

THE TIES THAT BIND FAMILY, KIN, TRIBE AND LOVERS

BY LOIS WADSWORTH

Connections to other people begin at our birth and last a lifetime. We are born or adopted into a family. Our links to family members cast far-reaching influences on our lives. We know other members of our larger family or learn about ancestors who have died. Later, we may form a family of our own through marriage and children and discover that connecting to a child requires a strong, secure commitment, while maintaining a marriage over the long haul requires good humor and forgiveness.

We may find a relationship with one other person meets our need for family, or we may embrace a family-like relationship with friends that lasts years and provides our primary support network. We form allegiances that include the people we work with, those who share our vocation, avocation or belief. We seek relationships among our peers, with our community. Other tribal-like connections may include national or geographic identifications.

One of the deepest personal liaisons we make is to the relatedness we create with a lover. Being in love is an experience that may become long-lasting, mature love or may be only a brief interlude. But the bond between two people in love reverberates at many levels of relationship. And the yearning between two people who do not become lovers resonates uniquely in their hearts.

In the 12 films I've selected as the best of 2003, the characters' dilemmas arise when duty to family, kin, tribe or lover conflicts with other strongly held obligations or desires. Most of the profound, central issues individuals grapple with come out of such conflicts. *The New York Times* film critics call the present a golden age of acting, and the strong performances in the dozen films here bolsters that idea. Actors who excel in their roles find their characters in a particular situation where personal allegiances are tested by another equally persuasive relationship. In the best screenplays, this conflict leads to the characters' emotional transformations and/or an expression of universal significance.



Justin Kirk in *Angels in America*.

HBO FILMS, 2003.

1. ANGELS IN AMERICA: 2003 Golden Globes: Best Miniseries (HBO). Best Actress, Meryl Streep. Best Actor, Al Pacino. Best Supporting Actress, Mary-Louise Parker. Best Supporting Actor, Jeffrey Wright.

Set in the mid-1980s, when the AIDS epidemic was raging in the U.S. and before wide-scale use of protease inhibitors and AZT, Tony Kushner's 1993 play involves 14 characters played by eight superlative actors.

A long-term gay relationship buckles under the burden of AIDS, and the healthy partner leaves, breaking his chosen community's unwritten code. A notorious historical character, dying of AIDS, denies his gay identity with his last breath. A married Mormon man takes a male lover, breaking the ties to his wife, his religion and his family. A lonely woman finds solace in drug-induced hallucinations in a desperate attempt to make sense of her failed marriage. A practical older woman finds herself accepted by unlikely but welcome compan-

ions. A demanding angel visits an ill man, calls him a prophet and bears the news that God seems to have disappeared. Celestial visitors and supernatural spectacle challenge the film's otherwise naturalistic treatment of characters and story but add grace, terror, humor and holiness to a subject bound up with loss and grief.

Kudos to the geni behind this outstanding work of art, director Mike Nichols, writer Tony Kushner and actors so good they break your heart. Al Pacino is the notorious, unrepentant Roy Cohn. Meryl Streep is a chipper Ethel Rosenberg, complete with gallows humor. The excellent Jeffrey Wright is Belize, nurse and humanizer. Justin Kirk is Prior Walter, a courageous man, who loves life and wants to live it as fully as possible. Mary-Louise Parker is Harper Pitt, a plucky young woman who will find herself. Ben Shenkman is Louis, whose guilt overwhelms him until he takes a stand against his lover. Patrick Wilson is Joe Pitt, the most conflict-



The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

NEW LINE CINEMA, 2003.

ed and culpable among them. And fiery, verbose, demanding Emma Thompson is the unforgettable Angel. Bless them all.

2. THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING: 2003 Academy Award Nominations: Best Picture; Director, Peter Jackson; Adapted Screenplay, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Peter Jackson; Art Direction; Sound Mixing; Original Score, James Horner; Original Song; Costumes; Film Editing; Makeup; Visual Effects.

The genius of Peter Jackson's three-film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's mythic tale of good and evil reveals itself in this perfectly imagined finale. Here the last battles take place between monstrous, killer armies amassed in the name of the dark Lord Sauron and the combined forces of the peoples of Middle-Earth — men, dwarves, elves and hobbits — who overcome their differences to stand united with the wizard Gandalf and win the day. The exquisite beauty of the lands to be saved complements the epic scope of the story.

Dwarves and elves, ancient enemies, find common cause fighting an enemy that would destroy them both. Among men, the difficulty lies in acknowledging the power of one leader, for generations of distrust have bred indifference and hostility. But if the nations of men stand beside Aragorn, the king who returns, they will at least die fighting for their shared values.

For most of the hobbits, leaving the Shire and comforts of home are the big obstacles, but once on the road, these small folk are game for what adventures come their way. However, Frodo, who bears the ring Sauron seeks to complete his hold on power, and Frodo's companion, Samwise Gamgee, face fear, exhaustion and hopelessness as their journey draws to an end. The sacrifice they make to complete their mission and fling the ring of power to the fires of Mount Doom is great, and the role played by Gollum in Frodo's fate remains mysterious to the end.

The bond between Frodo and Sam weathers the ordeals they encounter because it was shaped in their bucolic childhood and youth in the Shire. Likewise, the disparate tribes of men eventually recog-

nize Aragorn's leadership because of their shared history as kinsmen. Aragorn reconciles his inner conflicts about becoming king through vital emotional ties to his lover, Arwen, who gives up immortality to remain with him. Gandalf satisfies his allegiance to the commonwealth of all and leaves the stage of earthly endeavors.

3. LOST IN TRANSLATION: 2003 Academy Award Nominations: Best Picture; Director, Sofia Coppola; Actor, Bill Murray; Original Screenplay, Sofia Coppola.

Sofia Coppola's personal film set in a Tokyo high-rise hotel is a love story that defies film convention by being about friendship, not sex.

Charlotte (Scarlet Johansson) and Bob (Bill Murray) fill the many deliriously fine scenes sprinkled throughout the film with spontaneous delight and deadpan humor. Coppola's respect for Murray's gifts as an actor makes the film his best as well as her best. Likewise, Coppola invests Johansson's awesome abilities in a thoughtful portrayal of a neglected young wife in a large, foreign city.

Charlotte's photographer husband, John (Giavanni Ribisi), leaves her alone in the hotel while he goes on lengthy shoots out of town. She has too much time to think about their marriage. Bob is a washed-up American



Lost in Translation

FOCUS FEATURES, 2003.

film star in Japan for a week, making lucrative television spots promoting Suntory whiskey. Bob's stardom and his marriage have both worn thin, and he doesn't know how to jump-start either. Bob can't sleep, and neither can Charlotte, which is how they meet in the hotel bar in the wee hours of the morning. Over the next few nights and days, each finds the other a worthy companion on impromptu explorations of Japanese