

Second Best

UK / US : 1994 : dir. Chris Menges : Warner Bros : 105 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
Chris Cleary Miles
 William Hurt; John Hurt; Keith Allen; Jane Horrocks; Prunella Scales; Alan Cumming;
 Jodhi May

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∞ M ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Chris Cleary Miles (unmarried) in sweeter mode during a lull between the tantrums.
 Source: indeterminate website

"A film of contemplative, understated power" – **Evening Standard**

"Splendid. Perfect. Richly realised. William Hurt gives one of his finest performances" – **Los Angeles Times**

"William Hurt proves again what an extraordinary actor he is" – **Film Review**

"This touching, poignant and remarkable film is an inspiration"

– **Kaleidoscope Radio Magazine**

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Pensive drama with Hurt excellent in an unusual role: an unmarried, terminally shy, 42-year old postmaster in a small Welsh town who attempts to adopt a deeply troubled 10-year old boy (Miles). Rated PG-13 *** "

The Sunday Times review:

"William Hurt in horn-rims and a Douglas Hurd haircut is an odd sight, and placing his accent would defy even Henry Higgins. David Cook adapted his novel and Chris Menges directed. Hurt is a village postmaster in the Welsh borders, a lonely middle-aged asexual bachelor who, nevertheless, feels the need to love another human being, and decides to adopt a 10-year old boy (Chris Cleary Miles).

The child is a hard case, the witness of his mother's suicide, and his father (Keith Allen) exerts an emotional hold on him from prison. How such a contrasted pair bond is the meat of the film, while the adoption process, obviously harder for a single male, is seen as an ordeal that includes social workers Jane Horrocks, aggressive in dress and manner, demanding the man to lay bare his soul to her, and Prunella Scales, in a curious

group exercise, hurling a rigid cushion at him several times with all her strength.

There is a worthiness to the film suggestive of a certain kind of television drama, but Hurt's performance is both self-effacing and moving."

"An unmarried postmaster tries to adopt a disturbed young boy."

[no listing in "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety International Film Guide 1995"]

Radio Times review:

"In this overlooked drama, William Hurt's restrained acting style is perfectly suited to his role as the lonely Welsh postmaster who decides to adopt a son. He brilliantly exposes the mixed emotions of a forty-something trying to break with the habits of a lifetime and start anew, and he's well supported by such familiar faces as John Hurt and Jane Horrocks. Contains violence. *** "

"Drama starring William Hurt as a lonely, middle-aged Welsh postmaster who wants to become a foster parent. *** "

Full review pending on further viewing. This is the kind of film I would like to praise more highly, running as it does so counter the prevailing winds of the "child abuse" crusade, but creditable as the performances are, it is seriously hampered by improbable dialogue – both the boy (James, whose father is in prison) and his would-be adopter are given lines straight from the vocabulary of a social work manual, articulating their respective angsts in all-too-correct phraseology. What's more, William Hurt's character is just a tad *too* conveniently fragile – submitting to the logic that a strong, assertive foster father (who does not allow the boy to trash his kitchenware) would probably be A Bad Thing.

Hurt's unresolved estrangement from his own father, his total lack of a social life (translated above as being "asexual"), and his emotional breakdowns in the presence of the boy, seem calculated to reassure audiences that the child will have the whip-hand in any ensuing relationship, and this will be A Good Thing. It's a thesis, clearly, I don't agree with. And I doubt any responsible psychologist would advise a man with Hurt's personality to latch himself onto an angry, hostile 10-year old still devoted to a father in prison. The seismic shocks of the experiment might impact more on the man than the boy.

What annoys me particularly is the godlike status bestowed today on the prospective adoptee. Whereas often in the past the child would be packed off to his or her new family with no more say in the matter than a mule traded between farmers, today the child arrives on the scene with the status of a V.I.P guest, requiring and expecting the red carpet treatment all the way. I don't doubt the film is a fair reflection of the status quo, but we're still entitled to observe that the pendulum may have swung way too far in the other direction.

"Single" men permitted by the state to adopt children are rare as hen's teeth, and even if Hurt has a rough time being "vetted", the central premise of the film still rings false. In truth he wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance. And while the proposition that some social workers are merely female nazis, pursuing a sexual political agenda through their work, will not strike everyone as surprising, it is certainly a surprise to see that perspective reinforced by a mainstream film. We do not see many movies cataloguing the social worker fiascos of the 1980s, such as the great "Satanic Abuse" fad. They were more often than not portrayed as the interfering bad guys in films of the 1930s, but have latterly undergone an image makeover and emerged as a morals police force essential for the Protection of the Vulnerable.

There's a midway sequence where man and boy go on a camping and fishing trip to consolidate their relationship – described to the boy by Hurt as "a honeymoon period". During the night James steps briefly outside their tent for a pee. When broadcast on BBC1 – 01/12/02 – this scene was electronically fogged in a very obvious manner to frustrate anyone who might be hovering over their video-recorder drooling. (Isn't it reassuring to know our license fees are being so usefully spent?) Moments before this however, James has injured

his own forehead deliberately and forced Hurt to give it “a really long kiss” to make it better, after which he demands “But do you *love* me?” Duly reassured on that point, he snuggles down on the man’s lap with a smile of gratification. To agonise about the one sequence and not the other is some measure of how the self-appointed guardians of public morality are chasing after their own tails in their neurotic obsession with paedophilia.

Around the same period a film for British television – “**GOODNIGHT MR TOM**” – dealt with very similar themes, but in a WW2 setting. Of the two it was the more accomplished, but “**SECOND BEST**” is still worthwhile, not least for William Hurt’s painfully understated performance, and as a valiant effort to implant the notion that so-called “unmarried” people can make every bit as suitable candidates for parenthood as many couples. The majority of hurt and angry kids in our children’s homes, after all, arrived there as casualties of traditional two-parent families, did they not?

Nothing else is known of Chris Cleary Miles.

See subject index under [ORPHANS / ADOPTION](#), **POLICE / SOCIAL WORKERS**, **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**, and under **DIRECTORS** for other work by Chris Menges