

# [***'Barbie' saved the box office, but 'Oppenheimer' is the movie awards voters have been waiting for***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BDT-J1W1-JBSS-S483-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 26, 2024 Monday 4:24 PM GMT

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**Length:** 669 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; "Barbie" might have saved the summer box office, but as the lengthy build-up to the Oscars nears its end, "Oppenheimer" is clearly the movie that award voters have been waiting for.

Director [*Christopher Nolan*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/entertainment/christopher-nolan-peloton-instructor/index.html)'s historical epic about the father of the atomic bomb added awards from the [*Screen Actors Guild*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/24/entertainment/sag-awards-winners-list/index.html) and the Producers Guild of America over the weekend - the latter having emerged as one of the most reliable bellwethers for the Academy Awards, aligning with the best-picture winner 11 of the last 14 years.

Throw in the film's [*13 Academy Award nominations*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/entertainment/oscar-nominations-2024/index.html) and previous wins at the Golden Globes, Directors Guild of America, the [*BAFTAs*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/18/entertainment/bafta-award-winners-nominations-live/index.html) and the Critics Choice Awards, and while there could always be some stunning surprise, to all appearances the Oscar race is likely over except for the acceptance speeches thanking the Academy and Universal Pictures.

In hindsight, the golden hardware showered on "Oppenheimer" should have been predictable, given all the boxes that the film checks. Near the top of that list, despite trailing "Barbie" in revenues the film still grossed nearly $1 billion worldwide, providing award voters with a rare mix of prestige - a star-studded cast, a long-admired director and weighty material - and the kind of commercial success that actually might help attract TV viewers.

For years, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has wrestled with the disconnect between those two attributes, even toying with the idea (before rejection by its board) of establishing a [*"popular film" category*](https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/entertainment/oscars-popular-movie-category/index.html) to bring blockbuster-type movies into the broadcast. The Golden Globes, less fettered by the ***politics*** surrounding that, notably introduced just such a category this year (and naturally gave the honor to [*"Barbie"*](https://www.cnn.com/entertainment/live-news/golden-globes-01-07-24/h_18bde0cd71a65401862b956c891f9f8b)).

The Academy and host network ABC have long hoped to include more movies with similar box-office clout, fondly remembering that the highest-rated Oscars ever came in 1998, when "Titanic" sailed away with best picture after a then-record haul of ticket sales.

More recently, the Oscars have wrestled with a frustrating divide between awards recognition and widespread popularity, including a pair of best-picture winners, "CODA" and "Nomadland," primarily distributed via streaming services during the pandemic.

While the release of those movies merits an asterisk, even including the groundbreaking "Parasite," "Green Book" and last year's "Everything Everywhere All at Once," and "Oppenheimer" roughly matched the worldwide box office from the last five best-picture recipients combined.

Thanks in part to the organic "[*Barbenheimer*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/30/business/barbie-oppenheimer-box-office-movies/index.html)" hoopla that greeted their premieres in July, Nolan's cerebral film became an unlikely theatrical event, at a time when, despite their investment in streaming, major studios (and especially theater chains) desperately want to support and encourage the movie-going experience.

While the first part of "Dune" cleaned up with multiple Oscars in technical categories, the genres normally associated with blockbuster box-office returns this century - science fiction, comic books and action - have largely been denied invitations to the awards party.

"Oppenheimer" might be a blip or some kind of unicorn. More likely, it's that rare movie, like "Titanic," that successfully mixes historical elements and human drama with the cinematic qualities that can pack theaters.

Both the movie business and the television networks that broadcast award shows have undergone massive changes since "Titanic" director James Cameron proclaimed himself "the king of the world" at the Oscars, but they still cling to those commercial aims.

Whether the Oscars can generate greater enthusiasm for what now looks like a coronation remains to be seen, but the hope springs eternal. And in terms of fusing awards prestige and audience appeal leave it to "Oppenheimer," again, to have found that elusive formula.

Analysis by Brian Lowry, CNN

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**Load-Date:** February 26, 2024

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