

A Short Tribute to Long Movie Titles

Films these days say it all in a word as Hollywood's top honors over the decades increasingly have been awarded to the industry's one-word wonders

By Don Steinberg

Movie titles these days tend to be economical and terse (*Inferno*, *Arrival*, *Moonlight*, *Loving*). They keep it short. We're all busy.

But some of this year's films bring a touch of nostalgia. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* are throwbacks to an era when movie titles were packed with detail and a lot less boring — a convention more common in the let-it-all-hang-out 1960s and '70s.

Both of these 2016 films' names are taken from the books that inspired them, presold titles that would be crazy to abandon. But keeping the lengthy literary title isn't a requirement. The novel *The Price of Salt* became *Carol*. The memoir *A Long Way Home* plays onscreen as *Lion*. *Arrival* is based on a science fiction story called "Story of Your Life."

"That came out of marketing," says *Arrival* screenwriter Eric Heisserer. "For the longest time [the film] was called *Story of Your Life*. Then that got in front of test

groups, and we were given some pretty gloomy predictions: If we stuck to that name, there would be a very low turnout. Some saw it as a soap opera title. And there was a One Direction song that was way too similar."

Back in the counterculture days, we got plenty of unhurried movie titles that painted pictures. There were *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (1971) and *Don't Look in the Basement* (1973). Woody Allen in 1972 presented *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask* — it's a mouthful of a title (including the asterisk) that borrowed wholly from a best-selling book.

Producers filled movie posters with wordy titles that alerted us about people who were about to arrive: *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* (1966) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). And about people who did things: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962); *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1965); *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976). Not to mention

The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies (1964).

Movie names asked questions that films promised to answer: *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?* (1978). Newer titles gesture at characters' feelings but don't spell out the events: *Denial*, *Shame*, *Love*, *Truth*. Shaggier classics elaborated: *Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?* (1971).

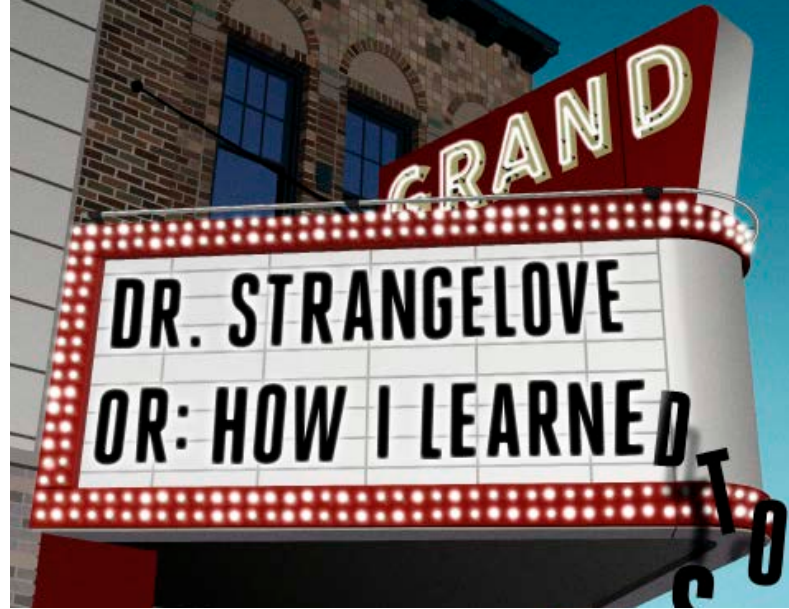
The word "or" once was popular, allowing studios to cram two titles into one. Possibly the longest was *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines, or How I Flew From London to Paris in 25 Hours 11 Minutes* (1965). It edges out *The Fearless Vampire Killers, or Pardon Me But Your Teeth Are in My Neck* (1967). Stanley Kubrick added a colon for *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

We even got the occasional sentence that doubled as a title and

plot summary: *One of Our Spies Is Missing* (1966), *Dracula Has Risen From His Grave* (1969), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975).

The handful of movies with rambling names in recent decades stand out among such austere titles as *Spotlight*, *Selma*, *Gravity*, *Room*. We got *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (1995), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015). *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (2012), inspired by the Chris Cornell song "Preaching the End of the World," was written and directed by Lorene Scafaria, who wrote *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*. Going long these days is a way to go for cute — though maybe it always was.

We did get an Oscar winner with an old-school long name. 2014's *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* even brought parentheses into the equation: Though no one really makes the effort to say the whole thing. Times do change. *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963).



FOR BEST PICTURE, THE ACADEMY IS CHOOSING FEWER CHARACTERS

Oscar is becoming a man of few words — and often just one, as filmmakers and the Academy increasingly are showing a preference for movie-title minimalism.

Over the years, there has been a clear upward trend in best picture Academy Award nominees with single-word titles, and this year looks to continue that trajectory. Thanks to strong contenders including *Arrival*, *Fences*, *Lion*, *Loving*, *Jackie*, *Moonlight*, *Silence* and *Sully*, 2016 has a good chance of breaking the record for the most best picture nominees with one-word titles (the current record is four, set in 2013 with *Gravity*, *Her*, *Nebraska* and *Philomena*).

This year also very well may set a new bar for the highest percentage of best picture nominees with one-word titles (the current record: 60 percent, as seen on the graph, a five-way tie among 1970, 1972, 1982, 2000 and 2005 — all years when there were only five nominees). If this year's best picture ballot reveals five one-word titles out of eight nominees, six out of nine or seven out of a potential maximum 10, both of those records will fall.

And that's the final word on the subject. — BEN ZAUZMER

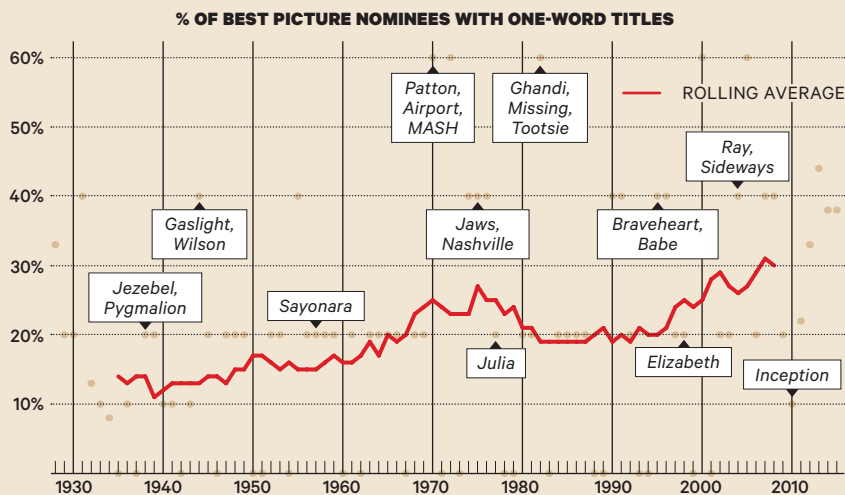


Illustration by **First Lastname**