**Big Brother.**

**EMOTION PICTURES:**
Film Reviews by Roland Atkinson, M.D.

**FROM 1982 TO 1985,** while Steve James was attending film school in southern Illinois, he volunteered in a Big Brother program and was assigned to spend time with Stephen Dale ("Stevie") Fielding, a disadvantaged grade school boy. They lost contact when James moved on to Chicago to make films, including the acclaimed documentary, Hoop Dreams, and the docudrama, Prefontaine. Feeling that he had not lived up to his pledge to Stevie to maintain contact, James called him a decade later, in 1995, and gained consent to film their renewed relationship over the next couple of years. Plans changed in 1997 when Stevie, himself a childhood sexual abuse victim, was indicted for sexually molesting an 8-year-old girl he was baby-sitting. He confessed. The focus of the film was unavoidably altered and protracted by this event and its aftermath. In the resulting documentary, simply titled Stevie, James follows the arduous events of the next few years, culminating in Stevie's sentencing to a 10 year prison term in 1999.

One internet reviewer has called this film a waste of time to make and a bore to watch, not because it was badly made but because Stevie Fielding is a "rural poor white trash... loser" whose story does not merit anyone's attention. Wow! I'm glad that fellow wasn't reviewing manuscripts the day Dickens dropped off Oliver Twist, and that he wasn't in charge of funding decisions when Frederick Wiseman needed cash to make Titicut Follies. Like many disadvantaged and traumatized kids who develop a pattern of misconduct, Stevie can perhaps be easily classified as a loser. His record, even apart from the molestation, is indeed sordid: burglary, assault, drunk and disorderly, fights, credit card fraud - you name it.

He only learned the identity of his father recently. He had not worked in over four years before his sentencing. He has few supportive or constructive ties to family or to the community. But he does have a devoted fiancee, Tonya, whom we meet. She is an endearing woman who seemingly suffers from some sort of developmental disability.

This is a long film (144 minutes). The original plan was to focus exclusively on Stevie in his early 20s. James had not planned to appear on screen himself at all. His presence emerged spontaneously during filming, i.e., gradually the relationship became the focus, rather than Stevie. Unlike the narcissistic Michael Moore, when James is on screen, he doesn't ham it up or try to influence the viewer through self-aggrandizing polemics and stunts. He just soberly says what's on his mind.

James is obviously troubled by the mess that Fielding has made of his life. He may believe that their 10 year disconnection contributed to Stevie's deepening problems, although that question is never openly confronted. James and his wife, who is a professional counselor, try to be supportive and helpful, but events after 1997 have a gravity and momentum that tend to sweep aside and render nearly useless any efforts that the James's, Tonya, or others can make to stem the tide of Stevie's fate. The judge later said he would have decreed a lesser sentence (six years) if Fielding had expressed remorse for the crime. Instead Stevie refused the judge's invitation to speak and made no statement at all. At the time the film wrapped, he had served over three years of his prison term.
Critical response to the film has been varied. It got strong praise from several reviewers at the Toronto Film Festival two years ago. When the film screened later at a documentary festival in Amsterdam, it was criticized on ethical grounds. Some people thought that James had exploited a marginal young man in circumstances where he was especially vulnerable. They argued that instead of continuing to shoot, James should have put down his camera and returned to his earlier private role as a supportive figure in Fielding’s life.

The film is well crafted and honest in its inquiry. I am concerned that naive viewers might form unnecessarily pessimistic generalizations from the film about the fate of troubled, delinquent young people. Although men like Stevie may continue a pattern of antisocial behavior well into their 20s, later, in their 30s and 40s, many begin to fare somewhat better, especially if they find a loving and steadying partner like Tonya. This sort of outcome was commonly found, for example, in a famous study of delinquent inner-city boys in Boston that has been going on since 1940, a unique longitudinal lifespan project initiated by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck and continued to this day by George Vaillant.

But really this film is as much about James and his Big Brother role as it is about Fielding. It can also be viewed as a morality tale about the vicissitudes of liberal do-gooder gestures. If you really want to be a Big Brother, this film raises the question of whether you should be prepared to stay the course and never walk away, as James did. In for a dime, in for a dollar. That seems a very tall order indeed. Or should one draw the opposite conclusion, that Big Brother-type programs are fatally flawed in their very conception, promising more than they can reliably deliver? Somehow, when James tells Stevie near the end that he "will be there for him", my reaction was that, while James was undeniably sincere, his phrase still rang hollow, seemed reflexive, i.e., it was the "right thing to say", rather than being a solid confidence builder delivered from the heart. Did James’s assurance mean anything to Stevie? Can it be trusted? Will it matter? This film raises troubling questions. Perhaps that will be its lasting value.

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