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February 2002

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# The Life of a Libertine

Kate Winslet and Judy Dench bring to the screen Iris Murdoch, the UK's famed and feisty novelist.

by Candace Moore

In Richard Eyre's stunning new film about Iris Murdoch, one of England's most lovable and eccentric thinkers, the young Iris (Kate Winslet) refers to language as "a machine for making falsehoods." It's a necessary machine, however; the film triumphs in showing how, for the über-articulate novelist, slowly surrendering her speech to Alzheimer's disease more than hurts, it *defiles* Murdoch. Losing words becomes tantamount to losing her fingerholds on a cliff.

With all of the riggings of a last-minute Oscar contender, this BBC co-production will have movie-viewers

genuinely weeping near its middle and face-blotting until the last credits roll. *Iris* is saved from maudlin

formulas, though, by a storyline based upon husband John Bayley's memoirs that moves captivantly through non-linear flashbacks. Murdoch's past and her present are interwoven as fluidly as two halves of a dream.

Self-described as a "poetically fervid, largely enthusiastic, and essentially historical soul," Murdoch lived the essence of the bohemian life, experimenting with casual sex (with both genders), nonmonogamy, Paris *boites*, the Communist Party, various religions, and lots of gin. A rigidly astute reader of the minds of her time—Sartre, de Beauvoir, Wittgenstein—and a brilliant lecturer, Murdoch wrote much regarding love, sexuality, freedom, and the duality of good and evil. (A new biography by friend Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, coincides with the release of the film and contributes further insight.)

This film offers agile, honest-ringing character interpretations by a top-shelf cast. From Murdoch's romantic wheelings around Oxford in the 1950s to her cold, coming-apart-at-the-seams in the 1990s, Murdoch finally finds herself isolated in a disaster of an apartment with cherub-faced, bumbly love Bayley (Jim Broadbent from *Moulin Rouge*). As the aging Dame Murdoch, academy favorite Judi Dench renders a fully

believable intellectual giantess who must succumb to a wicked aphasia. She appears at turns hardheaded, tender, dignified, juvenile, pissed-off, sparkling, and ultimately perplexed with her fate. Dench, a dame herself, is accustomed to playing fiery women exquisitely. With one Oscar in her pocket for just a few on-screen minutes as Queen Elizabeth in *Shakespeare in Love*, two further nods (one of them for a superb rendering of Queen Victoria in *Mrs. Brown*), and passion for Murdoch's work, Dench seems made for the part.

Two-time Oscar nominee Kate Winslet (*Titanic*) was less familiar with Murdoch's legacy, but the svelte beauty jumped into the part: "When Iris Murdoch was young she was a fiercely intellectual, deeply passionate, slightly wild, bisexual woman, and I just thought, 'What a challenge!'"

*Iris* documents Murdoch's well-established love of women with flirtatious candor. Although the movie centers on the writer's love affair and forty-

plus-year marriage to Bayley, the movie makes plain Murdoch's insistence on loving freely. Perhaps as research, and partially just for fun, Iris knew many people intimately. She once declared that happiness was "to be utterly absorbed in at least six other human beings." In one tantalizing scene Winslet kisses a dyke in a café, just as young Bayley arrives. When, taken aback, he asks if she goes to bed with women, she



Winslet goes both ways for the sake of philosophy in *Iris*.

replies "You mean lesbians?" with a rich, tell-all smile.

A witty, sad, and warm tale of a woman who lived exactly as she pleased and thought at the highest standards, *Iris* belongs among *Cleopatra*, *A Lion in Winter*, and *Isadora* as a historically based, female-driven classic. Grade: **A**

Candace Moore, co-editor of the small press *Runcible Spoon*, lives in L.A.

# Objects No More

Rah-rah girls go for blood in today's videos.

by Candace Moore

**Cheerleaders**—once celluloid's ditzy victims to chainsaw massacre or *Porky's* raunch—have been kicking ass and taking names on film lately. The most

## Sugar and Spice

Francine McDougall  
New Line, 2001

recent (if less skillful) example is *Sugar and Spice*: Five Lincoln High cheerleaders rally financial support for pregnant pom-pom queen Diane (Marley Shelton) by sticking up a Midwest bank. When not gossiping and refreshing makeup in their girl-skivvies, this giggling gaggle dresses up in betty-doll rubber masks, hoists semi-automatics, and traipses into the supermarket branch to commit armed robbery. Mena Suvari adds some cheek as the cheer-rebel. Mostly glossy, zany fluff, this flick contains some squeamish, offensive material in a jailhouse—the happy-go-lucky cheerleaders go to pre-research the heist with female cons, most of whom are portrayed as slobbering dykes. Grade **C+**



Everything Vice: *Sugar's* line up

## Bring It On (Universal, 2000)

Torrance (Kirsten Dunst) and Missy (Eliza Dushku) represent the new feminist cheerleaders: hot, headstrong, and in command of their own destinies. Peyton Reed's very funny, cheesy comedy follows five-time cheer champs, the Rancho Carne Toros, as their suburban captain and her star tumbler discover their winning routines are plagiarized from the inner-city East Compton Clovers. *Bring It On's* draw is Dushku (Faith on *Buffy*), all luscious legs and toned abs. This punk, sarcastic tomboy is bummed when chipper Torr prefers flirting with a guy at a sleepover. Grade: **B+**

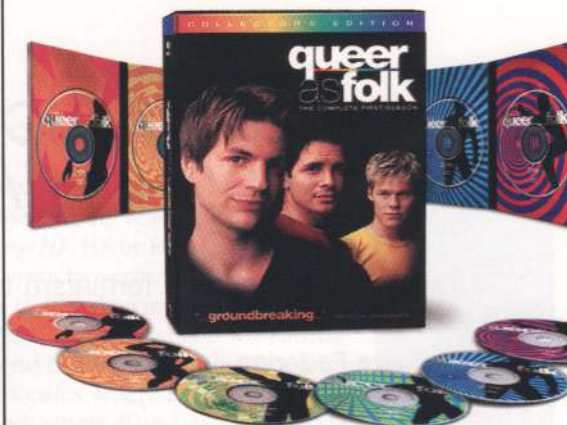
## The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom (HBO Video, 1993)

Holly Hunter's exquisitely misguided Wanda Holloway is accused of soliciting a hitman to slaughter her daughter's cheerleading rival, so that little Shanna might make the junior high team. Based on a true story, this made-for-TV movie is hard not to snore to, despite Hunter's precise portrayal of a finger-nails-on-a-chalkboard-type Texan wife and mother, and fine supporting work by Swoosie Kurtz and Beau Bridges. Mrs. Holloway's obsessive-compulsion over her daughter's back handsprings truly puts the fear in cheer. Grade: **B-**

## Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Fox Video, 1992)

The genius that devised the mythos of TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, started with a much less inspired movie version. Consider this camp flick the flippant outline of the meaty, witty series (now in its sixth season on UPN). This spoof on horror flicks features a sexpot blonde walking down a dark alley with an unconventional punchline: she bludgeons the monster in the shadows to bits. Vapid cheerleader Buffy (Kristy Swanson), a one-dimensional airbrain, happens to be the "chosen one," and thus innately feisty with stakes. Paul Reubens as a snaggle-toothed vamp and Luke Perry as a slacker love interest are slightly more entertaining. Grade: **B-**

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## Some Sex Sells

In a recent episode of *Queer As Folk*, the randy ad exec Brian recommended to his teenage lover that he offer condoms to encourage attendance at the inaugural meeting of his high school's Gay-Straight Alliance. "Because," opined Brian, correctly if not originally, "sex sells."

I had to laugh because, as he spoke, Brian lay buck naked with the buff Justin on a chic platform bed, fully precoital. It was as if the show, too, was commenting on the secrets of its own success.

I also laughed because Brian betrayed, as is usual for his character, a complete dismissal of lesbian experience. He's right: sex sells when it's by, for, and about men. But when it's lesbian sex, real lesbian sex, you and I know that most people regard it with either misunderstanding ("but what do two women *do* together?"), misrepresentation (e.g., those long, painted fingernails in *Hustler*), or complete disavowal ("We don't need laws against *that*," Queen Victoria is said to have insisted. "Women would never do

such a thing!"). I'm glad to see that *Queer As Folk* has featured some steamy scenes with Lindsay and Mel. But if lesbian sex really sold, we'd be seeing more of it in popular culture. Lots more.

I was further convinced of the ignorance and disempowerment that surrounds lesbian sex when we conducted our extensive lesbian sex survey, the results of which our dedicated intern Janine Sutherlin assembled for you on page twenty-two. After we distributed the survey last spring, we were *deluged* with responses—four or five times the amount we got when we asked about

your demographics or our editorial. The huge pile of responses symbolized, to me, the enormous desire you feel to speak about your sex lives, a desire unsatisfied by our culture's disinterest in—or outright hostility toward—our sexualities. It was as if no one had ever officially asked you before *Girlfriends*, and you were waiting to make a statement.

Make sure to read, too, K Kaufmann's report on lesbians who do pornos for other dykes: who are they? How are they different from your regular porn star? Our special Sex Issue also features Rebecca Chalker, author of *The Clitoral Truth*, on the chilling ignorance in the OB-GYN world about women's sexual functioning. For fun, don't miss Diana Cage's quiz, or you won't know whether your sexual totem is a tiger or a cold fish. Happy hunting.



The stack of sex surveys felt like it was taller than me and intern Janine Sutherlin.

Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief

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Girlfriends Magazine  
Volume 8, Issue 08

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publisher of *Girlfriends*,  
*On Our Backs*, and  
*Inside Pride* guides.  
3415 Cesar Chavez, Ste. 101  
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above address, or e-mail to  
editorial@girlfriendsmag.com.  
Obtain writer's guidelines from  
[www.girlfriendsmag.com](http://www.girlfriendsmag.com).

Girlfriends (ISSN 1075-8875)  
is published monthly by  
H.A.F. Enterprises,  
3415 Cesar Chavez, Ste. 101,  
San Francisco, CA 94110.  
One-year subscriptions are \$29.95  
(Canadian subscribers add \$10;  
other foreign subscribers add \$15).  
Periodicals Postage Paid at  
San Francisco and at additional  
mailing offices. POSTMASTER:  
Send address changes to:  
Girlfriends, PO Box 500  
Missouri City, TX 77459-9904.

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