

The Films of Peter Weir

By Jonathan Rayner, New York: Continuum, 2004, 288 pages, paperback, US\$19.95. Reviewed by Andrew Mason in the **September 2005 issue.**

Those readers who are expecting a film history or handy taxonomy of Australian director Peter Weir's work will not find it in Jonathan Rayner's *The Films of Peter Weir* (Second Edition).

Rayner teaches Media Studies within the School of English at the University of Sheffield and released the first edition of this book in 1998. Rayner is also the author of *Contemporary Australian Cinema*. (2000)

Whilst overall Rayner's *The Films of Peter Weir* breaks Weir's body of work into groupings of years, within each discussion of a particular film Rayner is not restricted to a sequential or chronological approach. Nor does Rayner provide extensive insight into Weir's biography or draw conclusions about the experiential influences on his art. Instead Rayner provides a wide ranging critique of Weir's work and in discussing one film may leap to another, or others, produced years apart to make a comparative point. Rayner also discusses Weir's work in the context of other films of their day, for example, discussing the hallmarks of films such as *The Cars That Ate Paris* and *Homesdale* in opposition to the gregarious comedies of *Barry McKenzie* films or Miller's *Mad Max*. In pursuing this critique of Weir's films, Rayner demonstrates not only his interest in auteur theory by searching for themes and motifs in this large body of cinema, but also does some sterling work in terms of both genre analysis and in plotting the psychological aspects of character.

While Rayner covers a lot of ground in his engagement with Weir's films he uses this to demonstrate that Weir, whose work is both prolific and disparate, maintains a consistency in his films that speaks of a grand narrative or worldview. While examining Weir's short films and features from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to the Hollywood films, *Witness*, *Mosquito Coast*, *Green card* and *The Truman Show*, Rayner identifies themes such as repression and freedom, culture clashes and innocence.

Rayner's work is detailed and diverse, drawing upon a raft of film theory and many examples from Australian National Cinema and global Hollywood releases. This variety of films and film makers provide a counterpoint to the dissection of Weir. In some instances Rayner's text has lengthy descriptive passages, but this is needed for those who have not seen the film he discusses and also serves to bolster his investigation into the diversity of points drawn out for evidence. This is a book for scholarly readers, not one necessarily enjoyed by Hollywood gossip fans. Rayner poses his arguments and engages the reader's own critical skills in judging their worth. In doing this Rayner interweaves his points of reference from film history in demonstrating his familiarity with Weir's work. Rayner creates a detailed and unified approach to this important director and in his analysis of how Weir departs from the norms of Hollywood, places Weir almost as a happy aberration, a successful outsider in the film industry.

Citation

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- Peter Weir is, without doubt, one of the most important Australian film directors of all time. His films have had a major impact, both in terms of the Australian film industry (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Cars That Ate Paris*, and *Gallipoli*) and as the work of an innovative auteur working within the confines of the Hollywood system (*Witness*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Fearless*, and *The Truman Show*).

This fully revised and updated edition of Jonathan Rayner's acclaimed study takes an in-depth look at the career of a filmmaker who has, over the course of 30 years, put together a substantial and much-loved body of work. Rayner illustrates how Peter Weir brings a consistent vision to his films, no matter how disparate their subject matter - and how he uses his 'outsider' status in the American film industry to his advantage.