



## What Dreams May Come (1998)

Film Review by Steve Biodrowski • August 14, 2007

Richard Matheson's *What Dreams May Come* is such a wonderful novel that one approaches the filmization with a combination of anticipation and dread: anticipation, because there is great potential for an excellent film; dread, because there is so much room for disappointment. For the first fifteen minutes, dread outweighs anticipation. Whereas Matheson got to the main point of his story (killing off protagonist Chris Nielsen and placing him in the afterlife) on the first page, the screenplay by Saul Bass begins with a scene of Chris (Robin Williams) and his future wife Annie (Annabella Sciorra) meeting on vacation, followed by the death of not Chris but of his children; only after several scenes of the grieving couple getting their life back together does Chris finally step over to the other side, thanks to a terrifyingly staged automobile accident.

The good news is that, once the transition is made, the film lurches almost immediately toward greatness, dazzling the viewer with a spectacular view of heaven that is not only beautiful but also profoundly moving, grounded as it is in the emotions and personality of the character experiencing it. Not only that, but those first fifteen minutes actually pay off in the long run, introducing plot elements that will be recalled later in the narrative, often to tear-inducing effect. (Apparently, this material was originally to be part of the film's flashback structure, but the studio wanted this part of the exposition to be more linear. Vincent Ward has expressed hope to someday restore this structure in a director's cut.)

The most amazing thing about the film is how it distills the essence of the novel while adding numerous touches of its own that make it work, cinematically, on its own terms. Bass's script layers the texture with back story elements that add dramatic weight to the plot. Abandoning the almost technical manual approach to the afterlife of Matheson (himself a true believer in the subject), Bass emphasizes the grand romanticism inherent in the story, while also tarnishing Matheson's picture-perfect portrait of family life. Not that the Nielsens are turned into a dysfunctional cliché, but they have some genuine

hurdles to overcome, before and after death, that make the film more than a storybook fantasy.

Fortunately, Ward's visualizing of the story is nothing short of brilliant. The book's approach to the wonders of the afterlife was straight-forward, almost matter-of-fact - which worked on the page. For the film, however, Ward has invested every frame with a kind of magic that goes right past the frontal lobes and lodges in the deepest part of our universal subconscious. It is as if we were seeing something new that is yet somehow strangely familiar. He may not convince you of the reality of an afterlife, but by the time the film is over, you will find yourself thinking, If it does exist, it must be like this; otherwise, it will be a big disappointment!

Williams does a fine job in the lead. Without resorting to his trademark wackiness, he brings a glowing good humor to his Everyman role that makes the pathos ring all the more true. Sciorra adds immeasurably to her character, making visible the grief and agony that drive her to suicide. Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Max Von Sydow are alternately endearing and funny as Nielsen's guides in the afterlife. Technical credits are excellent across the board, including the best use ever of computer-generated imagery to create the painted world heaven in which Nielsen finds himself. But what is most amazing is the way these virtuoso visual stylings have been integrated into a stylistic whole, working together and never standing out on their own.

Despite its shaky start, this film is like a dream come true.

---

**WHAT DREAMS MAY COME** (1998). Directed by Vincent Ward. Screenplay by Ronald Bass, based on the novel by Richard Matheson. Cast: Robin Williams, Cuba Gooding Jr., Annabella Sciorra, Max von Sydow, Jessica Brooks Grant, Josh Paddock, Rosalind Chao.