

DVD Select: This Potter spread a little magic, too

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Quickly now, before the other Potter takes over our every waking moment and large tracts of our subconscious, spend some time with the absurdly sweet and innocent "Miss Potter" (Weinstein/Genius, 3 stars).

And, yes, like the other Potter, this one is a bit magical. Our Potter is Beatrix, author of that petite little cautionary tale "Peter Rabbit," and scads of other tales that followed, all beautifully illustrated by Miss Potter herself.

'RENO 911!: MIAMI' - Reno sheriff's deputies try to blend in with the Miami Beach scene in the comedy 'Reno 911!: Miami.' CNS Photo courtesy of Glenn Watson. What child doesn't remember a teacher saying, at the end of the tiny tome, "Now boys and girls, be sure to listen to your parents so you don't end up like poor Peter - or worse!" Message: There are lots of Mr. McGregors out there - listen to your parents, they know - and you might be able to avoid the worst of the lot. And no mischief!

Ironic, because Beatrix Potter (Renee Zellweger) was very much at odds with her own mother about life and how it should be lived.

Potter grew up rather lonely during the height of the Victorian era, the eldest of two children of a social-climbing mother (Barbara Flynn) and a father (Bill Paterson) who would have preferred being an artist to a barrister. Beatrix poured much of her energy and imagination into her sketches of animals, which became characters, and then her closest friends. This was all fine as long as it didn't go anywhere, after all, a proper girl with intentions of marriage is well versed in the arts and culture.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

Alas, Beatrix couldn't bring herself to marry any of the fops and dilettantes that her mother introduced to her. She was quite resigned to settling down with her art and imaginary animal friends. For her day and class, yes, she was a bit radical.

Enter Norman Warne (Ewan McGregor) youngest son of an established publishing house who has been given Miss Potter's "Peter Rabbit" tidbit as a first venture for the firm. Expectations weren't high, except for those of Mr. Warne who made the book his life's work, and for Miss Potter, who was blessed with uncompromising and high standards.

The rest, as they say, is publishing history. Beatrix Potter got there long before J.K. Rowling and set the model for marketing of ancillary products - there were hundreds of items with the Peter Rabbit image impressed onto their surfaces.

Miss Potter became great friends with another spinster-in-training, Mr. Warne's sister, Millie (Emily Watson) and grew to deeply love Mr. Warne. Let's say no more than to note that Beatrix Potter's life, though charmed, was not without tragedy.

Beatrix Potter amassed a fortune and invested a lot of it in the purchasing and preservation of small family farms in what is known as England's Lake District. Upon her passing, thousands of acres of farmland, spared from avaricious developers, were given to the people of England. This is a gift which rivals in charm, beauty and simplicity her other gift to the children of the world - a moment's innocence when reading any of her numerous books.

Some folks might chafe at the sweetly innocent aura that surrounds "Miss Potter." Renee Zellweger's cheeks are so red that it looks like a mad sugar rush pressing through her pores. The relationship between Potter and Warne is so earnest and chaste that your teeth can indeed grind. But then, let yourself be carried back to their times - the late 1800s when things like passion and emotion and lust were either left to the underclasses or deeply repressed. Watching them build a relationship from a proper distance is like watching a delicate dance.

This is one of those rare movies in which you actually feel good about yourself at the end.

And Beatrix Potter? That girl had moxie, long before the Victorians had ever heard of the word.

You'll want to know more about Beatrix Patter at movie's end and you are in luck. The DVD offers a very nice documentary on her life and especially her role in preserving the English countryside. ALSO THIS WEEK

"Reno 911!: Miami - The Movie" (Fox, 1 star) Wow, I know this is supposed to be deliberately bad and, yes, I was recovering from the flu when I watched it. But ... where's the funny stuff? OK, falling into the fetid carcass of a whale while trying to push it off the beach was sort of funny. The rest? Painful. Even cameos from the likes of The Rock, Danny DeVito, Paul Rudd and Paul Reubens didn't help. Basically, the cast of the TV show gets to travel to Miami for a major law enforcement convention. That they have no hotel reservations nor tickets to the convention becomes a plus when every cop in town, including the entire Miami force, is locked up inside the convention center - a terrorist thing, don'tcha know. So, with only the Reno police department available to keep law and order, life in Miami is pretty much in the toilet.

It's not like there is any plot, or even a pretense. It's more like somebody comes up with a nude joke or a masturbation joke and it becomes a sketch, shot documentary-style. So, you laugh here or there, and begin wondering where this is all leading. When the word "nowhere" enters your mind, you shut off the player, move on and regain your life. It is that simple. Really. It is that simple.

"Close to Home" (Genius, 2 1/2 stars) Two women in the Israeli Army patrol the streets of Palestine together and discover under the stress of their assignment that they share more in common than they first thought. An army-buddy movie with two quite attractive and talented actresses. That's different. In Hebrew with English subtitles.

"Gray Matters" (Fox, 2 stars) In this romantic comedy, Tom Cavanagh and Heather Graham are brother and

sister, Sam and Gray. Super-tight. Share a loft downtown. Hang out together all the time. It had to happen, that day when Sam finds his perfect mate - the lovely Charlie (the lovely Bridget Moynahan). But, whoa, has Sam actually found the perfect mate for ... Gray? I think it's Pride Month - you do the math.

IT CAME FROM TV

"Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea," (Fox, Season 3, Vol. 1) Admiral Harriman Nelson and Cmdr. Lee Crane are back aboard the submarine Seaview in this Irwin Allen sci-fi/adventure series.

"Batfink" (Shout! Factory, 100 episodes) These five-minute animations are classic 1960s superhero shtick. Has wings of steel and super sonar - and a sidekick named Karate.

Also: Season 1 of "Silver Spoons"; season 2 of "Perry Mason"; and season 1 of "Picket Fences."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Al Pacino Collection" (Fox) contains four films either by, starring or about the actor Al Pacino - only one of

which you might have remotely heard of. But, and this is important, these are all special to Pacino himself. It is nice to share. In "Chinese Coffee" (2000) Pacino directs and stars in this Off-Off-Broadway play-turned-movie. Jerry Orbach and Susan Floyd are in the cast. "The Local Stigmatic" (1990) is just a 56-minute piece about two guys in a London pub who pummel an actor - but it has enough layered complexity for three films. The best-known of the lot is "Looking for Richard" (1996). While directing "Richard III" in New York, Pacino also directed a documentary on the creation of the production and the perspective of actors involved - and blends it all together into a fascinating film on theater. A fourth disc includes "Babelonia," an intimate look at Pacino.

Genius Products and the Weinstein Co. have established a new label to distribute and promote classic and contemporary martial arts films - Dragon Dynasty. Their first four titles are from the kung fu masters The Shaw Brothers collection: "Chamber of Shaolin," "King Boxer," "My Young Auntie" and "One-Armed Swordsman."

As if you don't have all the "Die Hard" movies on your shelf already ... Fox repackages the three Bruce Willis vehicles - just in time for the fourth, "Live Free or Die Hard" reaches theater screens. ("Dear God, don't make this be like Sylvester Stallone's 'Rocky' revival ... please!") Anyhow, Willis takes unimaginable abuse and then kicks butt until the bad guys are all dead or wish they were - that's the plot of all three: "Die Hard," "Die Hard 2: Die Harder" and "Die Hard With a Vengeance." The set contains a bonus disc with many, many more plays on the "die hard" title and some content.

Also out this week: The Don Bluth animation tale "The Secret of NIMH" (1982) ; pre-wedding jitters reign in "The Wood" (1999)

DVD Select: This Potter spread a little magic, too by Robert_J_Hawkins