

## HOW TO MAKE AN AMERICAN QUILT 7 / 10

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### *Authentic-feeling story of keeping it real*

Novel by Whitney Otto

Screenplay by Jane Anderson

Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse

Winona Ryder ... Finn Dodd

Anne Bancroft ... Gladys Joe Cleary

Ellen Burstyn ... Hy Dodd

Kate Nelligan ... Constance Saunders

Alfre Woodard ... Marianna

Kate Capshaw ... Sally, Finn's Mother

Adam Baldwin ... Finn's Father

Dermot Mulroney ... Sam

Maya Angelou ... Anna

Lois Smith ... Sophia Darling Richards

Jean Simmons ... Em Reed

Denis Arndt ... James

Rip Torn ... Arthur Cleary

Jared Leto ... Beck

Melinda Dillon ... Mrs. Darling, Sophia's Mother

Samantha Mathis ... Young Sophia Darling Richards

Claire Danes ... Young Gladys Jo Cleary

Loren Dean ... Young Preston Richards

Richard Jenkins ... Howell Saunders

#### *Finn Dodd:*

*For as long as I can remember, my grandmother and her friends have been a part of a quilting bee.*

*I remember sitting under the quilt frame pretending that I was surrounded by a forest of friendly trees and that their stitches were messages from giants written across the sky.*

*I used to spend my summers with my grandmother and my great-aunt, who lived in Grasse, California.*

*My mother would dump me there when she took off with her latest boyfriend.*

*My parents' marriage didn't last very long.*

*They said they didn't love each other any more.*

*Or maybe they were just afraid that their relationship had become just like everyone else's.*

*They eventually parted as friends.*

*And I eventually stopped thinking it was all my fault.*

*The truth is it's no one's fault. Sometimes love simply dies.*

Well, first of all, check out the actors in this cast of the 1995 film—it was the nominated for the MTV "Best Kiss" award (Winona Ryder and Dermot Mulroney) and for the Screen Actors' Guild "Best Performance by a Cast" award. Almost all of them are recognizable stars from the past, with some Academy Award winners, or have since then made solid acting careers for themselves... and there are so many of them.

Winona Ryder was a huge presence in the major women's movies of the 90s, from *Mermaids* in 1990 to *Girl Interrupted* in 1999. And particularly like her role *Mermaids*, she gives us a moving portrayal of a woman's coming of age (more a girl's coming of age in *Mermaids*). In *Quilt*, at 26 Finn Dodd is no longer a girl, but she hasn't quite made up her mind to take the next step into conventional womanhood with marriage and, quite likely, children: her boyfriend Sam (Dermot Mulroney) has just proposed to her, she's in the middle of her third attempt at a master's thesis, and she doesn't quite know what she wants to do.

So she decides to spend the summer with her grandmother Hy (Ellen Burstyn) and grandaunt Gladys (Anne Bancroft), in a small town in central California, to work on her thesis and sort things out. In the back of her

mind, she feels the combined experience of the six or seven women in the quilt bee—who are engaged in a major project conceived by master quilter Anna (Maya Angelou)—will help her in some way make up her mind. In that setting she comes to understand the special part each of her grandmother's friends has taken in the grand quilt of life; they're happy to share with the young woman what they've been through and how it was for them as young women years ago.

Anna declares the theme of the quilt will be "Where Love Resides."

And the remainder of the movie more or less guides us through where love resides in each of these women's hearts. As in *Mermaids*, the Winona Ryder character provides a running narrative, as one might expect from a writer or other introspective agent—I believe both movies are based on semi-autobiographical novels—and her voiceovers are poignant, funny, and straightforward. I love the simplicity of the prose: check out the introductory narrative above. One wishes one could protect Finn, as one would a child, from the harshness and absolutism of the real world.

The delight of the movie lies in the several stories, including the focal story of Finn herself. And what I'm struck by is how the quilt is a perfect metaphor for human life as it makes its way through the generations, particularly how women serve as the thread and fabric of life. First, think of the arts involving sewing or threading—which you can look at as "connecting"—and how they're almost universally performed by women. (You can tell me the human genome has nothing to say about gender behavior, and you can also tell me pigs can fly.)

Watch *How to Make an American Quilt*, and see how the lives are reflected in the mosaic of the stitched images—how interesting and beautiful these images are. Watching a movie like this helps me to realize the natural wonder of women: I think of flowers and plants, growing things, all the creative arts that occur in natural settings... and who does such things? Who takes a moment to lend an esthetic touch to the daily grind, gives it some kind of purpose... if only to perpetuate the species in style? Guys typically aren't anywhere close to this level of biological sensitivity—and I'm not saying this to put down men, only there tends to be a different set of (hopefully complementary) equations we look to solve.

Well, I don't want to get too carried away here with the paralysis of analysis. But one of the main reasons I like high-quality chick flicks is that so many truly important issues are dealt with in a context of a whole different language of complexity and subtlety. So do I get women? Well, yes, I think I finally see what the broad (no pun) brush strokes are telling me after nearly 60 years... and this is an area ripe for massive discussion, especially in an early 21st century America needing to break its bands of the awful inhumanity[1] of corporate-state war and collectivism. But I can only appreciate, not share the experience.

Quilt is a fine effort, with only a strand or two out of place... maybe because of the "too many cooks" phenomenon.

[1] Kleptocon-induced.

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*How to Make an American Quilt | Winona Ryder | Woman's Coming of Age*