

A review of *Conviction* and *Secretariat*

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue



Two of this season's movies, both based on true stories, remind us of the underrated pleasures of conventional filmmaking. *Conviction*, an account of how Betty Anne Waters sprang her wrongly imprisoned brother Kenny, and *Secretariat*, the tale of the legendary racehorse, are the most engrossing and emotionally engaging of the recent crop of releases.

In *Conviction*, director Tony Goldwyn and a seasoned cast bring a wealth of character detail to Pamela Gray's effective screenplay. Kenny Waters (Sam Rockwell) is sent to jail for murder on the testimony of two ex-girlfriends with axes to grind. (They've both seen his capacity for violence.)

Betty Anne (Hilary Swank), the only person who understands him well enough to know that he isn't capable of murder, takes sisterly devotion to an extreme level when she puts herself through law school while raising three kids in order to work toward getting his conviction reversed. The story is melodrama—it recalls the 1954 Douglas Sirk weepie *Magnificent Obsession*, in which Rock Hudson goes to medical

school so he can operate on Jane Wyman and restore her lost sight—but Goldwyn conveys it in a grounded realist style.

Swank has made too many of these triumph-of-the-spirit pictures; she gives a perfectly competent performance, but you've seen it before. Four women in the supporting cast provide much of the emotional variety that keeps the film in your head afterward. Minnie Driver gives a good-humored, hard-boiled performance as Betty Anne's law school pal. Karen Young plays Kenny and Betty Anne's embattled, inconsistent mother, who moved them in and out of foster homes. The film's most shocking moment is her casual judgment that she was always afraid Kenny would wind up with a murder rap someday.

When you juxtapose Kenny's mother's cavalier attitude with the willingness of two women to perjure themselves to send him away, you marvel that justice finally gets served. Clea DuVall plays Brenda Mark, whose false testimony is the consequence of a devil's bargain she struck with an unprincipled cop, and Juliette Lewis is Roseanna Perry, whose behavior reflects equal parts narcissism, terror and stupidity. Lewis's performance, the best she's ever given, could, in another context, be richly funny.

The linchpin of the film, though, is Sam Rockwell's charismatic and nuanced portrayal of Kenny, a deeply flawed man whom the movie, like Betty Anne, refuses to give up on. Betty Anne proves to be his redemption—not only because she fights tirelessly for his release but also because she won't allow him to sink to his worst view of himself, as a screwup who doesn't deserve to be let out of jail even though he's innocent of the crime that sent him there.

Secretariat is also about keeping faith against unlikely odds. That's how screenwriter Mike Rich and director Randall Wallace frame the story of the most gifted racehorse in history—through the struggle of his owner, Penny Chenery (Diane Lane, in her latest marvelous and seemingly effortless star performance), to hold onto him despite the pressure to sell him to pay off the burdensome taxes on her father's estate. (Scott Glenn gives a poignant rendering of Penny's beloved father in his final days.)

All of Penny's efforts are improbable gambles; her all-or-nothing spirit is what makes her a hero—that and our hindsight assurance that her instincts, like Betty Anne Waters's, are the right ones. Penny is lucky to find a team of allies who share her confidence: a not-quite-retired French-Canadian trainer named Lucien Laurin (wittily

underplayed by John Malkovich), an aggressive jockey, a loving groom and Penny's dad's loyal secretary.

Rich is a dreadful writer; the script suggests a thousand Hallmark greeting cards strung together. But the cast reads the lines with tremendous feeling, and the set-piece racetrack sequences make you forget the writing. Wallace and cinematographer Dean Semler shoot the races imaginatively, sometimes giving us a jockey's-eye view. The suspense is gorgeous. In the climactic one, suspense gives way to awe as Secretariat outdistances his nearest rival by 71 lengths. When Penny rejoices in the stands, the real Penny Chenery stands behind her and they catch each other's eye. The moment is magic.