

Bill Forsyth, Andrea Burchill,
Sara Walker, Marilynne Robinson



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REVIEWS CONTAIN PLOT SPOILERS.

HOUSEKEEPING

by David Archibald 2017

*H*ousekeeping, Bill Forsyth's fifth feature film, opens with a static long shot of a north-western American plain: on the lower part of the screen, foot-long, green- and straw-coloured blades of grass dance gently in the wind, their natural hues contrasting sharply with multifarious shades of blue-grey, stratus clouds dominating the sky above. As the camera pans right over the uncultivated landscape, a thin layer of slate-grey cloud drifts imperceptibly across the top of the screen, portentously. Below the clouds we see a house dug into the earth, its roof level with the horizon. An off-screen voice, that of the narrator, Ruth, who will steer us through this tale, informs us that the homestead once belonged to her grandpa. She talks animatedly and somewhat quizzically of his boyhood fascination with sketching mountains, and of his untimely demise when a train he was journeying in careered off a bridge in the dark of night and plunged into Fingerbone Lake with another two hundred or so poor souls.

This expansive body of water will be returned to continually throughout *Housekeeping's* 116 minutes, and will come to dominate, even haunt, the film and its central characters, Ruth (Sara Walker), her sister, Lucille (Andrea Burchill), and their unorthodox Aunt Sylvie (Christine Lahti). Trains also are a recurring feature, offering up a potential means of escape from the claustrophobic experience of small-town 1950s American life. Yet, as the film progresses, also presenting a possible route to a darker conclusion, one which would mirror that of Ruth's ill-fated ancestor.

Before directing *Housekeeping*, Forsyth's work had been based in Scotland. His fictional directorial debut, *That Sinking Feeling* (1979), was a darkly comic account of the lives of a group of unemployed Glaswegian youngsters involved in petty but victimless crime. Pulled together on a budget of £5000, its critical success led to bigger budgets, and wider acclaim, with *Gregory's Girl* (1981), *Local Hero* (1983) and *Comfort and Joy* (1984).

There are comparisons to be made between *Housekeeping* and Forsyth's previous features, the landscapes of which range, primarily, from Scotland's deprived, urban central belt to the perhaps more cinematic Highlands and Islands. I'm drawn, however, to the connection with a short promotional documentary, *Islands of the West* (1972), produced by Tree Films, the company Forsyth co-founded and with which he honed his skills as a filmmaker throughout the seventies. Shot in the Outer Hebrides in the north west of Scotland, as with *Housekeeping*, water is a dominant factor in human life, and takes on something of a spiritual, magical quality. This sense of an engagement with the otherworldly, and with the fringes of fantasy, is one of the key features which marks Forsyth's work and separates it out from a strictly realist cinematic style.

It was, however, the commercial success of his early Scottish-based features which enabled Forsyth's transatlantic move, and led to his first

venture with Columbia Pictures. In adapting Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, which was first published in 1980 and awarded the PEN/Hemingway Award for best debut novel (as well as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), the director has stated that he was not attracted primarily by the prospect of working in the US, but by the rich quality of the source material. Indeed, Forsyth has repeatedly and rather modestly described the film as a promotional video for Robinson's book. It is, of course, much more than that. Perhaps most obviously, cinema adds spectacle: the mountains which attracted her grandfather, the lake which consumed him – and as it transpires, her mother, Helen (Margot Pinvidic) – the snow-topped trees, the surrounding skies and so on are all conjured before our eyes. Although shot in British Columbia, Canada, the cinematography provides a rich visual quality which can only be imagined in literature.

Both film and novel, though, repeatedly foreground the fallibility of memory. As Ruth puts it, 'we often fought over the details'. The sisters,



for instance, argue over the colour of their free-spirited mother's hair, and of the car, which she drives over a cliff and into Fingerbone Lake in the film's opening ten minutes. While the novel leaves the reader with the power to decide on who to side with in these teenage squabbles, at first blush at least, cinema's visual qualities seems to ensure that it takes sides. Although, given that the film is narrated by Ruth, are the images a reliable account of these increasingly troubling events? Or are they simply the subjective imaginings of the adolescent, female narrator?

If Forsyth's previous films often focused on the fragilities of adolescent masculinity, *Housekeeping* is a film about women. Indeed the film's top six credits are all afforded to women, the sisters, their mother, Sylvie, Aunt Lily (Anne Pitoniak) and Aunt Nona (Barbara Reese). The brevity of her grandpa's appearance is indicative of the relative absence of men, in the film and in the family's story. For instance, we quickly learn that the sisters hear little of their dad: when Ruth poses the rhetorical question, 'Where was our father?' she follows up with, 'Nobody even mentioned him'. Instead, the girls' unorthodox coming-of-age story, by turns trivial and traumatic, is dominated by women, not least the central character of Aunt Sylvie. Aunt Sylvie sleeps on park benches, she rides freight trains, she steals rowing boats. Aunt Sylvie seems to drift as aimlessly through life as the slate-grey clouds from the film's opening scene. *Housekeeping*, however, is not her forte. As the family home becomes over-run with the newspapers and used food tins she collects, an unexpected thaw submerges the house in two feet of water. It places this newly-formed family unit, literally and metaphorically, in deep water and forewarns of the future threat which water may hold. The sisters gradually drift apart: Lucille, increasingly embarrassed by her aunt's actions, rebels against the somewhat masculine traits Sylvie represents, preferring instead to make connections, suitably enough, with her Home Economics teacher. Ruth, though, gravitates further towards Sylvie, acting out similar idiosyncratic behavior, beginning to walk like her, and, as the film progresses, quite

literally wearing her clothes. It is too much for smalltown America to bear, and the pair's plight looks increasingly fragile after Sylvie is judged to be a maladjusted matriarch and a danger to her neice by Fingerbone's self-appointed and small-minded keepers of morality.

Like all his previous films, *Housekeeping* is a film about outsiders. Forsyth's characters often float free from the mainstream: not overt political rebels but likeable, charming souls who reject mainstream mores. Here though is the suggestion that mental health is a driver. The ambiguous nature of the film's conclusion ensures that we're left unclear as to the consequences of the seemingly erratic life choices of Sylvie and, increasingly, Ruth.

As the characters move off into an uncertain future we're also left with an exquisite, if enigmatic, static long take closing shot which returns us to lakes and to trains. If trains signify the manufactured, time-bound inventions of modernity, water represents the seemingly natural, eternal quality of the world. But if we read the closing scene as one which will end tragically, then rather than the natural and the human-made co-existing in harmony, the film suggests that the latter is likely to conquer the former. The conclusion, though, however we interpret it, is emblematic of an extremely accomplished, continuously subtle, film which, for a variety of reasons, has remained somewhat neglected in contemporary film culture.

Robinson proceeded to win the Pulitzer-Prize for her second novel, *Gilead*, which was published in 2004. Forsyth's career trajectory, however, took a different turn. *Housekeeping* was the first of Forsyth's three North American films and received a warm critical response on its release in 1987. He followed with *Breaking In* (1989) and *Being Human* (1994), with the latter receiving at best mixed reviews but becoming something of a spectacular commercial failure. Forsyth returned to Scotland to pick up

past threads with *Gregory's Two Girls* (1999), a more overtly political film which never caught the imagination of critics or publics in the manner of his early Scottish films. His early work, produced when a Scottish film industry was virtually non-existent, has ensured that the director himself is something of a national hero in Scotland. But the manner in which film culture is often divided along national lines has meant that his US-set films have remained relatively under-examined critically and have never been widely available. This release, then, is part of the valuable process of raising awareness of Forsyth's lesser-known films.

In recent years there have been occasional press reports on possible new Forsyth projects, but nothing has yet come to fruition. Now in his 70th year, is it time to end the nigh-on two decades of speculation over whether he will direct another film? Perhaps it is. Although it would be in keeping with the behaviour of the idiosyncratic characters so expertly drawn in his films if Forsyth was to confound expectations and pull the unexpected out of the hat. ●

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HOUSEKEEPING

Production Report

by John Pym 1987

In this report for *Sight & Sound* magazine, John Pym spoke to Bill Forsyth about the film's turbulent production and subsequent reception.

When Diane Keaton withdrew as the lead in Bill Forsyth's new film *Housekeeping*, the backers Cannon¹ rapidly followed suit. The sets were built, the crew in place, Forsyth turned to his friend David Puttnam, then on the point of taking control at Columbia.² Puttnam had earlier turned down the project – Forsyth's own adaptation of Marilynne Robinson's novel about two orphaned sisters and their divergent paths, set in the 1950s and 60s in a lakeside community in the American Northwest – but now he changed his mind. Why? 'This was not really a Columbia picture,' Forsyth said, 'but we had worked together and he agreed to back it on the understanding that I would make it for a small sum, the budget was then \$5m (it rose to \$5.4m), and that I would direct a more straightforwardly commercial film for him at some unspecified future date. Of course, I agreed, but nothing was put in writing, and when he arrived at Columbia this was the first project to be given the go-ahead, and it went ahead very quickly. There was no red tape.'