



## Life Itself Discussion Guide

Director: Steve James

Year: 2014

Time: 120 min

### You might know this director from:

Head Games (2012)

The Interrupters (2011)

At the Death House Door (2008)

Reel Paradise (2005)

Stevie (2002)

Prefontaine (1997)

Hoop Dreams (1994)

## FILM SUMMARY

Based on his memoir of the same name, *LIFE ITSELF* is a beautiful and heart-wrenching tale of humanity that recounts the surprising and entertaining life of world-renowned film critic and social commentator Roger Ebert. A centerpiece of the film is the story of how Ebert and Gene Siskel revolutionized film criticism and became the most recognized, criticized, and powerful movie critics in the world. Part critical biography and personal history, the film's spine is the last four months of Roger's life when the filmmakers had exclusive access as he heroically battled – and ultimately failed – to overcome a hip fracture that turned out to be cancer. In the words of Rogerebert.com editor-in-chief Matt Zoller Seitz, "The movie is about cinema history and critical history, writing and reading, drinking and sobriety, religion and doubt, love and sex and marriage and parenthood and labor relations and so many other factors that combined to create Rober Ebert."

Director Steve James (*HOOP DREAMS*, *THE INTERRUPTERS*) digs deeper beyond the public's perception of Roger as Pulitzer Prize winning film critic and star of Siskel & Ebert to reveal his ribald sense of humor, his passions for politics and justice, as well as Russ Meyer and big-breasted women; his wild days at the legendarily rough and tumble O'Rourke's Pub, where he learned verbal combat but succumbed to alcoholism before joining AA in 1979; his marriage to his soulmate Chaz which changed his life; and how he championed and befriended such filmmakers as Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, Ramin Bahrani, Gregory Nava, and Martin Scorsese – whose career was cataclysmically affected by Ebert. *LIFE ITSELF* does not withhold the truth, rather, it bravely brings his raw, uninhibited humanity back to life in a place where Roger was most comfortable and most proficient: the screen.

## FILM THEMES

Film criticism may have been the vehicle through which Roger Ebert expressed himself, but the tale of his life is universal, and its message resounds long after the final credits roll.

### HONEST HUMANITY

After experiencing the trauma of losing his friend and colleague, Gene Siskel to cancer, Ebert vowed that if he were to face a similar fate, he would share his struggles with the world rather than remaining secretive. So when cancer announced its presence, rather than seeking refuge within himself, he redirected his spoken word into the written, using his blog as an ally through which to reach the world. By sharing his suffering, his fragility, his highs and lows, and allowing the public to become a part of his personal battles, Ebert inspired genuine affection. In the words of Werner Herzog, “He reinforces courage,” and his life was a bold reflection of the ties that bind us all together.

### CRITIC AS FRIEND

Unlike other critics of his time, Ebert befriended producers and directors, harkening back to the 1960s when the lines between artist and critic were blurred. Contemporary critics accused these alliances of clouding his vision, making it impossible for him to subjectively analyze a film as a body of work. Yet in Ebert’s approach lies the key to his brilliance. He held the human above all else, had no time for the ideological, and as a result, Ebert was able to be critical without resorting to the clinical. He faulted the bad work of those he knew in order to inspire them to greatness.

### WHY OPPOSITES ATTRACT

Like little boys fighting it out on the playground, Ebert and Siskel’s dynamic relationship was fraught with aggression and animosity. “Two Thumbs Up!” was a working partnership between two fiercely competitive, driven, even egotistical men resolved to outdo each other both on screen and off. As polar opposites who were repelled by the magnitude of the other, Siskel and Ebert rewrote the nature of film criticism and wielded an unmatched power over the careers of many filmmakers. Their relationship, not without its affections, engaged an audience of mass proportions.

### STRENGTH ON THE BATTLEFIELD OF LIFE

For 11 years, cancer had its way in Ebert’s body. Though it robbed him of the ability to eat, drink, and speak, Ebert came out fighting. Most impressively, he did not hide away from the world, but came out to laugh, to share his suffering and candid charm with anyone who cared. An inspiration for all, Ebert’s sense of humor and his love affair with life was apparent right to the end. In his final blog entry, written on the eve of his death, he states, “Thank you for going on this journey with me. I’ll see you at the movies.”

**“For me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy. It lets you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.”**

Roger Ebert

**“He’s an asshole, but he’s my asshole.”**

Gene Siskel

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What did you know about Roger Ebert before watching LIFE ITSELF? Did your feelings about him change after seeing the film?
2. How much importance do you place on film critics' reviews when choosing which movies to watch?
3. If you were battling a terminal illness, do you think you would remain private as Gene Siskel did, or choose to share your experience with the world as Roger Ebert did?
4. Did you ever watch "Siskel & Ebert & the Movies"? If so, what was your impression of Roger Ebert from this show?
5. Have you read Ebert's memoir, "Life Itself"? If so, did the movie do justice to the book?
6. Do you think it was fair of Roger to sign a do-not-resuscitate order without Chaz's knowledge? Why do you think he chose to keep this information from her?
7. Would Siskel and Ebert's TV show have been as popular if there had not been such intense competition and tension between the two? Was it the nature of their relationship that caused ratings to soar, or were people hungry for easily accessible information on films?
8. Do you believe critics are an essential part of an artistic society? Or do critics wield an unmerited power to make or break artists before their art has the chance to reach the public?
9. Martin Scorsese claims that Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel saved his life and career when they paid him tribute at the Toronto International Film Festival in the early 1980s. Has any one person's encouragement ever altered your life in such a way?
10. Writing kept Ebert sane throughout his battle with cancer and his inability to eat, drink, or speak. What is your primary motivating factor? What helps keep you sane during the hard times of life?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- LIFE ITSELF executive producer Steve Zaillian and producer Garrett Basch first approached director Steve James with the idea of turning Ebert's memoirs into a film. James had met Ebert a handful of times previously, and only knew him as a writer who critiqued his films. Upon reading the memoirs, James began emailing with Ebert and explaining to him how he would handle the making of the film, convincing Ebert to agree.
- Chaz Ebert, Roger Ebert's wife of 20 years and greatest supporter during his battle with cancer, worked as a lawyer. Chaz and Roger met after an AA meeting in 1989, and once they were married, Chaz quit her job at the law firm to become the vice president of the Ebert Company.
- Roger Ebert and Oprah Winfrey went on two dates together in the 1980s. At the first of these dates, he convinced her to syndicate her talk show, greatly increasing her earnings.
- Diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2002, which may have been caused by radiation he received as a child to combat an ear infection, Roger Ebert spent the next 11 years battling cancer. Thyroid cancer is the most rapidly increasing cancer in the U.S., and in 2011 an estimated 566,708 Americans were living with it.
- In 2005, Roger Ebert was the 2,288th person to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but the only film critic to ever receive this honor.
- When Roger Ebert was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for his film criticism during 1974, he was the first film critic to be awarded a Pulitzer. He has since been joined by four other film critics awarded in 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2012.
- Ebert was a staunch believer in Alcoholics Anonymous, which he joined in 1979. The first meeting he attended was just 10 steps from his desk within the Chicago Sun-Times building. Two days later, he was in Toronto for the film festival, and attended so many meetings during that week that by the time he returned home to Chicago, he considered himself a member of AA.
- In 1999, Roger and Chaz Ebert launched "Roger Ebert's Overlooked Film Festival," now called Ebertfest, an annual event held in Roger's hometown in Illinois. The festival aims "to celebrate films, genres and formats that have been overlooked by distributors, audiences and/or critics. These include independent, international and studio films that did not win wide audiences; overlooked formats such as 70mm; and overlooked genres such as documentaries and musicals."
- W. G. Faulkner is credited with writing the first-ever film review in 1911 for a London newspaper, when he wrote a review of the Urban Kinemacolor survey of George V's Coronation.
- Roger Ebert was an early investor in Google.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film, and maybe even your life journey with others as Roger shared his, both the ups and the downs.
2. Consider donating to the Roger & Chaz Ebert Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports arts and education programs, philanthropy, voluntarism and grantmaking foundations.
3. Consider donating to [The American Cancer Society](#), which funds research and provides assistance to those suffering from cancer.
4. Support up-and-coming film critics by reading their blogs and reviews on [RogerEbert.com](#).

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