

# Career opportunities

## Songcatcher, written and directed by Maggie Greenwald

By David Walsh  
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In Maggie Greenwald's *Songcatcher*, a musicologist, Dr. Lily Penleric (Janet McTeer), after being passed over for promotion, sets out to visit her sister, a teacher, in the Appalachian mountains of the southeastern US in 1907. While there she discovers that many of the Anglo-Scottish ballads with which she is familiar in her scholarly work are still being sung, often in versions closer to the centuries-old originals, in the isolated area. Penleric begins to write down the songs and record them, as sung by local women, on Edison cylinders.

She enlists the aid of a young girl, Deladis Slocumb (Emmy Rossum), with a remarkable voice. The girl, in turn, introduces Penleric to an older woman, Viney Butler (Pat Carroll), who proves an almost inexhaustible source of songs. The latter's grandson, Tom Bledsoe (Aidan Quinn), however, objects to Penleric's "exploitation" of the area's residents by an "outlander." Unperturbed, she presses on with her work.

In the course of strenuous efforts to reach the most isolated cabins, Penleric encounters a coal company representative buying up farms on the cheap for future mining, an errant husband, a moonshiner, a backwoods preacher and various others. Participating at a bloody and difficult childbirth helps humanize the prim and proper musicologist.

Inevitably a romance develops between Penleric and Bledsoe. Her sister's lesbian relationship with a fellow teacher, however, provokes a scandal and leads to a devastating fire. In the end Penleric decides on entrepreneurship, a career selling the mountain music in the outside world.

The film's premise has potential. Many of the songs in question are magnificent, and the area and its history fascinating. The presence of singer-songwriter Iris

DeMent, musician Taj Mahal and old-time music performer Hazel Dickens are welcome, although they are given relatively little to do

Unfortunately, Greenwald (*The Ballad of Little Jo*, 1993) is incapable, by and large, of doing the material justice. She has a feminist ax to grind and that colors the entire film. She makes her protagonist indomitable, courageous and farsighted. Penleric easily overcomes her character flaws and by the end of the film seems ready to take on the entire world. Who or what could stand in her way? This is largely the stuff of fantasy.

Greenwald practices a variety of independent, "radical" filmmaking. John Sayles's name comes to mind, but perhaps more apropos is the example of Jane Campion. There is something of *The Piano* in this work, and that is not meant as a compliment. *Songcatcher* also transports a thoroughly modern, middle class woman back in time (although McTeer strives—a little too hard—to give a period flavoring to her character) in an ahistorical fashion. (Why 1907, incidentally? Nothing is really made of the era.) The two filmmakers demonstrate a similar tendency to create a leading male figure—a noble savage with the soul of a sensitive artist—obviously and absurdly tailored to their social conceptions (and psychological needs, but that is an area where I don't care to go); although, all in all, Aidan Quinn escapes with more of his dignity intact than Harvey Keitel did in Campion's muddled work.

Greenwald extends her social vision to her choice of traditional music, most of which is lovely, but emphasizes men's treachery to or mistreatment of women. Such conduct and the songs that chronicle it exist in abundance, but it is a distortion to transform the history of folk music into the record of the battle between the sexes.

The history of that music, more than anything else, tells a story of social conflict. The songs document the betrayals of male (and female) lovers, but their more general role is to present, in a distilled and aesthetically refined form, the lessons learned by various social layers, particularly the rural poor and small farmers, in the course of their experiences over generations. The folk song teaches its hearers about whom they can trust and whom they can't, about the ruthlessness and perfidy of the rich and powerful, about toil, about suffering, as well as the joys to be snatched in the midst of life's difficulties. The most enduring ballad gains its strength from the fact that it is not the expression of a single voice, but articulates the half-understood, but deeply felt yearning of an entire people or social layer. This is to a large extent a closed book to Greenwald, or at least she fails to address it seriously.

Her film treats the poverty of the Appalachian population and the villainy of the coal companies essentially in passing, as factors in the situation of the people—but this is not the central interest of the filmmaker. One has to assume that what or whom an artist places in the foreground of her work is the object or personality that means most to her. Lily Penleric is squarely in the foreground of *Songcatcher* throughout.

Astonishingly, considering the social wretchedness endured by the majority of the film's characters, we are still apparently meant to care about Penleric's career problems and ambitions by the end of the work. Because this is what most powerfully matters to the film director: her own dramas and opinions and career opportunities, and not the struggles and difficulties of these people. Greenwald is unable, unlike more serious artists, to recognize and embrace a reality far more significant and tragic than her own. Unhappily, she can't get out of the way of her own film long enough to do that.

This pettiness and a misplaced axis lend the film some of its diffuse and skewed feeling. Although the performers do their best, the work never takes on a genuine life of its own. The feminist recipe book always feels close at hand.

Perhaps most revealing, *Songcatcher* seems to take for granted, like most contemporary films, that sticking one's heels in and fighting against the prevailing circumstances would be absurd and generally a waste of one's precious time. One can't help but be struck by

Penleric's decision to go off at the end and become a little businesswoman. No futile life of the social reformer for her! She leaves the long-suffering women of the mountains behind without a second thought.

The work is the product, all in all, of a social layer prone to selfishness and self-pity, upon whom identity politics have only had a harmful impact.

However, the soundtrack of the film, available on CD, is well worth possessing, thanks to the performances of Iris DeMent, Gillian Welch, Emmy Lou Harris, Dolly Parton, Emmy Rossum and others.

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