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Murder on Her Mind

Women kiss and kill in new flicks.

by Candace Moore

Historically, when women

kill, they usually kill those closest to them—lovers, children, spouses, or family members. Two recent murder mysteries, *The Weight of Water* and *8 Women*, despite their decidedly different temperatures (*Women's* bright heat vs. *Weight's* seeping chill), both explore the intimate motives of the femme fatale.

Director Kathryn Bigelow's thriller version of Anita Shreve's best-selling novel *The Weight of Water* weaves dual plots set more than a hundred years apart. In 1873, two women are

butchered with an axe (in brutally shot, dark-lensed reenactments) on Smuttynose Island. The lone witness to the attacks, Norwegian settler Maren Hontvedt

chopping firewood, carved up her own sister and sister-in-law.

Polley's portrayal of Maren, an unfulfilled housewife who harbors incestuous cravings for her brother—and by extension, his young bride—is nothing short of stunning. Polley's subtle expressions (as Maren) opiate the viewer into sympathizing for the killer. While topless and giving over to the caresses of her brother's wife, Maren makes miniature squeals of pain because she is so rarely touched lovingly, it hurts. She rolls over in bed and kisses her sister-in-law tenderly, hours before she cuts into her face.

Unlike most adaptations, Bigelow's is nearly as mature as its literary predecessor. The dialogue is sparse but punches. Bigelow works gesturally, letting the haunting, icy scenery evoke the characters' emotional landscapes, and slowly freeze to the bone.

8 Women, the riotous French import from auteur François Ozon (*Water Drops on Burning Rocks*) treats the "female killer" with much more levity. Ozon pays tribute to Jacques Demy's frou-frou mod-musicals of the sixties, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, by setting this comic whodunit in a Technicolor-saturated countryhouse inhabited by peculiar, designer-clad girls who break into chipper songs of love and longing. Catherine Deneuve, still a walking advertisement for good face cream, is accompanied by a veritable bird collection of France's most versatile acting belles, with a few ingénues thrown in for good measure. Danielle Darrieux, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Béart, Fanny Ardant,

Virginie Ledoyen, Ludivine Sagnier, and Firmine Richard join Deneuve in playing the caddy ladies that bring flavor, mischief, and striptease to a wealthy businessman's manor. Only one morning Daddy's found with a dagger in his back, and all the gals are implicated.

But once the man of the house (who's been incidentally bedding his wife, maid, sister, and daughter) is dispatched, the party's on, and half the girls quickly admit to preferring, gee-whiz!, "the touch of a woman." Ozon seems to revel in lesbianism-as-



A bored housewife (above) and *8 Women* make marvelous mysteries.

shitck, tossing catfight-prone sister-in-laws Gaby (Deneuve) and Pierrette (Ardent) into the ring. Instead of duking it out, they find each other's moist lips irresistible and roll to the ground to dry-hump. *8 Women's* bawdy sugar trumps *Gosford Park* hands-down for a murder-mystery to guffaw at, and goes so gladly off subject, you forget someone's dead upstairs. Grades: *Weight of Water*: B+; *8 Women*: A.

Candace Moore is an editor at the UCLA Center for African American Studies.

The Weight of Water

dir. Kathryn Bigelow
Lions Gate Films, 105 min.

8 Women

dir. François Ozon
Focus Features, 103 min.

(lovely Sarah Polley), claims she hid, barely escaping the blade of the former boarder whom she identifies as the murderer. In the present day, journalistic photographer Jean (Catherine McCormack) re-investigates the slayings for an article while yachting around the eerie isle with her husband Thomas, a prize-winning poet turned boozehound (which Sean Penn renders to a jaded tee), her brother-in-law Rich (Josh Lucas), and Rich's juicy new lover (Elizabeth Hurley). As Jean delves into court documents, she becomes convinced that the man hung for the nineteenth century crime was falsely convicted. Based on Thomas' musing that "using an axe requires intimacy," Jean comes to suspect that Maren, arms strong from

Married De Facto

These videos put a new spin on spinsters.

by Candace Moore

Victorian sweethearts Elna (Jane Adams) and Harriet (E. Katherine Kerr)

run a schoolhouse together deep in the Appalachian Mountains, teaching and living secretly as lovers. Elna's musicologist sister, Dr. Lily Penleric (Janet McTeer), visits and discovers the locals singing old English and

Irish ballads, passed down and isolated in the region for hundreds of years.

The professor soon stirs up the remote coal-mining town, lugging a phonographic device through the

woods to scientifically record the untouched love songs. This period piece by director Maggie Greenwald retraces the origins of American folk music while intelligently examining turn-of-the-century prejudices with a feminist eye. Grade: **A-**



Ladies find love in *Songcatcher's* Appalachia

Songcatcher

dir. Maggie Greenwald
Lions Gate Films, 112 min.

If These Walls Could Talk 2 (HBO, 2000)

The first of this TV special's three shorts is the clincher. While directors Coolidge ("1972") and Heche ("2000") offer fresh slices of lesbian love in historical context, Jane Anderson's "1961" is a heart-wringing and exquisitely rendered drama. Vanessa Redgrave portrays Edith Tree, a retired schoolteacher who's widowed when her life partner, Abby (Marian Seldes), falls off a ladder. For her, swallowing her grief is mixed with swallowing her tongue. The piece really reflects the myopia of the era, as hospital nurses treat Edith's loss as inconsequential and Abby's nephew inherits, and callously boxes up, the lovers' home of more than thirty years immediately after the funeral. Grade: **B+**

Gertrude Stein: When This You See, Remember Me (Meridian Video, 1970)

This documentary splices old footage of modernist writer Gertrude Stein, her lover Alice B. Toklas, and various members of their Parisian salon together with photographs, interviews, and Stein's prose read via voiceover or in song. Whereas 1987's biopic *Waiting for the Moon* concentrates on the give-and-take, collaborative love affair of the two longtime companions, this film renders Stein a roman-statured icon of egotistical brilliance, preoccupied by the men in her life (Matisse, Picasso, Hemingway). Meanwhile, Toklas is painted as the genius's snippy (and sidelined) housewife, cook, and keeper. Grade: **B**

Companions (Wolfe Video, 1999)

Seven lesbian shorts run the gamut from compelling to just plain weird, as they take on this shared theme. *Traveling Companion*, by first-time auteur Paula Goldberg, is the strongest of the set, exploring a travel writer's search for a stranger to accompany her to Italy after the death of her significant other. Set in L.A.'s famed dyke coffee haunt, Little Frida's, the cast includes *Sex and the City*'s Kristin Davis. Also notable are *The Dinner Party*, by *High Art* director Lisa Cholodenko; *Peppermills*, in which a noir gal amasses 257 pepper grinders, stolen to remember dates with metropolitan femmes; and *My Pretty Little Girlfriend*, wherein a lovers' quarrel over a cheeseburger results in bloodshed. Grade: **B-**

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Names I've Called My Wife

The night that Alice proposed marriage to me on a starlit bridge in Paris, she and I lay awake afterward in our hotel room, staring upward. It was uncharacteristic behavior for us at the time. We were six months into a whirlwind romance that sent us flying to Charles de Gaulle for a week of hedonism. When we slinked back at dawn, well, let's just say that the time we spent in bed was not wasted counting fleur de lis on the upholstered ceiling.

Finally, I rolled over.

"Alice, are we going to call each other *wife*?"

"I was just thinking about that. Of course we are."

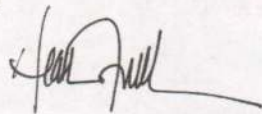
I looked at her for a while, screwing up my courage. Finally, I practiced out loud, "Wife. My wife." She followed suit. *Wife, wife, wife.*

Suddenly it was like the air had cleared and we could get back to our romance. "Wife, can we have oysters tonight at the Buci Market?" "Wife, let's see if we can find Gertrude's apartment on Rue de la Christine!" After four and half years being married, we still call each other wife all the time.

I don't know what was so scary about the *w*-word. I guess I felt that I didn't deserve the name; to say it to a person you're not allowed to call *wife* in a court of law, an accountant's office, a bank, or even most hospitals is to step out onto a verbal limb. I felt like I was committing symbolic theft. Now, I don't give a damn.

The *w*-word would feel so much less awkward if we had more pictures and stories about lesbian commitments. That's why activists, for example, have put pressure on newspapers that refuse to print queer ceremonies in their weddings pages (see News Analysis, page 12). It's also why each January *Girlfriends* publishes a bridal issue, complete with pictorials representing real lesbian ceremonies. This year we got some stunning submissions, some of which are below, some of which you can see in the features.

In our last readers' survey, more than half of you reported that you had or are planning to have a ceremony with your lover. But this issue isn't just for the brides. It's for anyone interested in the politics of gay marriage, relationship self-help, or how we name our partnerships. May you find it inspiring and empowering.



Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief



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