

Heartland

USA | 1976 | 96 minutes

Credits

Director	Richard Pearce
Screenplay	Beth Ferris Bill Kittredge (additional scenes and dialogue) Elinore Stewart (letters)
Photography	Fred Murphy
Music	Charles Gross

Cast

Clyde Stewart	Rip Torn
Elinore Randall Stewart	Conchata Ferrell
Jack	Barry Primus
Jerrine	Megan Folsom

There are two very different ways of recalling the lives of the pioneers who settled America's frontiers and carried civilization westward. One way is to remember the terrible physical hardships that had their equivalents in the settlers' psychological dislocations and disorders. These were the things that Boynton Merrill Jr. recorded in his remarkable book "Jefferson's Nephews," about the decline and fall into poverty and madness of the members of one branch of the Lewis family when, in the early 19th century, they moved from Virginia into the Kentucky wilderness.

By far the more popular method is to recall the pluck and perseverance that overcame all obstacles and made America great. There's nothing wrong with this method, though it does tend to be sentimental, prompting us to grieve for an innocence that probably never was. It also gives rise to the sort of myth about "the American character" that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale celebrates five nights a week in a 90-second syndicated radio show (WOR-AM) sponsored by International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation. If I understand Dr. Peale correctly, the young men who save strangers from burning automobiles and the housewives who know how to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation at the supermarket are the direct descendants of Virginia Dare.

The nicest thing about "Heartland," a new, low-budget, uncommonly beautiful film written by Beth Ferris and directed by Richard Pearce, is that even though it celebrates

the people of the American frontier, with emphasis on the women, it largely avoids sentimentality. The screenplay, based on the real-life story of Elinore Randall Stewart, is about an impoverished Denver widow who, in 1910, moves from the comparative ease of the city to the wilds of Burntfork, Wyo., to become the housekeeper for a taciturn Scottish rancher named Stewart. With her small daughter from her first marriage, and with Stewart, whom she eventually married, Mrs. Stewart survived just about everything the frontier could throw at her, including the death of a newly born baby and the loss of most of the ranch's livestock, as well as the sort of weather in which someone might freeze running from the house to the barn.

Though Mr. Pearce has made documentaries and features for television and was the cameraman for Peter Davis's Oscar-winning "Hearts and Minds," this is his first theatrical feature as a director. It is also Miss Ferris's first theatrical screen credit as a writer. Together they have made an unusually accomplished work.

"Heartland," which was shot entirely in Montana under what must have been difficult circumstances, also has the benefit of three remarkable performances — by Rip Torn, as the dour rancher, a man whose humor, though buried, is as real as his courage; by Conchata Ferrell, as the no-nonsense housekeeper, a big, hearty woman who is strong without being tough, and by young Megan Folsom, as her small daughter, reminiscent of Peggy Ann Garner in "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." Barry Primus is also very good as the ranch's hired hand, and Lilia Skala brings a kind of highly theatrical energy to her role as the local midwife. I just wish she hadn't plucked her eyebrows.

Because the seasons are as important as anything that happens in them, the photography by Fred Murphy is very much a part of the film's success. The movie seems to have been shot mostly in the drained colors that Alan Pakula wanted for his "Comes A Horseman," though what we saw on the screen was often so dark we couldn't tell what was going on. Mr. Murphy seems to have achieved his effects with high color contrasts that are never too bright and that have the texture of early black-and-white photography.



"Heartland" doesn't entirely avoid the clichés of the genre. It may be time to declare a moratorium on the slaughter of pigs on camera to indicate the fundamental laws that rule the farm. Also, there must be ways to celebrate the so-called miracle of life without forcing us to endure both human and animal births. After a point, they all look alike.

Most of the time, though, "Heartland" is firm and realistic in its appreciation of its people and the quality of their lives. One feels they are so stubbornly independent that they would have little patience with prefabricated pep talks about the American character. In Mr. Torn and Miss Ferrell the film also has two actors who look and behave as if they were quite capable of coping with nature's worst and smiling about it afterward.

Vincent Canby - New York Times - Published: September 22, 1979

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