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## Interview with Glen Starkey

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Glen Starkey

## INTERVIEW WITH GLEN STARKEY

### Movie Reviewer and English Lecturer

Glen Starkey reviews movies for San Luis Obispo's alternative weekly *New Times* and is part-time English Lecturer at Cal Poly.

*Moebius: How did you get involved with movie reviews?*

GS: Film intrigued me long before I ever started reviewing for *New Times*. As an undergraduate at Cal Poly, I began taking film classes in 1980 from Dr. John Harrington, studying Westerns (yes, I took a class in cowboy movies), world cinema, and directors such as Ingmar Bergman and François Truffaut. Later on I took film classes from Dr. Doug Keeseey, most notably a terrific class on the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Brian DePalma that helped shape my aesthetic sensibilities as they apply to film.

I eventually returned to Cal Poly to get my MA in English, graduating in 1998. By that time I had already been working for *New Times* for about seven years, doing music, theater, and art reviews as well as feature stories. After graduation, I started working in the English Department at Cal Poly as an instructor, and I continued working for *New Times* as well. A former arts editor and I began a weekly movie review column called "Split Screen," which is basically a short conversation between two people about a film. Eventually, after that particular arts editor left, I began asking people from the community to join me for a review, and now I get lots of requests and work with a new guest reviewer every week. I always let the guest reviewer choose the movie that we watch. Afterwards, we both contribute our thoughts in writing and collaboratively provide the reader with a balanced review. Of course, I still do independent reviews, but I've really come to enjoy the perspective of the various guests in "Split Screen." That's one of the beautiful things about film—nearly everyone enjoys the medium, has a lot of experience with watching film, and has a valid opinion regarding a film's artistic merit or entertainment value. Film is the great equalizer.

*Moebius: According to you, what makes a movie engaging?*

GS: Hmm. That's an almost impossible question, because there are so many different kinds of film. I love those cheesy sexploitation films of Russ Meyer such as the brilliant Roger Ebert-penned *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, or Meyer's *Supervixens* or *Blacksnake!*

They're titillating and hilarious, and I'm fascinated by the way Meyer tries to weave in some moral to balance what's basically a topless jigglefest. Would one of these films make my top 100 of all time? No. But they sure are fun to watch. I also enjoy quirky films such as Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, which I found compelling and brave for attempting to humanize a pederast, a man who's a loving father and a kind, thoughtful person, except he likes to drug his eleven-year-old son's sleepover friends and rape them while they're unconscious.

Clearly, films can be pure entertainment or they can be art. Most are somewhere in between. What makes a film engaging differs from film to film, person to person.

*Moebius: What were your top ten favorite movies of 2004?*

GS: It was a great year for independent films. I don't have a particular order, but I really enjoyed films such as *Napoleon Dynamite*; *Sideways*; *Super Size Me*; the marionette film *Team America: World Police*; *Baad Asssss!*, a film about the making of the brilliant 1971 blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song*; *Garden State*; the newest Wes Anderson film *The Life Aquatic with Steve Sizzou*; Tarrantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, which for me was not only better than the first but also made the first one better by providing more context; the zombie spoof *Shaun of the Dead*; and what I think is one of David Mamet's best movies ever, *Spartan*.

*Moebius: What is the worst movie you have ever seen, or worst movie you have seen all year?*

GS: Ever seen? That's impossible to say. I remember a really disgusting film from my childhood called *Mark of the Devil*. It was R-rated and a friend and I snuck into the theater when I was about twelve or thirteen. The film was about a witch hunter, and the film contained notorious graphic torture scenes. When you went into the theater they issued barf bags. Man, I wish I still had that thing because it had a screen print on it from the film. I'm sure it's a collector's item now. There was another film called *Blood Diner* that was simply awful—a guy's head gets squished by a bouncing low rider. And let's not forget *Cannibal Holocaust*, in which a guy gets his penis lopped off by an angry tribe of headhunters. Man, that looked so real. They also slaughter a few animals in that film. Here's what's weird: These are three of the worst films I've ever seen, but I'd watch each one of them again because they're so awful they transcend their badness to become compelling. Last year's *Catwoman* wasn't nearly as bad as those three films, but I never want to see it again.

*Moebius: Can you watch a film without analyzing it?*

GS: No, not really, not any more than I can read a book strictly for mindless pleasure. That's not to say there isn't pleasure in analyzing and assessing books and films—that's the greater pleasure, actually. When watching a movie, my brain is always in critique

mode. I cannot switch it off. I am constantly assessing the story, the filmmaking techniques, the choices the actors and director make. I try to teach the same to my students, who sometimes think that over analyzing books or films can strip the pleasure of the experience of reading or watching. Not so!

*Moebius: Who are your favorite film critics?*

GS: I loved Pauline Kael. She was so deliciously wicked and funny and usually dead-on right. I also enjoy A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*, John Simon of *The National Review*, David Denby of the *New Yorker*, even Roger Ebert, who's much better in print than he is on his TV show.

*Moebius: You teach an English 134 class, here at Cal Poly, which revolves around film—explain.*

GS: I'm teaching the freshman composition course as a film class for a couple of reasons. For one, nearly all my students like films more than they like to read. I'm always shocked to learn that some students have never read a novel all the way through. Obviously I don't think of that as a good thing, but I have them for ten short weeks and I'd rather concentrate on getting them to write about something they're interested in rather than fighting the twin battles of teaching them how to write an expository essay while at the same time teaching them to read with some modicum of passion. They're already passionate about film, so they just need to learn to watch a film critically. The other reason I use film is because it frequently offers a look at topical issues germane to students' lives. The students pick the films, and this past quarter, for instance, they chose *Boondock Saints*, which has Christian symbolism and an ethical quandary at its center, *American History X*, which deals with racism and the power of mentor relationships, and *Fight Club* and its message of anti-consumerism, male emasculation in contemporary society, and the legitimacy of the American Dream. These are great topics for a freshman comp class and the papers these kids write are generally quite good.

*Moebius: Do you foresee movie review as always being a part of your life?*

GS: I certainly hope so. I love watching movies, and I'd do it even if I didn't get paid for it, but I have to say, there's something awfully nice about getting into films free and then getting paid to offer an opinion. I think it's about the best job in the world. 

*Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Sadie Martin on March 31, 2005.*