



FEATURES

Revisiting Harrison Ford's One Oscar-Nominated Performance

The only movie Harrison Ford ever got an Oscar nod for just turned 40 and deserves to be watched more often.



By [David Crow](#) | February 11, 2025 |

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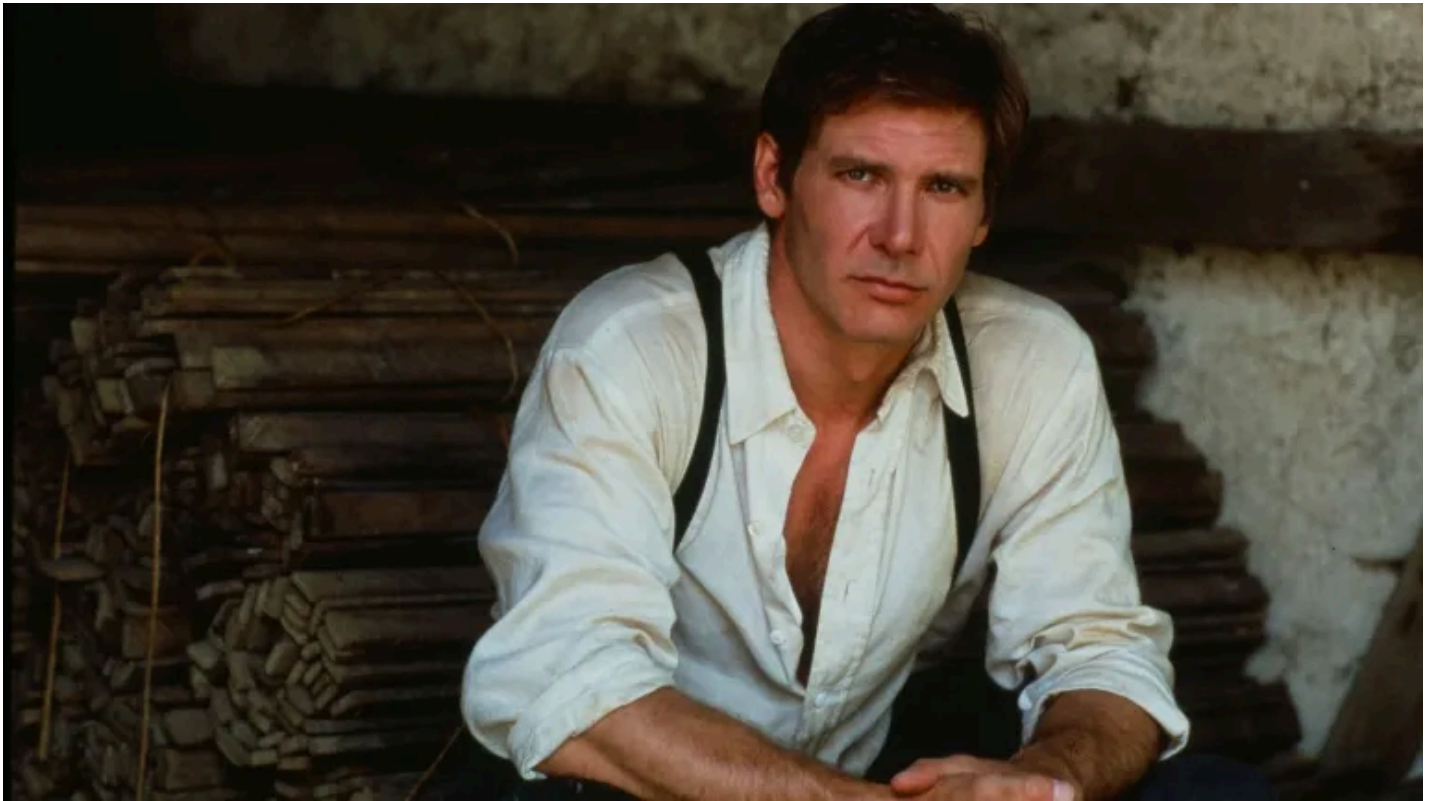


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Harrison Ford has only been nominated for an Oscar once in his career. It's a strange thing to remember when considering one of the most prolific and defining movie stars of his generation. This is the man who was Indiana Jones, Han Solo, and Rick Deckard, to name but a few. For many he also remains the best Jack Ryan, and emanates a world-weary grumpiness that is like a blast from the Humphrey Bogart past—a comparison that Steven Spielberg and Sydney Pollock both invited by casting Ford in Bogie-inspired roles.

Yet unlike Bogart, who won an Oscar for *The African Queen* and was nominated on two other occasions, Ford only garnered the Academy's attention once, and it was for a superb if regrettably less-than-fully-appreciated thriller, which released 40 years ago this month: Peter Weir's *Witness*.

As a sophisticated and surprisingly economical thriller with a hard R-rating and a downbeat ending, *Witness* is a textbook definition of the type of movie they don't make anymore. It's a medium-budgeted studio programmer for adults that somehow cultivated enough class and humanity to be remembered by the Academy almost a full year later after its release. In addition to Ford getting a Best Actor nomination, *Witness*

was also nominated for Best Picture, Director, and Cinematography—albeit the only award it won was for Best Original Screenplay, courtesy of William Kelley, Pamela Wallace, and Earl W. Wallace.

The screenplay in *Witness* is excellent, yet it is the quiet authenticity cradled by the film's Australian director, and his ability to recognize that same stoic naturalism in one of the 1980s' biggest movie stars, which made *Witness* such a striking film, as well as one of the most important in Ford's career.

Prior to starring in this movie about a copper forced to go to ground among the Amish, Ford had proven himself to be one of the more popular names in the new decade. In the eight years before *Witness*, he'd starred in three Star Wars movies and two Indiana Jones flicks. He was also in the highly ambitious Ridley Scott flop, *Blade Runner* (1982), plus several other works that relied on Ford's then-youthful charisma, such as when he played fast-talking Tommy opposite Gene Wilder's accidental gunfighter in *The Frisco Kid* (1979).

Witness was something different, however. In retrospect, it would be the first of the star vehicles where Ford would angrily point at castmates and righteously explain the difference between right and wrong. One might even say it was the first of Ford's middle-aged roles, paving the way for Jack Ryan, Dr. Richard Kimble, and a host of other morally indignant heroes of a certain age. Yet the beauty of John Book, Ford's protagonist in *Witness*, is that he is neither a hero nor the moral center of the story. In fact, he exists at an ethical crossroads where he must remain in perpetual twilight between our modern world—within which Ford's curmudgeony charm has always felt a bit like an anachronism—and the actual ancient way of life he meets in the film as a stranger and interloper.

That is certainly how the Amish community at the heart of *Witness* perceive John Book when he shows up on their doorstep with a bullet hole in his side and a gun he needs to hide. Moments earlier, he did this community a service by personally taking on the safety of young single Amish mother Rachel Lapp (Kelly McGillis) and her son Samuel (Lukas Haas). At the beginning of the picture, little Samuel witnessed the brutal murder

of an undercover police detective by—as we soon learn—two other cops caught up in the drug trade.

And after his own police chief (Josef Sommer) attempts to cover up the deed by having Book shot and bad men sent for Rachel and her inconvenient son, a half-dead John takes the mother and child home to their Amish farm. Book's crooked brothers in blue do not know which among the many Amish and Mennonite communities around Pennsylvania they've vanished off to, and this buys Book time to heal. But it's also just long enough for him to learn there can be no true middle ground for himself and Rachel's slowly growing attraction.

The above could easily read as the setup of a by-the-numbers thriller about dirty cops and movie stars caught in a high-concept. Ford would, in fact, make many such films in the decades to come. However, the power of *Witness* hails from the spartan instincts of Weir and Ford, two talents who seemed to intuitively understand how to excavate the credibility of a character or story, no matter how sensationalistic or nakedly commercial.

Indeed, McGillis would star in one of the bigger “high-concept” hits of the ‘80s a year later when she appeared opposite Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. But in *Witness*, she gets to play an actual character in a film that has the good grace to realize the most important things are often left unspoken.

They're seen for certain. Witnessed, even, as we all can plainly notice in the sequence where Book introduces Rachel to the velvety wonder of Sam Cooke one night in her late husband's barn. It is there that Book and the Amish have uneasily hidden the police detective's shot up car, and where he must hunker over the vehicle's engine by candlelight if he wishes to ever drive away from this place.

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In the sequence, Ford reveals the inherent handiness of his character, working as resolutely in oil and engine grease as we later see Amish men in Rachel's community build from wood and hammers. However, the alien nature of Book's metal and chrome carriage, his electric lights and music, is what captures Rachel's imagination. There is an unavoidable attraction between the two that is never once uttered aloud or acknowledged beyond a stolen kiss much later in the picture. But it is there in the dancing shadows and beamers as the two idle to "(What a) Wonderful World."

So many of Ford's best performances, though, rely on what's beneath the surface. At the top of the iceberg, it's easy to see why he became a star: a flashy smile attached to good looks that can sit as comfortably in a leather jacket as a tweed sport coat—and sometimes in the same movie, as was the case with the signature Indiana Jones role. But despite having the vibrant masculinity of a Golden Age movie star, there was always a quiet wounded intellectualism beneath the surface of Ford's screen persona. These competing sensibilities were used to comic effect by Spielberg, but in Weir's hands they become something forlorn and tragic.

There is a vulnerability to the Book character that makes Rachel's attraction palpable, but there is also an aggression and darkness too that dooms him to be incompatible in her world. In some ways, it complements the Amish lifestyle as seen in a terrific and elongated barn-raising sequence. It is again Weir's commitment to the truth of whatever world he is building that a movie like *Witness* can stop for a full five minutes of silent cinema. It is really only Maurice Jarre's uncharacteristically synthesized score which gives sound to a sequence where Book joins Rachel's father and neighbors, including rival beau Daniel (Alexander Godunov), in building a barn. The lack of dialogue, like the barn itself, is a monument to the antiquated pleasures and simplicity of an Amish lifestyle.

But the electronic nature of the music betrays what an awkward fit Book and this story is in this culture. Soon enough that incongruity becomes bitterly inescapable. Hence the most violent scene in the movie is not the opening where a man is stabbed to death in front of a child, nor is it the end of the film where Book in turn kills those killers, one through a horrible suffocation while being buried alive in grain. Those scenes are hard to watch, but they pale in comparison to a sequence where Ford—while still dressed in an

Amish man's hat and hooks—brutalizes a redneck tourist who's driven to town to gawk at Amish folk.

The actual fisticuff stunt work involved in Ford beating up some meatheads is basic, the sound effects pedestrian. But it is the bubbling look of anger and hostility in Ford's countenance that causes sincere discomfort. Viewers are keyed into the fact a volcano is about to erupt, and the rage is so convincing that when copious amounts of fake blood are smeared across the face of the extra he lays out, you want to look away. Something beautiful has been violated; the lovely daydream between Ford and McGillis' characters shattered into a million pieces.

Witness is nominally a thriller, but in practice it's a doomed romance. And the nature of that ruination is written entirely in Ford's performance and its equal measures of sensitivity and wrath, intelligence and barbarism. It was a turn worthy of an Oscar nomination. Forty years later, it remains a gem in Ford's catalog, and perhaps an indictment of the Academy since more of its ilk, including from this star, have gone so unrecognized.

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Drama **Harrison Ford**



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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...