

**Nancy Bartley**

**Nancy.bartley@fulbrightmail.org**

### **Feature film/drama**

**Logline:** In 1931, a 60-pound 12-year-old boy is sentenced to life in prison for murder. In this true story based on a book, the boy must learn how to navigate deadly politics amidst dangerous men and decide if becoming a savage is the way to become a man.

### **Synopsis**

In this 1931 true story 12-year-old Herbert Niccolls runs away from his abusive grandmother, breaks into the general store to get something to eat and is surprised in the act by the sheriff. Herbert fires a gun, accidentally kills the sheriff and is sentenced to life in an adult prison. He brings with him a beautiful blue marble, a souvenir of the summer skies of his childhood.

As soon as Herbert gets to prison the power-hungry Guard Smedley puts him in a cell with Blu, an insane, homicidal pedophile. But Ray, a cunning con, comes to the naïve boy's aid. The no-nonsense Warden McCauley assigns Herbert to share a cell with Walter, a sullen 17-year-old, who becomes Herbert's closest friend. Ray continues to do Herbert favors and Walter cautions Herbert that Ray is not to be trusted.

Boys Town's Father Flanagan and a Seattle society woman, Armene Lamson, in the meantime, campaign to parole Herbert to Boys Town, irritating the autocrat, Gov. Roland Hartley, who will do anything to keep the boy in prison as a symbol of being tough on crime.

In the meantime, Ray decides it is time to collect on the favors he has given to Herbert. Ray plans to escape and needs Herbert's help. Herbert agrees but when he realizes what he is asked to do will kill his friend, the prison librarian, he changes his mind. Just before the librarian drinks poison, Herbert knocks the cup away and blames Ray. Ray and his friends wait to get Herbert alone and plan to rape him.

Walter hears Herbert scream and with mad-dog viciousness, Walter attacks Ray and his friends, killing one. Walter is sentenced to be executed and on the night of the hanging, Herbert escapes from his cell to try to save him. Herbert pleads with the warden to spare

Walter and admits that had he not first agreed to poison the librarian, the trouble with Ray would never have started.

McCauley is upset and continues the execution as Herbert watches the brutal scene and changes from compliant to vicious and rebellious. Smedley takes Herbert to solitary and beats him. The next day, McCauley, a by-the-rules warden who is often at odds with Smedley, confront the guard and orders him to report to his office. Instead, the guard retaliates by freeing a cellblock full of prisoners and a riot begins. Guards are taken hostage as prisoners try to escape.

Ray is looking for Herbert and just as he comes close, McCauley steps into Ray's path, sacrificing himself to become Ray's hostage but saving the boy. Herbert sees the door to the sally port open and sees prisoners running to freedom. He begins to run until he sees McCauley lying wounded and calling him for help. But helping means confronting Ray and with mad-dog viciousness, Herbert fights Ray, killing him. Herbert turns to McCauley and tries to help him. By doing so he gives up his chance for freedom and the gates close out the light.

Lamson, Flanagan, McCauley and Herbert gather at the parole board hearing. Gov. Hartley stamps papers. He rejects Herbert's parole. Afterward, a tearful Lamson vows to continue the fight.

Nine years after Herbert first entered prison, he is released and will go on to lead a crime-free life and work for Twentieth Century Fox, but as he says, "Like the once beautiful blue marble, what goes into prison comes out broken."