

Nyad is a 2023 American biographical sports drama film about swimmer Diana Nyad's multiple attempts in the early 2010s to swim the Straits of Florida, with flashbacks to her early life. It is directed by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin (in their feature narrative film directorial debut) and written by Julia Cox, based on Nyad's 2015 memoir *Find a Way*. It stars Annette Bening as Nyad,^[2] with Jodie Foster and Rhys Ifans in supporting roles.^[3]

Nyad had its world premiere at the 50th Telluride Film Festival on September 1, 2023. It was released in select theaters on October 20, 2023, then streamed on Netflix on November 3. The film received positive reviews from critics, with particular praise for the performances of Bening and Foster. For their performances, Bening and Foster received nominations for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress, respectively, at the 96th Academy Awards, the 81st Golden Globe Awards, and the 30th Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Plot

In 2010, sixty-year-old Diana Nyad resolves to accomplish the one thing that has eluded her—a 110-mile nonstop swim from Cuba to Florida, which she had unsuccessfully attempted thirty years prior. She appoints her best friend and former partner, Bonnie Stoll, to train her. Despite public skepticism because of her age, Diana relocates to Key West with Bonnie for her training and hires navigator John Bartlett to accompany her on her swim. In lieu of a shark cage, Diana opts to swim with a Shark Shield, a shark repellent electronic device.

In August 2011, Diana makes her first attempt at swimming the Florida Straits since 1978. However, unfavorable ocean currents pushing her off course force her to quit early. On her second attempt a month later, she gets stung by box jellyfish. The lead medic jumps in to save her, but he is also ensnared by the jellyfish and has to be rescued. A shot is administered to Diana for the venom, but she insists on continuing to swim with her injury. After some initial resistance, Bonnie and John oblige her, but Diana gets stung again and briefly loses consciousness. She is resuscitated on the boat.

Nyad



Official release poster

Directed by	<u>Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi</u> <u>Jimmy Chin</u>
Screenplay by	<u>Julia Cox</u>
Based on	<i>Find a Way</i> by <u>Diana Nyad</u>
Produced by	<u>Andrew Lazar</u> <u>Teddy Schwarzman</u>
Starring	<u>Annette Bening</u> <u>Jodie Foster</u> <u>Rhys Ifans</u>
Cinematography	<u>Claudio Miranda</u>
Edited by	<u>Christopher Tellefsen</u>
Music by	<u>Alexandre Desplat</u>
Production companies	<u>Black Bear Pictures</u> <u>Mad Chance Productions</u>

Diana recovers in a hospital, where Bonnie expresses her worry to Diana about the severity of the dangers and warns her she is letting her personal dream overtake the safety of the boat crew. Diana pleads for another try and consults with a box jellyfish expert, who gives her a specially designed protective suit. Diana's swims and training are interspersed with flashbacks that show her upbringing and her sexual abuse at the hands of her childhood swimming coach, Jack Nelson.

Distributed by	<u>Netflix</u>
Release dates	September 1, 2023 (<u>Telluride</u>) October 20, 2023 (United States)
Running time	120 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English

In August 2012, Diana makes another attempt, despite warnings from John about bad weather conditions. A thunderstorm breaks out during Diana's swim and John's boat starts to flood. Bonnie calls for Diana to abort the mission despite Diana's pleas to keep going. Back on land, Diana refuses to admit defeat and plans for another try, prompting a fight between her and Bonnie. Bonnie calls out Diana's self-centeredness and laments how she has put aside her own dreams just to support Diana, before quitting as trainer.

Some time later, Diana calls John and apologizes for her behavior. John accepts the apology but admits he can't do another run because of more pressing concerns, including financial stability. Diana visits Bonnie and the two reconcile. Bonnie informs Diana that Nelson passed away, and the news compels Diana to reflect on her trauma. Bonnie later decides to train Diana again after realizing the closeness of their bond. John also returns as navigator; he discloses to Bonnie that he is in ill health and wants one last opportunity to see what Diana can do.

Diana begins her fifth attempt on August 31, 2013; this time she is helped by more favorable currents. Danger arises when a shark approaches and the Shark Shield is not properly functioning. Assistants from the boat's crew jump in the water in time to ward off the shark, which swims away. Hours later, Diana's body is showing signs of exhaustion. She has hallucinatory visions of the Yellow Brick Road from *The Wizard of Oz* and the Taj Mahal. To help motivate her, Bonnie jumps into the water and implores Diana to give it one last push. When the coastline of Key West is in sight, the crew excitedly informs Diana that they are getting closer.

On September 2, Diana makes it to the shore of Key West, where hordes of spectators and fans are gathered to watch. She emerges from the water and gradually ascends onto the beach, prompting celebrations from the crowd. Asked by the press to speak, Diana says she wants to say three things: "One, never, ever give up. Two, you're never too old to chase your dreams. And three, it may look like a solitary sport...but it takes a team."

Cast

- Annette Bening as Diana Nyad^[4]
 - Anna Harriette Pittman as Diana, age 14
- Jodie Foster as Bonnie Stoll^[5]
- Rhys Ifans as John Bartlett^[6]
- Karly Rothenberg as Dee Brady
- Jeena Yi as Angel Yanagihara
- Luke Cosgrove as Luke Tipple
- Eric T. Miller as Jack Nelson

- Garland Scott as Jon Rose
- Johnny Carson as himself

Production

Development

In January 2022, it was announced that Netflix will distribute the film.^[7] In March 2022, it was announced that production was underway.^[6]

Music

Release

Nyad had its world premiere at the 50th Telluride Film Festival on September 1, 2023.^{[8][9]} It had its international premiere on September 12, at the 48th Toronto International Film Festival.^{[10][11]} It was released in select theaters on October 20, 2023, then streamed on Netflix on November 3.^[12]

Reception



The performances of Annette Bening and Jodie Foster garnered positive reviews, earning them Academy Award nominations for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress respectively.

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 86% of 158 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 7/10. The website's consensus reads: "*Nyad* is an uplifting sports biopic strictly on the merits of its story, but it's the outstanding performances from Annette Bening and Jodie Foster that really keep this picture afloat."^[13] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 64 out of 100, based on 35 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews.^[14]

Richard Roeper called the film a "rousing biopic" and stated: "When Bening and Foster are onscreen together, it's movie magic. They don't just have chemistry; they're chemistry professors."^[15] Siddhant Adlakha of Mashable wrote, "It's a movie in which age is both obstacle and strength, and it allows Bening and Foster to play their ages gracefully, as actresses in their sixties. Whatever it struggles to say about bravery in the face of wounds from decades past, it manages to say tenfold about the way its characters choose to live now. *Nyad* builds to exuberant emotional crescendos that feel straight out of the schmaltzy Hollywood biopic playbook, but these scenes transcend cliché thanks to the emotionally resonant performances at their core."^[16] He critiqued the handling of the abuse plot line as "narratively misplaced", but said "thanks to [the film's] unyielding focus on physical strain and suffering — it's the aquatic Passion

of the Christ — it maintains enough stakes and sporadic intensity to get by".^[16] Writing for *The New York Times*, Amy Nicholson said Bening and Foster's scenes together "capture decades of camaraderie in effortless shorthand".^[17]

Writing for *Vulture*, Alison Willmore praised how the film eschews biopic conventions of making the protagonist likable, as well as Bening's commitment to the role and physical transformation.^[18] She said, "Despite that dedication, there's a hollowness to the way the film characterizes its protagonist, which means Bening's performance never fully resonates", adding "we never see any of that or much of what [Diana's] life is like outside of training at all".^[18] Christy Lemire of *RogerEbert.com* wrote, "There's a thornier, messier, much more provocative story to be told here, so it's frustrating the filmmakers opt for easy inspiration instead."^[19] She noted how the film curiously skips over Nyad's history of embellishment, but praised the acting in particular, saying "it's a joy to watch Foster dig into this kind of amusing and meaty role once more. Bonnie is the one person who will call Diana out on her obnoxious behavior—at least until Rhys Ifans arrives later as the no-nonsense captain of the boat that cruises alongside Diana during troubled try after try."^[19] Lemire concluded *Nyad* "might not be the greatest film about...achievement, but it's sufficiently entertaining".^[19]

Rex Reed called it "a movie of uncommon exhilaration" that "resonates long after the final frame," and highly praised the performances of Bening and Foster.^[20] Peter Travers said Bening's performance is "body-and-soul acting at its peak", and referred to Foster as "an exuberant blast", continuing: "Their teamwork is a thing of beauty."^[21] Leonard Maltin named *Nyad* as one of his favorite films of 2023: "*Nyad* is a compelling biopic that could have been bland, or didactic, or dull. Instead, in the hands of documentary filmmakers Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, with a smart script by Julia Cox, it soars. One of

this year's great pleasures was watching Annette Bening and Jodie Foster together, inhabiting their characters so completely that it didn't seem like acting at all. I would also nominate Rhys Ifans for Best Supporting Actor."^[22]

Accolades

Award / Film Festival	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref
<u>The Queerties</u>	February 28, 2023	Next Big Thing	<i>NYAD</i>	Nominated	^[23]
<u>Mill Valley Film Festival</u>	October 16, 2023	Variety Screenwriters to Watch	Julia Cox	Won	^[24]
<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	November 15, 2023	<u>Original Score — Feature Film</u>	<u>Alexandre Desplat</u>	Nominated	^[25] ^[26]
<u>Washington D.C. Area Film Critics Association Awards</u>	<u>December 10, 2023</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	<u>Jodie Foster</u>	Nominated	^[27]
<u>Chicago Film Critics Association</u>	December 12, 2023	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Nominated	^[28]
<u>Dallas–Fort Worth Film Critics Association</u>	December 12, 2023	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Runner-up	^[28]
<u>Women Film Critics Circle</u>	December 18, 2023	Best Actress	<u>Annette Bening</u>	Runner-up	^[29]
		Best Supporting Actress	Jodie Foster	Nominated	
		Best Equality of the Sexes	<i>NYAD</i>	Nominated	
		Best Screen Couple	Annette Bening & Jodie Foster	Won	
<u>San Diego Film Critics Society</u>	<u>December 19, 2023</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	Jodie Foster	Nominated	^[30]
<u>Dublin Film Critics Circle Awards</u>	December 19, 2023	Best Actress	Annette Bening	8th place	^[31]
<u>Alliance of Women Film Journalists</u>	January 3, 2024	Grand Dame for Defying Ageism	Jodie Foster	Nominated	^[32]
		Most Daring Performance	Annette Bening	Won	
<u>Golden Globe Awards</u>	<u>January 7, 2024</u>	Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Drama		Nominated	^[33]
		<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	Jodie Foster	Nominated	
<u>San Francisco Bay Area Film Critics Circle</u>	<u>January 9, 2024</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Nominated	^[34]
<u>Columbus Film Critics Association</u>	<u>January 9, 2024</u>	<u>Best Supporting Performance</u>		Won	^[34]
<u>San Francisco Bay Area Film Critics Circle</u>	<u>January 9, 2024</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Nominated	^[35]

<u>Critics' Choice Awards</u>	<u>January 14, 2024</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Nominated	[36]
<u>AARP Movies for Grownups Awards</u>	<u>January 17, 2024</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>		Won	[37]
		<u>Best Actress</u>	Annette Bening	Won	
<u>Make-Up Artists and Hair Stylists Guild</u>	<u>February 18, 2024</u>	<u>Best Contemporary Make-Up in a Feature-Length Motion Picture</u>	Felicity Bowring, Ann Maree Hurley, Julie Hewett, Mahar Lessner	Nominated	[38]
		<u>Best Contemporary Hair Styling in a Feature-Length Motion Picture</u>	Daniel Curet, Vanessa Columbo, Enzo Angileri, Darlene Brumfeld	Nominated	
<u>Costume Designers Guild Awards</u>	<u>February 21, 2024</u>	<u>Excellence in Contemporary Film</u>	Kelli Jones	Nominated	[39]
<u>Visual Effects Society Awards</u>	<u>February 21, 2024</u>	<u>Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Photoreal Feature</u>	Jake Braver, Fiona Campbell, Westgate R., Christopher White, Mohsen Mousavi, Dann Tarmy	Won	[40]
		<u>Outstanding Effects Simulations in a Photoreal Feature</u>	Korbinian Meier, Sindy Saalfeld, David Michielsen, Andreas Vrhovsek (for stormy waters)	Nominated	
<u>Screen Actors Guild Awards</u>	<u>February 24, 2024</u>	<u>Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role</u>	Annette Bening	Nominated	[41]
		<u>Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role</u>	Jodie Foster	Nominated	
<u>Academy Awards</u>	<u>March 10, 2024</u>	<u>Best Actress</u>	Annette Bening	Nominated	[42]
		<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	Jodie Foster	Nominated	
<u>Writers Guild of America Awards</u>	<u>April 14, 2024</u>	<u>Best Adapted Screenplay</u>	Julia Cox	Nominated	[43]
<u>GLAAD Media Awards</u>	<u>May 11, 2024</u>	<u>Outstanding Film – Streaming or TV</u>	NYAD	Nominated	[44]

Historical accuracy

Ratification and record controversies

Nyad's crossing from Cuba to Florida took four attempts over four years but lost its formal recognition from the *Guinness Book of World Records* due to controversy between leading swimming organizations about whether the swim could actually be authentic, based on the existing evidence.^[45]

Nyad first sought formal recognition of her feat from leading figures in the marathon swimming community shortly after completing her swim in 2013, but she was immediately held to questioning about what kind of equipment she used, how much her crew assisted her in the water, and why her speed nearly doubled in some portions of the swim.^[46]

According to a 2014 Openwaterpedia entry, the Florida Straits Open Water Swimming Association (FSOWSA), which did not exist at the time of the swim, was established to set rules and standards to ratify Nyad's 2013 swim to Cuba, but according to one of the leading marathon organizations, the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA), founded in 2008,^[47] there is limited evidence that FSOWSA exists.^{[48][49]}

In 2018, according to *Time*, Nyad reached out to the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA) to request official recognition of her swim, but at the time, no official standards for ratifying such a swim existed other than those followed by the English Channel Association.^[50]

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Nyad had lied about her swimming record previously.^[51] She claimed to have placed sixth at the 1968 Olympic trials, which she never actually attended. She also stated in her 2015 memoir *Find a Way*, which served as the basis of the film, that she was the first person to swim around Manhattan, when she was actually the seventh.^[52]

Some Nyad supporters have dismissed scrutiny of the swimmer as a sexist response to a powerful woman, but her detractors have countered that marathon swimming is one of the few sports where women frequently best men in competition.^{[52][53]} Athletes like Gertrude Ederle, Greta Andersen, Shelley Taylor-Smith, and Cindy Nicholas have been celebrated by the swimming community for outperforming men in endurance and speed.^{[53][54]}

Marathon swimmer and journalist Elaine K. Howley stated, "Nyad lovers always throw back at us that we're anti-female, anti-gay, and that couldn't be further from the truth. I have found marathon swimming to be incredibly LGBTQ+-friendly and welcoming to older women. That is all a straw man. Just because somebody is part of a marginalized group doesn't mean you can't ask questions when they make extraordinary claims."^[52]

In September 2023, immediately following the premiere of *Nyad* at the Telluride Film Festival,^[55] the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA) revisited its 2022 investigation and report^{[56][57]} rejecting the validity of Nyad's 2013 Cuba to Florida swim and claimed that numerous pages had been "vandalized" by WOWSA founder Steve Munatones.^[58] The WOWSA board once more announced that it could not recognize the swim. This judgment was based on nine hours that went undocumented in designated observer logs during the course of the swim,^[59] conflicting accounts from crew members,^{[60][61]} and GPS data showing unusually high speeds of up to 4.0 miles per hour.^[62] For context, Michael Phelps' 2002 world-record Olympic 400 meter swim had a pace of about 3.7 miles per hour at a time of 4 minutes and 3 seconds.^[63] Nyad was 64 at the time of the swim and claims this very high speed came from the help of ocean currents.^[64]

WOWSA judged Nyad's swim based on documentation standards established by the English Channel Association, which was founded in 1927.^[65] According to NyadFactCheck.com (https://nyadfactcheck.com/details_ec.html), Nyad made three failed attempts to swim the English Channel, a struggle that was depicted in the 1978 documentary celebrating her ambition in the face of failure, "Courage to Succeed." The English Channel Association posts no record of her attempting the swim.^[66]

Steve Munatones, founder of WOWSA, had been trying to push for ratification of Nyad's swim and was consequently restructured out of his own organization.^[67] Munatones had served as an advisor for the film *Nyad* starring Annette Bening and Jodie Foster^[68] and, along with Evan Morrison of the Marathon

Swimming Federation, had encouraged the marathon swimming community to embrace Nyad in order to bring more visibility to their sport.

Evan Morrison of the Marathon Swimming Federation (MSF), the other major organization for marathon swimming, has stated, "What the new WOWSA management doesn't seem to understand, since they weren't around at the time, is that in 2013, there was no system of ratification for independent solo swims, or generally accepted standards of documentation."^[69] In 2022, the MSF had completed an extensive analysis of the swim and recognized it as an "assisted" swim, which indicates that the swimmer was touched by her crew and wore a special stinger wetsuit to protect her from jellyfish, rather than going untouched and wearing the everyday swim suit used for "unassisted" swims.^[70]

In response to WOWSA's 2023 judgment, the *Guinness Book of World Records* revoked its recognition of Nyad's achievement.^[71] Nyad responded by saying "Maybe I had too much hubris, like, 'I don't need to prove this to anybody.' That's my bad".^[72]

Nyad believes if she had been more engaged with the marathon swimming before attempting the swim, she might have avoided the high level of controversy she faced. "Marathon swimmers are a special breed; it's a grueling sport, and they suffer," Nyad told *Time*. The sport is filled with people who have committed amazing athletic feats, swimming day and night without stopping, exposed to extreme weather and dangerous marine life.^[73] Literally hundreds of them have written books^[74] and had documentaries^[75] made about them—but Nyad, who with a decades-long career in broadcast and print journalism^[76] "is perhaps the best known athlete in a sport few people know... with even fewer media-savvy representatives."^[77] The benefits she enjoyed from her elite media connections, combined with her false statements about her achievements, triggered antagonism in a community that is filled with accomplished athletes.

Discrepancies in film portrayal

The film simplifies Nyad's Cuba to Florida swim, showing her with only one vessel and aiming for an "unassisted" swim, which misrepresents the actual event involving multiple vessels, a comprehensive crew, and the use of a stinger suit that contradicts the unassisted claim. The film dramatizes events that did not occur, such as a shark encounter, which never happened during the 2013 attempt but has affected documented marathon swims by other athletes.^{[78][79]} It also inaccurately portrays her completing a swim of the English Channel, which official records show she never did,^[80] and gives her the extraordinary English Channel crossing time of 7.5 hours, which would make her time 10 minutes faster than the current record-holder for fastest swim by a woman (or lady, per Channel parlance), American Peggy Lee Dean.^{[81][82]}

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External links

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