of us were born holding this technology. And the National Library Service will also back us up if we're stuck on something. We're able to get ahold of them really quickly, and they're open to calling our patrons and coaching them as well. The NLS has several blind staff members, and sometimes they're able to help patrons through things in ways we can't quite conceptualize because we're sighted.

Please, if you need help, reach out! You're not going to be in an endless phone loop or a ChatGPT thing.

HPLD: Yeah, that sounds VERY different from the service I used before.

NS: Another thing Readers Advisors do is help people find books they want to read because often they can't just go to the library and browse the shelves anymore and see what's on the must-read lists or displays or whatever.

HPLD: Oh, right. I'd never thought of that. If you can't see

the titles on the displays or just browse by walking the stacks it'd be pretty difficult to just sort of casually browse books. Now, tell me about this: We have a [Personalized Reading List service](#), and it's really cool to help people find books they want to read, but sometimes people are hesitant to tell us what they really want because they feel ashamed or embarrassed. Do you deal with that?

LS: It's rough sometimes, sometimes it's uncomfortable for people to ask for some of the things they might want to read. What you're reading or learning about can be a very private thing. We coach our patrons, "We're not judging you, we want you to read what you want to read, and it may be uncomfortable for you, but it's not uncomfortable for us, you can tell us what you need."

HPLD: If someone is reading or hearing this and thinking they may qualify for services, or maybe they know someone who might make good use of services, what's the first step?

LS: We have an application, which we have to use because we're funded by the federal government and because we have those special copyright workarounds we talked about earlier. The application is on our website, and we can also send a printed copy through the mail or through email. Once you've got the application, you'll see a list of the kinds of people who can certify, and it includes doctors, non-related caregivers, therapists, reading specialists, librarians. Once you get that application filled out and certified, we create a profile for you, and you'll have access to all of the materials from us.

HPLD: Okay, last question: I've seen this debate pop up on Booktok: Does listening to the audiobook count—

LS: YES!

HPLD: —as reading?

LS: YES! I have stickers all over my water bottle that say that it is. And they've done MRIs and seen that listening to the audio activates the same part of your brain that seeing the written word does, so you're processing in exactly the same way. You're not cheating when you read your kid a book, so why would listening to a book be cheating?

HPLD: Any last things you want people to know about CTBL?

NS: We do want to say that we are not in competition with your local library, and you should use both! You can still use your local library to find out which books you might like and then get them from us in an alternative format, and you can use us AND the public library. Sometimes patrons think they can only use one library. Use your library and use us, use one or the other as a supplement.

HPLD: Well, there goes my juicy interview headline about the rivalry between us and CTBL.

RENOVATIONS: Totally Worth It

by Charlene Parker
Manager, Farr Regional Library

I'm not going to mince words here. It was a dark time in my family's history. Very dark.

Many years (okay, decades ago) and before the spouses and grandchildren arrived on the scene, my parents remodeled our kitchen and bathroom. They hired my brother, who was taking a break from his graduate studies in architecture, to be the architect, general contractor, foreman, and sole worker for this project. They agreed that the work would be done in time for my college graduation reception in early December and the extended family Christmas dinner.

However, on Thanksgiving Day, a healthy helping of reality was served with the turkey and dressing. The bathroom wasn't finished, and the kitchen wasn't started.

On my graduation day, the kitchen looked like a bomb shelter that took a direct hit. We held my reception in the church fellowship hall.

In mid-December, my mother announced that because of all the mess, she didn't think we'd get a Christmas tree. It was only through the surprising intervention of my dad that we managed to get a small tree to avoid a truly "grinchy" Christmas.

On Christmas Day, mom bravely cooked the turkey and all the trimmings in the middle of the dining room, which was where the stove was now located, and then transported the

entire dinner for 20 people three miles up the road to my grandmother's house.



By January, conversation around the dinner table had grown decidedly surly. Instead of saying, "When the remodeling is completed...", we used the phrase, "If the remodeling ever gets completed...", and made sure that my brother, the goat, got the message.

Finally in February, my brother completed the project a mere four months after the deadline. In the bathroom, there were new fixtures, including a shower, and new cabinets. The kitchen had new appliances, new windows, cabinets, flooring, and countertops. There was also a stained-glass window (designed and created by my brother) that caught the setting sun's rays and cast a golden glow throughout the house. In short, it was beautiful and worth the mess and inconvenience. All was forgiven and my brother was once again, in my family's good graces.

In early 2025, Farr Regional Library in Greeley and Carbon Valley Library in Firestone will begin their own remodeling projects. In addition to other building updates, both libraries are getting new carpeting. If you've ever recarpeted your home, you know that before that beautiful new carpet can be installed, you're going to have to figure out where you're going to move all the stuff currently sitting on your old carpet. You might be tempted to think, "that avocado green carpet from the '70's isn't all that bad. I can probably live with it."

Now imagine that you need to recarpet Farr and Carbon Valley Libraries. Both libraries have collections of over

70,000 books, CD's, DVDs, and audiobooks on rows of shelves. At Farr, there are 28 rows in the south wing alone. To accomplish this task as quickly and safely as possible, the library district hired a company that uses an ingenious piece of equipment that moves entire rows without removing the books from the shelves. However, like your living room, all those shelves plus the furniture (tables, chairs, etc.) need to go somewhere else. It's a massive project with shelving and furniture and recarpeting constantly moving in a carefully choreographed sequence. Picture a ballroom scene from an episode of Bridgerton and you'll get the idea. And so, for the safety of our patrons and staff, both libraries are scheduled to close during early 2025 for approximately a month to accomplish this portion of the remodeling projects quickly and safely.

Beginning Monday, January 6, Farr Library will remain closed until the end of the month. Our lobby will be open so that patrons can return items, pick up holds, check out items, and browse a small collection of new and recently returned books. Patrons will also be able to do limited photocopying and mobile printing and read the daily newspapers.

During Farr's closure, you're encouraged to visit Centennial Park Library, LINC, or Riverside Library for computer services, programs, story times, and a larger collection of books and other materials. Please also consider checking out some extra books before Farr's closes that will last you until we reopen later in January. [You can keep up with the progress and details on Farr's webpage.](#)

In addition to new carpeting, new paint in a totally different color scheme, new service desks, and improved

technology in the meeting spaces are part of the plan. Carbon Valley Library will close beginning in early to mid-February. In addition to new carpeting and paint, the library will be adding a makerspace, a drive-through window for holds pick-up, new furniture, and a mural in the children's room. [You can keep up with the progress and details on Carbon Valley's webpage.](#)

There is no denying that remodeling projects are often inconvenient, messy, confusing, and headache inducing. But as my family discovered, the finished product was totally worth it. We hope you'll feel the same about Farr and Carbon Valley Libraries when our projects are complete.

Epilogue

My brother finished his graduate studies and enjoyed a successful and fulfilling career as an architect. Now retired, he enjoys doing remodeling projects in his own home. His wife, wisely, does not set deadlines for completion.

When my mom and dad retired from farming and moved to Greeley, the stained-glass window traveled with them and for 20 years, hung in their living room window. It then went with my mom when she moved to an assisted living facility. It now has pride of place in my brother's home in Lakewood.

Eventually, I did replace that avocado green carpet. I have no regrets.

Our remodeling story remains a family favorite and is often retold (with some embellishment) at holiday dinners.

Farr Regional Library will be renovated and offering only limited services and hours beginning

MONDAY, JANUARY 6TH

(REOPENING AT THE END OF THE MONTH)

Available services in lobby:

- Pick up and check-out of materials on hold • Limited photocopying and mobile printing
- Small browsing collection • Basic Book A Librarian sessions



Monday-Thursday • 9am-5pm
Friday-Saturday • 10am- 5pm
Sunday • 1-5pm



The Spirit of **CAGEMAS**

Every year around this time, we celebrate Cagemas and our favorite thespian: Nicolas Cage. I pull up the ol' IMDB, scroll through Saint Nic's latest offerings, and always find SOMETHING incredible.

This year, I'm a little stuck on Cagemas. But it might not be my fault.

Apparently, a few years back, Cage got himself into some trouble, possibly related to buying several properties, including New Orleans' "most haunted" house. Cage thinks the house may have been cursed, and that the curse caused his financial woes. This is the first I'm hearing that spending millions on real estate is a "curse" as opposed to

"terrible financial decision-making." I must've skipped the Stephen King book where a guy hit an old woman with his car, and she cursed him with her last breaths, repeating the phrase, "Bad financial decisions...bad financial decisions."

However, it would seem that Cage has repaid his debts as of 2022, lifting the curse, freeing himself to be a bit more choosy with his roles than he's been the past several years. And this WOULD seem to be playing out with a glance at Cage's IMDB page.

Granted, we got a few middling movies, [Arcadian](#), a [Cabin at the End of the World](#) knockoff, and [Sympathy for the](#)

Devil, which is described as a “high-stakes game of cat and mouse,” which I would call accurate so long as we don’t confuse “high-stakes” with “adequately budgeted.”

But we have to remember that there’s a good chance a lot of these filler movies were ones Cage agreed to and likely filmed in 2022 or before. They’ve probably been in post-production for a minute. Look at *Sympathy for the Devil*: you don’t get those sumptuous lighting effects that combine the ugly greens of *Fight Club* with the garish neons of *Drive*, creating a weird visual soup that’s both too gray and too electric—you don’t get that effect overnight. I mean, you do if you just set up Adobe Premiere to apply like 30 filters and leave it overnight. Why you’d WANT that is another story.

I am hopeful that this new level of financial independence means a brighter future for Cage. Instead of the occasional bits of excellence we get from a *Pig* or *Longlegs*, punctuated by the flashes of more animated brilliance we get in movies like *Dream Scenario* and *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent*, all lost in a sea of movies that we can’t sort out from each other. Movies where we Paid the Ghost, were Imprisoned By Ghostland, and Chained Kills--maybe we’ll get a more consistent look at the man, the legend, as he’d like to be. CAGE UNCAGED!

On the other hand, it makes me a little sad. I’d like to think Cage would keep making at least SOME trash for us, the true fans. Even at the lowest point, for every 4 *Pay The Ghosts*, we would get a hidden gem, a *Willy’s Wonderland*, which definitely seems like the kind of movie you make because the money is handy, and you’ll wrap the entire production in about 4 days.

All this means that I didn’t find much in the way of Cage this year. But my searches did lead me to a new bit of Cagey info: Apparently, for a time, Cage was on a search for the Holy Grail.

No, not in an unproduced *National Treasure* sequel. No, not a Monty Python movie on DVD. No, not an Indiana Jones movie on VHS, a copy of which some maniac is trying to say is worth \$559 dollars on eBay because he had the tape graded, and it’s a collector’s item. You COULD just buy regular, ungraded copies at the ARC for \$1.99, but I guess you do you.

Nic was looking for the actual Holy Grail, the cup.

I don’t know that this search was super hardcore, I don’t think Cage was necessarily out there with electronic gizmos, analyzing old documents and pushing hidden switches that led to caves that could only be navigated while holding an actual flaming torch. But he definitely spent some time poking around, and PROBABLY bought some property in Rhode Island because he thought the Grail was there at one time (again, Nic, baby, you’re making it difficult for me to sympathize with your “curse” here...).

I didn’t see anything on Cage’s IMDB that would inspire a Cagemas this year, but his extracurricular hunt for the

grail inspired a grail hunt of my own: This year, I would find the most unhinged holiday movie committed to film.

In this, the age of abundance, the hardest part of any search isn’t finding scraps of information or leads to follow, it’s filtering things out. Because there is A LOT to sort through.

Much like Cage had to start with, well, the entire world in his search for the Grail, I had to start with the entire world of holiday movies for mine. Which meant I needed to build a couple filters to get rid of a huge bulk of stuff right away.

If we’re talking wild performances in holiday movies, *Silent Night Deadly Night 2* is clearly a frontrunner, but I want an unhinged holiday movie, not an unhinged movie that takes place during the holidays, if that makes sense. However, if you do get the chance to see this movie, pay special attention to the car stunt that I am 100% sure was an accident that nearly killed a stuntperson. They don’t make them like THAT anymore!

This same stipulation ruled out your *Feeders 2*, your *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (just barely), your *Violent Nights*.

No, what I wanted was something that was intended to be a loving, fun, holiday spirit kind of movie that turned out... not that way.

Something of a more...family variety. A movie with a *lifetime* of good intentions. A *hallmark* of the genre.

Some of the easy family movies to knock off the list were movies that followed the same plot: a young woman, who is obsessed with her career, usually at a magazine of some kind, needs to learn how to take it easy and enjoy life a little more. Really LIVE, you know?

How do all these women work at a magazine? And how are these magazines successful in 2024? Where’s the movie where the career-minded woman is working at a magazine that is absolutely TANKING? Sales are bottomed out, things are getting desperate, and her office is a corner in the parking garage that is mostly dry. Mostly.

A lot of these movies also seem to involve a woman falling for a man, only to find out that he has a DARK SECRET: turns out he’s the prince of some vaguely-European country, and the guy has to get married before midnight on Christmas Eve, otherwise some other government figure, a real Jafar type, will come to rule the country for some reason.

Quick aside, readers, if you meet a man around the holidays, and he has a BIG secret, I’m just going to gently advise that you assume it’s not, “I’m actually a prince, and we need to get married tonight!” At best, it’s going to be something like, “I threw up on your side of the booth while you were in the bathroom. And it’s occurring to me now that I probably should’ve told you that earlier.”

You might not think that eliminating intentionally weird

movies, movies about career women who need to learn how to love, and movies with secret royalty would narrow the field all that much. But, according to my calculations, I was left with about a dozen options.

As I'm sure was the case with Cage's grail search, even after narrowing things down, mine had a few false starts. One was a movie called *The Cabin*.

You can be forgiven for seeing that title and thinking it's a horror film, especially because it's directed by the same guy who directed two *Leprechaun* movies: [Leprechaun 3: Leprechaun in Vegas](#) (the worst) and [Leprechaun 4: Leprechaun in Space](#) (also the worst, but with a lot more energy and effort, which always makes a bad movie better).

In *The Cabin*, two different, single-parent families are put into the same cabin, which is sort of understandable because they share the last name MacDougal. However, the reason they're staying in these cabins is because they are attending MacFest, a Scottish festival for everyone with a name that begins with "Mac." The booker for cabins accidentally booking two families with the same last name in the same cabin sort of makes sense, but when you had DOZENS of MacDougals calling, wouldn't that set off some kind of alarm in your head?

Oh, and to save you the embarrassment I experienced, I searched, there is definitely no real "Mac Fest" in Scotland. I think that'd be like having "Smithfest" in the States.

However, despite a strong start and a director with an undeniable pedigree, *The Cabin* doesn't go too far, and it's mildly charming, due in no small part to everyone's favorite mom/love interest, Lea Thompson.

Next I took a hard swing in the opposite direction and watched a movie that was TOO outrageous: *A Karate Christmas Miracle*.

This one is a doozy, so hang with me:

A kid's dad disappears during a mass shooting event perpetrated by an (ALLEGEDLY very drunk) Eric Roberts in a clown getup, which is a pretty tasteless and totally unnecessary reference to the Aurora theater shooting, made more clear by a character's name being Aurora. A reminder at this point: THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A CHRISTMAS MOVIE.

Note that I didn't say the kid's dad was killed in the shooting, I said he disappeared. Because that's what happens in the movie: The dad is supposedly at the theater when the shooting occurs, but his body is not found among the victims. I guess this leads most of the movie's characters to assume he's dead for some reason, except for his plucky son, who thinks he can somehow make his dad come back home by completing 12 tasks in 12 days, including, most importantly, becoming a black belt in karate.

The kid goes from rank amateur to a black belt in 12 days. I'm not sure how. I did find one online karate academy that says you can earn a black belt in 12 months. They promise that you can weave your martial arts training into everyday activities, maybe like waxing a car or (I suspect)

taking a picture of your credit card and sending it to someone on the internet that you really shouldn't send it to.

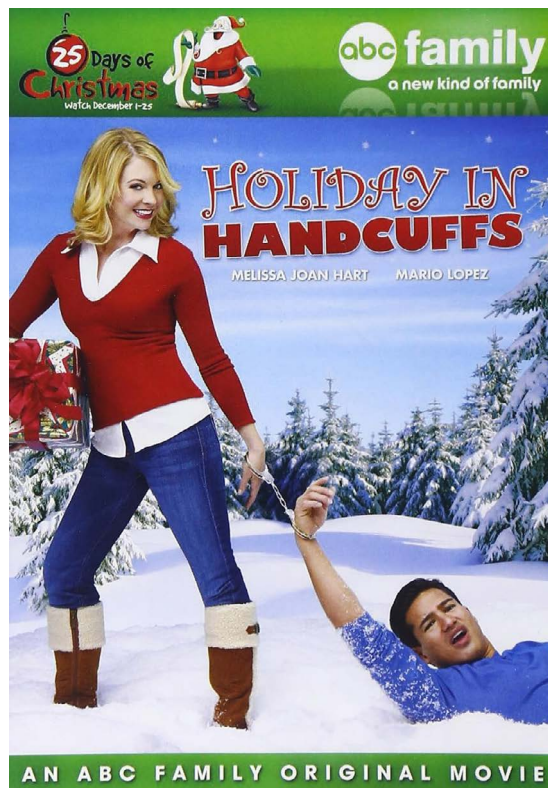
But, hey, it's movie magic, the kid earns his black belt, and the dad returns home at the movie's end, inexplicably.

Or, maybe it's explicable, but it's just not explained by choice. Yes, the dad, who has been mysteriously absent since the mass shooting, just walks in the door. The movie makes no attempt to explain where he's been, what he's been doing, why he didn't call, or why any of what happened has happened. Instead, he gives us a vague "I escaped," and we roll credits.

Some might argue that the plot points about where the dad was this whole time and why he disappeared and why he's back now might be important, but that's the thinking of someone who is too focused on the DESTINATION of a movie, not

the JOURNEY. Which, in this case, involves a psychic, a poltergeist, deep dark secrets, lucid dreams, and some of the worst filmmaking of all time. Seriously, I'm a big creative expression guy, but this is the kind of movie that makes you think that you should have to pass some kind of test before you can make a movie. It doesn't have to be hard, but maybe just some questions like, "Is it important that the movie have some kind of thing it's expressing?" or "If the plot centers around a character's disappearance, should there be some explanation made for the character's disappearance, at least a THEORY, at some point?"

A Karate Christmas Miracle was TOO much for me. I have a high tolerance for this sort of nonsense, and even I was overwhelmed. This movie broke my spirit like so many planks of wood at a karate dojo.



And then, just when things looked darkest, I found it, my grail: [Holiday in Handcuffs](#).

When you pop in a movie called *Holiday in Handcuffs*, you're expecting...well, I don't know what you're expecting. I was thinking maybe a gritty, *Con-Air*-style situation where a father, probably played by Scott Adkins, needs to reconnect with his estranged daughter around the holidays, which involves A LOT of bad guy punching.

I'm going to assume Scott Adkins was busy and a lot of script changes were made, because instead of the martial arts master, they got Melissa Joan Hart, TV's Sabrina, to play a diner waitress who needs to impress her family by bringing a guy to their Christmas gathering at a cabin in the woods.

In a plot that seems more appropriate for an A24 horror movie, she kidnaps Mario Lopez, AT GUNPOINT, handcuffs him inside her car, and brings him to their family's remote cabin for the holidays where he's trapped between pretending to be Hart's boyfriend and attempting to escape his capture.

Yes, this holiday romcom begins with a kidnapping at gunpoint and a drive to a remote location.

Now, there are some concessions, attempts to soften the story. The gun in question isn't like Robocop's machine pistol, it's some old-timey pirate gun relic that probably(!) wouldn't fire anyway. And Hart doesn't have to knock Mario out or anything, he slips on the ice and she shoves him in the car. And when he's blindfolded, he's blindfolded with her knitted scarf, which is meant to be festive, I suppose, but from his perspective, it's STILL a blindfold meant to make it impossible for him to escape capture. I don't think, if I was in that spot, it'd be much comfort if [Kelly Clarkson's "Underneath The Tree"](#) was playing in the car, know what I mean?

Now, a lot of romcoms have one super important plot mechanism in common: Two people meet, they HATE each other, and then come to love each other.

Oftentimes, the hate will be for a ridiculous reason, like Ryan Reynolds supposedly not liking Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal* because she's a bit stern, and also because she's "SO OLD." Hollywood is always doing this to Sandy B.: I'm supposed to not like her because she's marginally older, I'm supposed to not like her because she's a computer nerd, I'm supposed to not like her because she's not "pageant-ready." C'mon, Hollywood. We like Sandy B! These are not "No thanks, Sandy!" level obstacles should she come a-knockin'.

But in *Holiday in Handcuffs*, the felony-level interpersonal conflict is a bit hard to get past. Even if I ended up thinking a woman was pretty nice, even if she reminded me of a childhood spent watching *Clarissa Explains It All*, our conflict, namely that I don't really enjoy the threat of someone splattering my brains all over the interior of a

car, is a leap-and-a-half. It's a stretch stretchier than my holiday meal pants to go from threat of murder to head-over-heels in love in 90 minutes.

The beauty of *Holiday in Handcuffs* is that it's competently made, there's a good cast, it's very watchable in ways that lots of bad movies aren't. It's just...someone involved in the storytelling didn't think it through.

Maybe the writer? She did also write *Christmas is Cancelled* in which a woman in her mid-20s discovers that her dad has started dating her high school rival. Which also seems like a challenge to end with holiday spirit.

Dads, if we've learned two things from this column, they should be: 1) Do not just walk away from a mass shooting and vanish for a couple weeks, and 2) Do not date someone your daughter went to high school with. I know that to some of you the first one sounds totally reasonable, ridiculous that I'd even have to say it, and just know that the second one is equally reasonable. Even if you think it's not, it is. Trust me. Even if you were a young dad, and even if your daughter's high school graduation was 30 years ago, just don't do it. There are plenty of fish in the sea, and you'll have a better life if you date one of them, AN ACTUAL SEA CREATURE, than you would dating someone whose slam book had a page dedicated to your daughter.

Holiday in Handcuffs is a journey. It's a holiday miracle, in a way. It's a movie where you could genderswap the casting, cut a trailer with a slow, spare version of a Christmas carol playing over ominous drone shots of a car winding its way through the forest, and you'd have a horror sensation. It's well-made and misguided as can be, and it features lovable stars from the 90s. It's got it all.

Well, okay, it'd have IT ALL if Judy Greer co-starred as the wacky sister or wacky fiancé of Mario Lopez. But sometimes, it's the imperfections of a Grail that make it truly one-of-a-kind.

Nic, Mr. Cage, if you're out there, thank you for all your years of service. I hope that 2025 brings you joy and opportunities that you sometimes take, sometimes turn down, and perhaps occasionally take and regret almost immediately, but you do as you always do and put in a good effort. You're always the best part of your worst movies, and that's not an insult.

I did find a grail of sorts with *Holiday in Handcuffs* this year, but I want you to know that the true grail I seek is *Willy's Wonderland 2*.

May we both find our grails sooner rather than later.



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