

“Life Itself” is the title of a fabulous new film. I saw it on July Fourth of 2014 in an audience deeply caught up in its story.

This documentary centers on Roger Ebert, the critic who covered movies for the Chicago Sun-Times, television stations, and other media.

The film covers the whole range of Roger’s life, starting from his early years and finishing with his death in 2013. It gives much attention, of course, to his views of the movies.

Among the films noted in the film, I much appreciated Roger’s analysis of “Bonnie and Clyde,” a film that he considered one of the best American movies ever made.

Much attention is given to his relationship with Gene Siskel, reviewer for the more prestigious Chicago Tribune. Their association on television was often marked by insult and disagreement. However, in time it led to an important friendship, as witnessed by his choosing of Siskel as the best man at his wedding in 1992.

That wedding made a huge difference in Roger’s life. It brought to him Chaz Hammel-Smith, an Afro American woman of great personal charm and love. This marriage, taking place when Roger was fifty years old; in large part it enabled him to endure terrible physical suffering.

That pain came from cancer of the thyroid and salivary gland. This disease required many surgeries and difficult bodily arrangements. One of the features of “Life Itself” is frequent views of Roger’s face, something that I had to get used to, as I think others in the audience were also required to do.

For me, the ultimate appraisal of this film was thumbs up, way up. It stands as a beautiful portrait of human life filled with achievement, along with missteps and suffering. I came away from this cinematic experience with renewed appreciation of what human life can be.

Written by Richard Griffin
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I feel grateful to Steve James for having made the film, though he himself has reason to thank Roger Ebert himself to the vital part he played in this movie's making. And for being such an exciting person.