

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY _ (8 / 10)

1936 novel set in London is strangely modern

Screenplay by David Magee

Screenplay by Simon Beaufoy

Novel by Winifred Watson

Directed by Bharat Nalluri

Frances McDormand ... Miss Pettigrew

Amy Adams ... Delysia

Clare Clifford ... Margery

Lee Pace ... Michael

Ciarán Hinds ... Joe

Christina Cole ... Charlotte Warren

Tom Payne ... Phil

Delysia: *[during an air-raid drill] Guinevere, I'm scared!*

Guinevere Pettigrew: *It's just a drill, I'm sure it's just a drill.*

Delysia: *But it won't always be, will it? We're going to war, aren't we?*

Guinevere Pettigrew: *Yes we are. And that is why you must not waste a second of this precious life. Listen to me. Once I too had ambitions. Not your grand ones, simple ambitions. Marriage, children and a house of our own. He died, in the mud in France. A good, solid man. You would call him dull, no doubt, but he smiled whenever he saw me and we could've built a life on that. Your heart knows the truth, Delysia. Trust it.*

What a phrase, "... but he smiled whenever he saw me and we could have built a life on that." Uttered by Guinevere Pettigrew (Frances McDormand) to her strangely acquired mistress for a day, Delysia (Amy Adams), it comes toward the end of the movie in the context of an adoring piano player Michael (Lee Pace) proposing to Delysia that she accompany him to New York for song and marriage.

I know what some of you are thinking: "What a chick flick! O! Coffee Coaster guy has lost it now, he's contributing to the feminization of culture that's going to leave us hopelessly vulnerable to military attack from Canada and Mexico. Dogs and cats sleeping together. Virtual extinction of he-men everywhere and the end of the oh-so-successful machismo world as we know it." But just hang on to your barbecue tongs, guys, and think about all the wonderful works of fiction you read as you were growing up.

Okay, so you never read any books... and still don't. Never mind!

Seriously, Miss Pettigrew is a faithful rendition of a novel by Winifred Watson, a remarkable Englishwoman of the mid-20th century who wrote tender little testaments to the human spirit—particularly about the commoners she was one of. From the extras of the DVD, it's clear that the spirit most represented in Watson's works, particularly in the lead character of Miss Pettigrew, is her own. But what I'm trying to convey here is the sort of 'quiet beauty' that must surely flow through Watson's prose—I haven't yet had the pleasure of reading her novel—and the caring, faithful representation of her book in the 2008 film.

The book was written in the middle of the Great Depression and set in London's night club district. We're introduced to the proper, dowdy Guinevere on the morning of what looks like is going to be a very bad day: she's unfairly fired from her position as a governess, then a man on the street bumps into her, spilling and scattering her suitcase contents. She takes a short breather in a soup kitchen, and spills her plate when she surprises a woman making out with a guy on the sidewalk. Finally, the employment agency turns negative toward her, based on Guinevere's occasional mild displays of moral judgment of her employers.

Note: both the man who bumps into her and the woman making out on the sidewalk later appear as key characters, which I regard as a clever mechanism for tightening the plot; I wonder just how common such a writing gimmick was... especially considering that Winifred was not particularly schooled as a novelist.

Through some chance chicanery, Miss Pettigrew finds herself at the threshold of the luxurious flat where the beautiful young aspiring singer-actress Delysia is holding forth. Delysia is a woman enthralled with her

sexuality... and with men. She has three in tow—Nick, the nightclub owner who actually owns the flat (and pretends he owns her), Phil, the son of a producer with whom she's trying to sleep her way into a theatrical role, and Michael, the piano player who loves her (whom she tries to keep at bay because she sees no prosperity angle to him)—and, initially, you wonder if you're watching a French-opera farce.

In addition to the relationships that Delysia balances with the three men, she's friends with a lady fashion editor Margery (Clare Clifford) who has similar scruples... i.e., not too many. Margery is basically 'playing' an older established fashion designer Joe (Ciarán Hinds), who, affluent because of his acclaimed designs of women's undergarments, has an idealistic streak; he longs for an honesty in life .

So the sophisticated social climber Delysia is expecting a social secretary, and the inelegant, matter-of-fact Miss Pettigrew walks in the door; it's a case of mistaken identity at first sight, with many indirections and indiscretions to come... all in a 24-hour period, as it turns out. The perspective is from the women's side, but the men are drawn with humor and sympathy, too. Indeed, "humor and sympathy" is a good phrase for the sense of life of this author: she finds lightness and hope in the most mundane concerns of ordinary people trying to make do and get by.

Frances McDormand is terrific as Miss Pettigrew, getting more mileage from a facial expression or a double-take than many actors manage in elaborate sentences and histrionics. We are viewing Winifred Watson's London world through Guinevere's eyes, relishing almost like a Zen master the odd things that happen to her in the 'eternal present.' Throughout the movie—there is a depression going on, you know, and many people from all walks of life are facing hunger regularly—even during Guinevere's "life for a day" where she is surrounded by food, we see little morsels come within inches of her mouth only to be swept away like tumbleweeds. [There's a 'food' scene I'm not going to reveal, but it laugh-out-loud captures the small gratification of her situation.]

On the serious side, we really have to feel for all the women in a world that is so dominated by men and this foolish, contrived holocaust of war. These women realize their dependence, yet do not accept it as a law of nature. How they work around it, work out the equations of existence, with a measure of style is fascinating. The fear-factor is ever present:

Delysia: *Do you know what my name is, Guinevere?*

Guinevere Pettigrew: *I was under the impression it was Delysia Lafosse.*

Delysia: *Sarah Grubb. One of the Pittsburg Grubbs. My father is a steelworker. No one else in the world knows that apart from Michael. And he doesn't judge me.*

Guinevere Pettigrew: *No, he wouldn't.*

Delysia: *But you do.*

Guinevere Pettigrew: *Me? I certainly do not.*

Delysia: *Oh, you think you don't, but you do. For all the fancy apartments and fashion shows, do you know how close I am to having nothing? Every day I wake up and I think, if I make the wrong move, I could be out on that street with no clothes, no food, no job, and no friends. Just plain old Sarah Grubb again. Do you know what that's like?*

Winifred Watson, though, believes in happy endings... not to give anything away. Also, if this is a chick flick, we should make the most of it. Well worth the attention.

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Miss Pettigrew | *Frances McDormand* | *Winifred Watson* | *World War 2*