



MEMBER EXCLUSIVES

Housekeeping

Housekeeping

Director: Bill Forsyth

Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation

Producer: Robert F. Colesberry

Unit Production Manager: Robert Frederick

Production Co-ordinator: Elaine Fleming

Location Manager: Scott E. Mathers

Production office assistant: Lukia Czernin

Production Assistants: Franco Pante, Leah Semenov

Assistant Directors: Lee Knippelberg, David Webb, Richard Cowan

CASTING: Lynne Carrow, Margery Simkin

Extras casting: Nancy B. Black

Screenplay: Bill Forsyth

Based on the novel by: Marilynne Robinson

Director of Photography: Michael Coulter

Camera Operator: Tony Westman

Special effects co-ordinator: John Thomas

Editor: Michael Ellis

Production Designer: Adrienne Atkinson

Art Director: John Willett

Art Director (Alberta): John Stuart Blackie

Set Decorator: Jim Erickson

Set Dresser: Dave Ball

Oil Paintings: Stephen Campbell

Draughtsperson: Jon Ridington

Scenic Artist: Jon Ringbom

Costume Designer: Mary-Jane Reyner

Costume Supervisor: Linda Lee Langdon

Costumer: Abby Benjamin

Make-up Artists: Sandy Cooper, Maurice Parkhurst

Titles: Rank Post Production Services

Music: Michael Gibbs

Orchestrations: Paul Holderbaum

Music Recording: Alan Snelling

Sound Recording: Ralph Parker

Sound Re-recording: Hugh Strain, Clive Pendry

Sound Editor: Alan Bell

Dialogue editor: Richard Dunford

Foley Editor: Jacques Leroide

Stunts: Betty Thomas

Boat co-ordinator: John 7 Smith

Animal Trainer: Vince Nicholson

Cast:

Christine Lahti (*Sylvie Fisher*)

Sara Walker (*Ruth Stone*)

Andrea Burchill (*Lucille Stone*)

Anne Pitoniak (*Aunt Lily*)

Barbara Reese (*Aunt Nona*)

Margot Pinvidic (*Helen Stone*)

Bill Smillie (*sheriff*)

Wayne Robson (*principal*)

Betty Phillips (*Mrs Jardine*)

Karen Austin (*Mrs Paterson*)

Delores Drake (*Mrs Walker*)

Georgie Collins (*Sylvia Foster*)

Tonya Tanner (*young Ruth*)

Leah Penny (*young Lucille*)

Brian Linds (*deputy sheriff*)

Clayton W. Okell (*boy on cliff*)

Clay Barton (*boy on cliff*)

Erik Richardson (*Sandy*)

Bob Hughes (*Charlie*)

Sheila Paterson (*Bernice*)

Judi Pustil (*ice-cream lady*)

Ron Koukal (*gas-station attendant*)

Bob Elsdon (*grandmother's friend*)

Hans Farenholtz (*grandmother's friend*)

Enid Saunders (*Etta*)

Mike Daley, Gunter Voight (*hobos*)

Michael Davidoff (*fisherman*)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

A contemporary review

One of the most attractive features of Bill Forsyth's work is his refusal, at the risk of having his films dismissed as charming but trivial, to lend any sort of undue weight to the elements of myth and magic that lurk almost invisibly beneath the surface: the elaborately formalised ritual, for instance, whereby the unwitting Gregory of *Gregory's Girl* is guided to the girl destined to be his sleeping beauty, or the influence those Olympian goddesses Stella and Marina wield over the affairs of men in *Local Hero*. Purely on the level of charm, *Housekeeping* is as entrancing as anything Forsyth has done to date, constantly disconcerting as well as delighting with its slant-eyed view of reality. The children's mother sitting placidly eating strawberries on the roof of a car stranded in the middle of a field, then driving straight over a cliff after some small boys arrive to help push her out of a rut; the two little girls, fearful of Sylvie's wanderlust, stalking her to the railway waiting-room and observing her suspicious interest in time-tables that turns out to be merely an attempt to keep warm by the stove; the flood scenes in which the inundated house and its cupboards playfully reject any attempt at housekeeping; the oddly aesthetic effect achieved by Sylvie when, goaded by Lucille into doing something about the mess of old tin cans littering the parlour, she lovingly scrubs away the labels and arranges the cans in symmetrically gleaming pyramids on the tables.

But as a film about growing up, about the pressures to conform or otherwise offered by the adult world, *Housekeeping* always has in mind the wider horizons subtly evoked in Marilynne Robinson's novel: 'To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it... and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing – the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again'. The craving here is for a sense of family, expressed by the two little girls, left anxious and insecure as circumstances pass them indifferently from hand to hand, as they pore over collections of meaningless photographs, ask eager questions about their parents which elicit only vague generalities from even the most promising oracles. A wonderfully pregnant shot near the beginning shows the two little children alone at a window high in a tenement block, safely tethered but sowing panic among the neighbours watching below in anticipation of a fall. Quite apart from suggesting a possible reason for suicide in their mother's evident inability to cope, the image intimates that family ties, in themselves, are no guarantee of security.

Lucille, one might say, opts out in deliberately breaking away from her remnants of family, electing to seek stability with strangers who will help her to conform, to put down roots in a community which, ironically, is itself precariously shallow-rooted in that severe climatic conditions constantly subject it to obliteration by fire or flood. Ruth, the more placid of the two sisters, seemingly content to drift with the tide, similarly opts out, but in an entirely different sense. As the narrator whose voice is occasionally heard lending a historical perspective ('Grandfather was born in the plains', the film begins, 'He thought the whole world was like that'), Ruth's horizons are

Isobel Louie (*woman on train*)
Anthony Holland (*Mr Wallace*)
Elizabeth Strong (*Mrs Dickson*)
Juli Bailey (*Georgette*)
Tiffany Ward (*Marie*)
Jeanette Grittani (*Miss Royce*)
Andrian Naqvi (*grandpa as a young boy*)
USA 1987
116 mins

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defined by what she chooses to remember. So her narrative begins with the mystery of grandfather, who lived in a house dug out of the ground (a wonderful glimpse shows its windows just able to peer like a mole from a hole), until he learned of the existence of mountains, obsessively began painting images of Mount Fuji, then came north in search of his dream.

Like him, Ruth wants to see, from an uninhibited perspective, and the vision of life she acquires is a strange mystic compound distilled from her perception of two contradictory elements. On the one hand, the permanent presence of her grandfather, who died in a mysterious accident nobody saw, when a train crashed from the trestle bridge and through the ice to disappear into the lake below: the most spectacular disaster in Fingerbone's history, a significant moment dredged out of memory each year when the lake freezes over. On the other, the permanent transience of Aunt Sylvie, who shows neither signs of ever leaving Fingerbone, nor of ever becoming part of it. As their relationship matures, Sylvie and Ruth begin, almost unaware of what is happening, to breathe new life into lost memories, with the dead Helen resurrected as Ruth for Sylvie, and as Sylvie for Ruth.

'She looks so sad', one of the townswomen anxiously remarks of Ruth when they arrive on their mission to do good by taking her under care. 'Well, she is sad', Sylvie explains, 'That's how it is with family. You feel them the most when they're gone'. The moment serves not only to bring Ruth's viewpoint into focus for the first time in the film, it also underpins the paradox whereby Sylvie and Ruth, seemingly leaving everything behind when they burn the house and walk away from Fingerbone, in fact take it all with them. The novel makes the point easier to grasp by dropping in an explanatory perception from Ruth: 'Sylvie, I know, felt the life of perished things'. But the same perception is implicit throughout the film: in Sylvie's squirrelling away of empty cans and old newspapers; in Ruth's distress when Lucille impatiently shakes out and crushes the wild flowers found pressed, each one in its proper place, between the pages of a dictionary; above all, in the expedition Sylvie leads into the forest to show Ruth the abandoned cottage glittering like a fairy palace under its rime of frost, urging her not to frighten away the children, descendants of the sometime and possibly mythical settlers of Fingerbone's early days, whose presence they sense but never actually see.

Ultimately, what Sylvie demonstrates to Ruth through her daydreaming absorption in mysteries that no one else finds remarkable, and equally pertinently through her endless fascination with transients met in railway stations or here and there on her wanderings, is that since all life is transient it can only be recaptured through transience. Walking precariously away from Fingerbone across the trestle bridge beneath which grandfather still lies, hopeful of making it to the other side before a train comes along, leaving behind a regret for Lucille's defection, Sylvie and Ruth disappear into the night. A defeat, in a sense, echoed as Ruth's voice is heard murmuring, 'She always does that. She wanders away'. Yet at the same time a triumph in that for Ruth, one senses, the world is made whole again in this very act of departure to meet it. Elliptical and gently teasing, it's a marvellous movie, eminently faithful to Marilynne Robinson's novel, yet one hundred percent Forsyth in mood and manner.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1988