

# Not Far Enough

Put Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman together in an epic Irish-American saga and the result is...a buzzard.  
David Nichols reports.

The Gulf War: the skill, the expertise, the *progress* of it all, was once again occasion for white America to look back in wonderment. America the brave, the most excellent: where did all this magnificence come from?

Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman present million-dollar director Ron Howard's version of American origins in the new movie *Far and Away*: in fact, the movie had the working title *Irish Story* which, typically for Hollywood, actually meant 'American Story With Irish People'.

Cruise and Kidman's characters are from different classes, different religions, different world views; America, the great leveller, puts them on an even footing. But wait...was it America, or was it Love? Heck, tell me the difference!

But all of this is not any sort of a sub-text. Actually, it's a given. Underneath is something which is both more personal and more revealing of mainstream America.

Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman met in a movie: no, literally. They came together in *Days of Thunder*, the motor-racing film Tom conceived of as an epic follow-up to his role as Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone's rather more severe *Born on the Fourth of July*. Nicole played his doctor: the movie was rather crass, and the product placement (the little packets of Sweet 'n' Low Tom diabolically pushes up Nicole's leg to illustrate his pursuit of perfection) didn't help at all. Nevertheless if it didn't break box office records, it did get the two together—and yet another fairytale Hollywood romance was born.

Who of the American audience of *Far and Away* would not know about Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman? They have the 'pairability', if not the classic

quality, of Tracy and Hepburn, Bogart and Bacall. They're both young and attractive, not to mention talented. The ascension of Tom Cruise from 'handsome top box-office draw' to 'talented too' would be worth plotting in itself. The fact, then, that Tom and Nicole don't actually 'get together' for any period of time in *Far and Away* (they actually reveal their love for each other in the closing few seconds of the movie: there, I spoil it for you!)

doesn't seem to matter. They are, after all, married off-screen.

The movie plays with our knowledge of the couple. Where the real Nicole is only a novice in Hollywood terms, in the movie she is Shannon, a complacent, petulant, established young lady of the upper classes: daughter of a Protestant land-owning family in Ireland, 1892. Tom Cruise, Hollywood's leading leading man, is a poor and even slightly simple young lad called Patrick. He tills the soil—back-breaking work because the soil is so bad in Ireland—and he is so unworldly it hurts. By a series of ridiculous and vaguely humorous coincidences Shannon takes Patrick under her wing and the two travel





together to America, where land is free for the taking!

Pause for three-quarters of an hour in Boston for the obligatory Tom Cruise violent sport sequences. Tom seems to believe no one will go to see a Tom Cruise movie if they cannot see him dice with death in a man-against-man sport. *Days of Thunder* was the need for speed. *Far and Away* is boxing. In fact, Patrick, after being beaten from an early age by his drunken, ugly elder brothers, has invented a new form of boxing: you wag your head around and dodge your opponent's blows. No one's ever thought of this before so, naturally, he's a hit—until he chooses to challenge a massive Italian. Are the Italians more Catholic than the Irish? God obviously thinks so, and Pat cops it.

Suddenly they are destitute: Pat and Shannon are split up. Pat helps build a railroad, having abandoned his dream of land. Yet he can't let the bad times get him down in such a world of promise: travelling to the next place of menial work he hears a black co-passenger (the only black person in the film) decrying the craziness of a group of would-be land claim-stakers. Pat

can't help it, he's crazy too. He leaps off the train and joins the throng: land!

At the town where the race to grab a plot is about to begin, Patrick reunites with Shannon who is there not only with her old beau—a snivelling upper-class cad—but also her parents who, after their house is destroyed by Irish rebels, decide to 'make a fresh start'. (Shannon's parents are interesting. Her father confesses to Patrick early in the film that he has no particular wish to live off the peasants' hard labour and degradation. Unfortunately, he is too bumbling and loveable to explain why. Then he concocts a plan to steal a plot of land which people are already slaughtering each other over: he does not need the land but enjoys the *adventure* of the plan to defraud others of it. Loveably enough, he succeeds.)

'Land! The land, America, freedom, is there for the taking. One split-second shot, just before the race for the land begins, speaks a billion words: a few Native Americans, in western clothes, look on as the white settlers prepare to kill each other in the pursuit of a small farm. The shot of the Native Americans is too quick to mean anything except: 'Native Americans, not

doing anything about anything'. They might be bemused, they might be antagonistic, but they're portrayed as not acting on either or on any impulse. Ron Howard appears to be looking around and noticing for a second that 'Yes, actually, the land wasn't free for the taking *per se*—these people had it first. There, I said it—but what can I do about it?'

Do Pat and Shannon get their little plot of land together? Does a horse roll over Patrick and kill him, until his soul—hovering above his body—hears Shannon cry out that she has *always* loved him? Well, you'll have to see the film and find out. *Far and Away* is a myth (Tom & Nicole: their romance) within a myth (white guys: they rule) within a myth (America: the bold and brave) within a myth (Ron Howard makes great 'family' movies). And when a film makes a complacent mass media enthusiast like the present writer *this* upset and irritated, you know it has to be pretty darn deep.

**DAVID NICHOLS** started his journalistic career ten years ago in *Vox Muzpaper* and has since progressed through *Smash Hits*, *TV Guide* and *Puncture to Terrorzone*.

## Low Fidelity

*Cuba—last hope of socialism or a prospective banana republic that even runs out of bananas? Ray Moynihan was his own man in Havana.*

José is in his late 20s. He comes up to us on the street, the day we arrive in Cuba, before we even find a hotel. The Lido. It's cheapish, there's hot water most of the time, and a fifth floor view of crumbling old Havana. You can smell the sea from the balcony.

José sniffs out a couple of sympathetic foreigners. He tells us he is very keen to meet and talk. He breaks through our first night nerves, and we end up sharing a meal at one of Havana's celebrated eating spots, the Bodeguita

del Medio. Lots of photos of Hemingway. We eat rice, black beans, chicken and pork. Often they are out of bananas. The beer's good, though, and always available. It comes in brown unlabelled bottles.

Anna is 50. We meet in her home in Cerro. It's comfortable, but small, in the better part of Cerro, a big suburb in central Havana. We have a letter of introduction from an Australian friend of her husband. He is a senior bureaucrat; she is a senior academic.

Anna is passionate about the revolution, and makes us a wonderful meal. A few friends drop in and we chat about the new petrol restrictions and the reductions in the working week. We drink warm flat beer and Cuban rum, and overhear Fidel on the neighbour's TV. It's a speech about everything, the third this week. It runs for maybe two hours, prime time, no ads.

José is trained in one profession, works in another and is actively involved in the music scene in his spare time. Sooner or later he confesses to us that his sympathies lie with the Cuban dissidents. Perhaps he boasts it. I don't quite know how to react to a Cuban dissident.