

*Housekeeping* is Bill Forsyth's fifth feature and his first set and filmed outside Great Britain. It is also his first adaptation.

Based on Marilynne Robinson's 1981 novel it tells the story of a very strange family. The grandfather painted mountains and dies in a train disaster; the mother, deserted by her husband, one morning decides to drive her car into the same lake as the train and leaves her two daughters with grandma. It is the elder girl, Ruth (Sara Walker), who narrates the film and tells of their life with scatty Aunt Sylvie (Christine Lahti), to whom grandma passes the care of the children.

The story is essentially the emergence of the character of Ruth, who turns out to share Sylvie's free-spiritedness. The small town in which the action takes place, surrounded by mountains, plays an important part in the narrative. Called Fingerbone it is in fact Sandpoint, Idaho – the author's home town. As well as having to battle the elements the characters have to fend off the interfering concern of the local busybodies who, unable to understand Sylvie, are at first anxious about her influence on the girls, then try to separate her from them.

Equally embarrassed by their aunt's unconventional behaviour to begin with – her indifference to their truancy, sleeping on park benches and socialising with down-and-outs – Ruth and Lucille (Andrea Burchill) gradually drift apart as the latter wants to get back to a normal life of school and friends. Ruth doesn't know what she wants but at any rate accepts Sylvie for the way she is. It is only when Lucille moves out to a friend's house that Ruth has the chance to realise herself free of her sister's overbearing influence. The relationship between Ruth and Sylvie, the crux of the film, can blossom at last.

*Housekeeping* has its charmingly funny moments but is less reminiscent of the genuine wackiness of *Local Hero* than of the melancholy of *Comfort and Joy*. Its characters are hard to understand but loveable all the same, a tribute to the actors – or rather actresses – and Forsyth's skill with them. Diane Keaton was originally slated to play Sylvie but thankfully she backed down (not that she is not an obvious choice, but her mannered interpretation would have been over-familiar and would have deprived us of the joy of Lahti's performance.) An actress to look out for in the future, she imparts real warmth and endearment to her character's eccentricity. *Housekeeping* is a touching film which avoids wearing its heart on its sleeve. It is neither sad nor optimistic but certainly something of both, and will stay with you for a long time.