

On Lance Armstrong
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I just finished watching an Australian produced documentary, "Stop at Nothing: The Lance Armstrong Story." Armstrong's was a compelling story: a Texan from modest beginnings, he was a bike racer who survived cancer in his twenties and went on to win the prestigious Tour de France race, which had always been dominated by European racers, seven straight times, and in the process became arguably the most celebrated athlete in America. He ended up disgraced, however, because of his use of performance enhancing drugs, which he denied for years before finally admitting. *The New York Times* film reviewer Stephen Holden included "Stop at Nothing" among his favorite films of 2014. The point of this thought is that it wasn't one of my favorites.

A *Variety* review calls "Stop at Nothing" "comprehensively reported." To the contrary, the documentary spends two hours, no exceptions, simplistically pounding home the point that Armstrong is a cheat and a bully and an all-around bad guy and nothing else. This low-life would, well, stop at nothing to get ahead. Watching this documentary makes us feel good about ourselves: we wouldn't do what this villainous character did; we are superior to Lance Armstrong, every one of us. This comforting and assuring message makes us like this documentary and the people who put it together and want to give it and them awards. But no awards would go in these directions if my votes were the deciding factors.

Why am I so down on this film? The problem I have with it is that there isn't even the attempt to see the world through Armstrong's eyes and understand his actions from his perspective, or to see Lance Armstrong for all that he is as a person. To wit:

Armstrong wasn't the only competitor doping in big time bike racing; they all were. If he didn't dope, he couldn't compete, simple as that. He faced a stark choice: dope or go to work at Foot Locker for twelve dollars an hour. Of course you and I would have chosen the Foot Locker job, but is it at all understandable, and even acceptable, that a basically decent young person who loved bike racing and had been raised in hardscrabble circumstances by a very young mother, whom he wanted to look out for, might not make that same choice?

Armstrong wasn't tilting the playing field by doping, he was leveling it; because all the Europeans he was racing against were doing it, so doing it himself put him on a par with them. And on that level playing field he performed brilliantly. Can we get beyond finger pointing and pontificating and recognize and admire his remarkable talent and determination and work ethic? In contrast to the documentary, can we find a single positive thing to say about him?

If Armstrong admitted doping, he would lose his prize money and sponsors, that is to say, his livelihood, and, as he has been since he admitted doping, get sued for every dollar he has to his name. Would you or I ever hold back the truth—have we ever—to save our jobs and thus be able to support our families (Armstrong has five children)?

If he admitted doping he would pull the rug out from untold numbers of cancer sufferers strengthened and inspired by his example of not only beating cancer but becoming more accomplished than before the illness. Is it at all a possible that that reality was a factor affecting his decision not to confess for so long?

If he admitted doping, it would irreparably damage a foundation he established that greatly elevated public consciousness around cancer and raised millions of dollars to combat it (what have you and I done that is remotely comparable?). Is it really clear-cut that the right choice given this circumstance was for him to come clean?

It is so tempting to do what these documentarians did, uncritically and smugly assume the role of a moral scold and demonize another human being and stone him when he's down and helpless. There's no heavy lifting involved in that; nothing adverse is going to result for you if you do that; it feels good to be righteous, and to cut someone down to your size; and it lets the world know you are securely situated among the good guys in life's melodrama, and that can have payoffs for you both personally and professionally (like getting invited to the right dinner parties and getting your documentary on favorite-films-of-the-year lists). But doing that, you miss an opportunity to come to grips with life as Lance Armstrong lived it, and even more fundamentally, to provide insight into the multidimensionality of all of us, and the complexity of the moral choices we all face getting through our lives, and the

fact that we all live in glass houses. Plus, there's just something
crappy about what you did to Lance Armstrong.