



Visions of an Earlier America

By Jan Lisa Huttner

SOMETHING OLD:

The Ballad of Little Jo

SOMETHING NEW:

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio

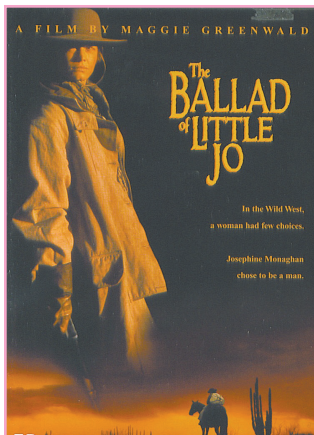
SOMETHING BORROWED:

Their Eyes Were Watching God

SOMETHING BLUE:

The Weight of Water

March brings another celebration of Women's History Month. Sometimes it's easy to forget what life was really like in an earlier America, but good movies can help us all remember.



With all the hoopla surrounding **Brokeback Mountain**, you might think that no one had ever challenged Western gender stereotypes before, but of course that's not true. In 1993, director/screenwriter Maggie Greenwald released **The Ballad of Little**

Jo. Greenwald's screenplay is based on the true story of Josephine Monaghan, a well-bred Boston girl who learns the hard way that she must conceal her true identity in order to survive in the 'Wild West.' As Little Jo, Josephine makes a life for herself in 19th Century mining camps and dusty towns, but it's a harsh and lonely existence.

Suzy Amis turns in a superlative performance as Jo, and her tough shell and rough, gangly looks are totally convincing. Amis has had lots of supporting roles, most notably playing Old Rose's granddaughter Lizzy in **Titanic**, but this is her only lead performance in a film, and she hits a home run.

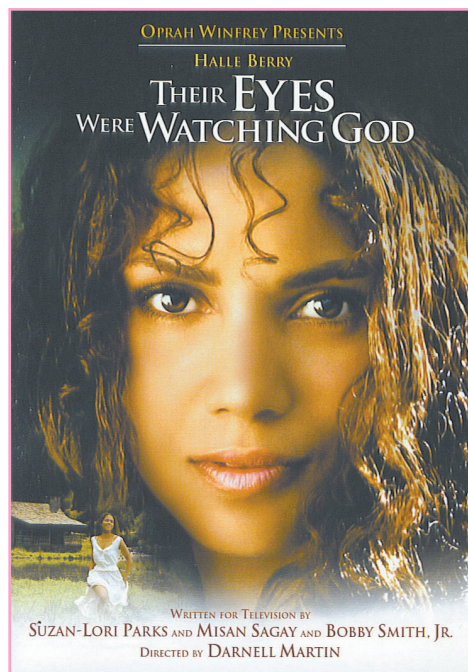


Julianne Moore also turns in a powerhouse performance in **The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio**. **Prize Winner** is based on Terry ("Tuff") Ryan's best-selling 2001 memoir, an Eisenhower-era haunted house story in which the mon-

sters are bankers, milkmen, priests, and policemen, while the damsel-in-distress is a tenacious Catholic housewife.

This could have been grim stuff, but filmmaker Jane Anderson (who won multiple awards in 1993 for **The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom**, and received multiple nominations in 2003 for the HBO movie **Normal**), takes her lead from Tuff. Evelyn Ryan, Tuff's mother, never gave in to the sorrows of her life, and Anderson understands that her job is to prove that Evelyn did, in fact, manage to keep it all together.

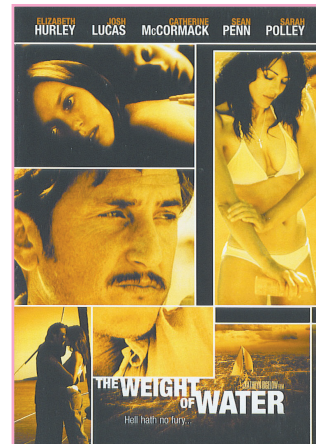
I frankly don't know why **Prize Winner** didn't do better at box office when it was released in movie theaters last Fall, but I predict it will be very popular when it hits the DVD shelves on March 14th. Evelyn Ryan was as uniquely American as many of the more famous men of her generation, and the heroic dimensions of "a life well lived" are clear for all to see.



Their Eyes Were Watching God, originally shown on ABC television last year and now available commercial-free on DVD, is based on the ground-breaking novel by Harlem Renaissance pioneer Zora Neale Hurston. The adaptation was released as part of the "Oprah Winfrey Presents" series, and Oprah, who can get anyone she wants, recruited Suzan-Lori Parks (the first African-American woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize for Drama) to write the screenplay.

Halle Berry stars as "Janie Crawford," a woman whose unquenchable thirst for life survives two

abysmal marriages and a doomed love affair. The climax takes place during a Florida hurricane circa 1920, making it all the more resonant in our post-Katrina world.



The Weight of Water, adapted by Alice Arlen from a novel by Anita Shreve, is really two films in one. The framing story is a pot-boiler about a photojournalist (Catherine McCormack), struggling to cope with her husband's alcoholism, who becomes obsessed with a lurid murder. The inner drama is the "real story" of the murder, committed on a barren island off the New England coast in 1873.

Sarah Polley is absolutely heart-breaking as "Maren Hontvedt," a young Scandinavian woman force to marry a much older man. When her husband John decides to emigrate to America, Maren has no choice but to make the best of it, but her loneliness and isolation drive her to the edge of despair. Director Kathryn Bigelow, best-known for macho flicks like **Point Break** and **K-19: The Widowmaker**, has assembled a team of excellent actors (including Josh Lucas and Sean Penn), but they all pale besides Polley; she's riveting.

Last August, just before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the punditocracy was fully absorbed in debating what the Iraqis should include in their new constitution. One clever gentleman on *Meet the Press*, Reuel Marc Gerecht of the American Enterprise Institute, went so far as to say: "...in the year 1900, for example, in the United States, it was a democracy then. In 1900, women did not have the right to vote. If Iraqis could develop a democracy that resembled America in the 1900s, I think we'd all be thrilled." Watch a couple of these films in honor of Women's History Month, and I doubt that YOU will agree.



Jan Lisa Huttner is the Managing Editor of **FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples**. A complete archive of Jan's reviews for the *Woman's Newspapers*TM can be found in the "Treasures" section of www.films42.com.