

# Documentaries: Not Just For Nerds

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Documentaries have enjoyed a renaissance in the past few years and, judging by the box office success of *March of the Penguins* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, the interest in these non-fiction films won't end any time soon. *March of the Penguins*, the 2005 Oscar winner for best documentary, made more money in US theatres (\$77 million) than the movie that won the best picture Oscar that same year (*Vice*, 2006). *An Inconvenient Truth* earned more than US\$48 million worldwide and two Oscars and was hugely influential in fueling interest in climate change. In 2004, *Fahrenheit 9/11* became the highest grossing documentary of all time, pulling in US\$222 million worldwide. Of course, when it comes to earning money, these films are the exception not the norm. The other four films nominated for the best documentary Oscar in 2005 earned less than US\$5 million combined (Vice, 2006). Still, though, documentaries are now considered cool—they're no longer just for history buffs and nature lovers. As a matter of fact, documentaries are now a common sight at places like Blockbuster Video.

Most documentaries these days are designed to be just as interesting as they are informative, and to appeal to young adults just as much as to adults. Many documentaries are designed especially for young adults. *A Tale of Two Teens* (2005), a

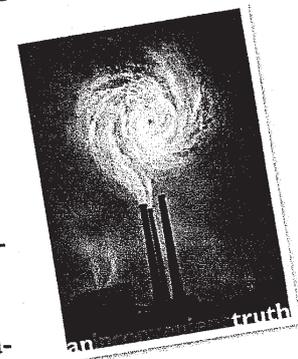
film about the AIDS crisis in Africa, is one example of such a film. Geoff Poister, one of the films' producers, has said, "What we're trying to do is make the subject of AIDS something that teenagers would be interested in exploring" ("*A Tale*," 2004). One of the ways they do this is by telling the story of AIDS through

the lives of two teenagers, one American and one African, affected by the disease.

The Cinema Guild Catalog provides summaries of dozens of documentaries classified as being especially for young adults. The catalog can be found here: [http://www.cinemaguild.com/catalog/catalog\\_young\\_adult.htm](http://www.cinemaguild.com/catalog/catalog_young_adult.htm)

## Hot Button Issues

One of the common characteristics of the documentaries aimed at, and popular among, young adults is a focus on social issues, especially those with a global impact, like AIDS, or poverty, or climate change. Many young adults are deeply concerned about these issues and want to learn more about them. Documentaries also provide a means of reaching young adults that aren't inter-



ested in them. The following films are among the top social issues documentaries of the past few years, along with one classic of the late 1980s:

- *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), about climate change
- *Who Killed The Electric Car* (2006), about the environment and the power of corporate greed
- *Gunner's Palace* (2004), about the realities of the modern-day war in Iraq
- *Super Size Me* (2004), about over-consumption, personal health, and the deceit of big business
- *Born Into Brothels* (2004), about Indian children affected by poverty and prostitution
- *The Fog of War* (2003), about the complexities of war and the need for international understanding
- *Bowling For Columbine* (2002), about crime and violence in America
- *Roger and Me* (1989), about corporate greed



## Science and Nature

Of course, when many people think about documentaries they think about science and nature

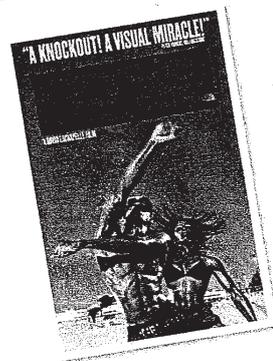
films. Well, it's true: there are a lot of documentaries about science and nature. But a lot these films are a lot cooler than you might think. Here are some of the best from the past few years:

- *March of the Penguins* (2005), all about penguins
- *Winged Migration* (2003), a visually stunning film about bird migration—no really, you've got to see this
- *The Blue Planet* (2001), a documentary series from BBC about the world's oceans
- And just about anything from Nova, Discovery, or National Geographic.

## Special Interest

There are also a lot of special interest documentaries, many of which should interest young adult audiences. Here are some of the most talked about special interest documentaries from the past few years:

- *Air Guitar Nation* (2006), about the best air guitarists in the US and their quest to win the World Air Guitar Championships
- *Jesus Camp* (2006), about a summer camp that trains young American Evangelicals to "take back America for Christ"



- *Rize* (2005), about a groundbreaking dance phenomenon built on street youth culture in Los Angeles
- *Grizzly Man* (2005), about the strange life and death of environmentalist and bear enthusiast Timothy Treadwell
- *Murderball* (2005), about the super-competitive and even dangerous world of wheelchair rugby
- *Mad Hot Ballroom* (2005), about a program in New York inner-city schools that teaches young people discipline and self-esteem through competitive ballroom dancing
- *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), presenting Michael Moore's views of the Bush Administration's handling of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy



- *Dust to Glory* (2005), about the Baja 1000, said to be the most grueling off-road race held every year in Baja, Mexico
- *First Descent* (2005), featuring amazing footage of five of the best snowboarders in the world
- *Bob Dylan: No Direction Home* (2005), about the life and music of Bob Dylan, who remains cool even to many of today's young people

- *Step Into Liquid* (2003), a visually stunning documentary about the world of surfing
- *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003), about the life and music of hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur
- *Hoop Dreams* (1994), a classic documentary about two American teenagers wanting to become professional basketball stars

## References

### Sports and Music

The following documentaries about sports and music should be of particular interest to young adult audiences:

- *Shut Up and Sing* (2006), about the strange persecution but eventual triumph of the Dixie Chicks

Vice, J. (2006, March 5). 3 nominees win at the box office. *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City). Retrieved April 4, 2007, from [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4188/is\\_20060305](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4188/is_20060305)

A Tale of Two Teens. (2004 November). *ImagineNews.com*. Retrieved April 4, 2007 from [http://www.imagenews.com/Archive/2004/NOV\\_2004/01\\_FEATURES/23\\_REALITY.html](http://www.imagenews.com/Archive/2004/NOV_2004/01_FEATURES/23_REALITY.html)