

The bleak Hollywood masterpiece that attacked 'fake news' | BBC Culture

By Mark Allison

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In January 1925, experienced cave explorer Floyd Collins became trapped 55ft (16.7m) underground in Kentucky. William Miller, a reporter from the local Louisville Courier-Journal, was one of the first journalists on the scene, and his coverage of the rescue effort quickly transformed a rural tragedy into a nationwide media sensation. Taking advantage of his small stature, Miller squeezed into the unstable cavern to personally deliver supplies and even pray with the victim. This unrivalled access was the defining feature of his lurid first-hand reports, which were printed and broadcast across the country. "Death holds no terror for Floyd Collins, he told me tonight, more than 115 hours after he was trapped," one such dispatch read. "As I placed a bottle of milk to his lips, he said, 'I believe I would go to heaven.'"

The Courier-Journal was not shy in framing their reporter at the centre of the story; "CJ MAN LEADS 3 RESCUE ATTEMPTS" ran the front page of one edition. This hair-raising spectacle did not have a happy ending – Collins had already been dead for three days by the time a rescue shaft broke through – but Miller's intrepid reportage nevertheless scored a Pulitzer Prize.

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