

Dames and dragons

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

At the center of *Lovely and Amazing* is a dysfunctional family of mostly women. The mother, Jane (Brenda Blethyn), a lonely divorcée, is preparing for liposuction at the hands of a handsome surgeon (Michael Nouri). Her eldest daughter, Michelle (Catherine Keener), makes crafts she can't sell. When her husband (Clark Gregg), who's cheating on her with her best friend, turns caustic about her inability to bring any money home, she impulsively takes a job at a 24-hour photo shop, where her boss is a teen outcast (Jake Gyllenhaal) in desperate need of some sexual confidence. Michelle's sister Elizabeth (Emily Mortimer) is an actress whose neurosis about her looks wins little sympathy from her boyfriend (James LeGros). Jane's third, adopted daughter is an African-American youngster named Annie (Raven Goodwin) who acts out her identity confusion in a series of textbook behaviors (mainly over-eating).

Writer and director Nicole Holofcener spells everything out--she even has Annie, whose adoptive family is Jewish, tell a joke that insults both blacks and Jews. Yet the characters' actions remain mysterious. They seem not so much outgrowths of their personalities as inventions designed to illustrate the psychic pressures placed on females (hence the title).

Michelle's decision to get work at a photo lab is an implausible device to set up the next section of the plot, in which she falls into an affair with her adolescent boss. Are we supposed to think she's emotionally so underdeveloped that she's naturally drawn to a 17-year-old? Scenes early on in the movie suggest that possibility, but they're contradicted by her relationship with Annie, whose childishness wears on Michelle and to whom she gasses on ungenerously about their mother as if Annie were another adult. Michelle is dreadful with children; she barely focuses on her own daughter. Yet when her husband, discovering her infidelity, threatens to take the little girl away from her, she weepingly insists that their daughter is the only thing in the world she cares about.

In Holofcener's scheme, men are merely appendages. Ironically, though, their incidental status in the film liberates the actors: free of the need to be mouthpieces for the filmmaker's trite comments on women's issues, Gyllenhaal, LeGros and Dermot Mulroney, as a movie stud who picks up Elizabeth, develop quirky, pleasing little roles. (Gregg isn't so lucky--the script casts him as the hated character.)

The problem with the women in the movie isn't the actresses; except for Catherine Keener, who plays the same single note in all of her movies--smirking irony--they're all obviously talented. And you can see them working hard to find the subtext in what amounts to a series of feminist bulletins. They're stranded in an arid film that passes for a profound encounter with the lives of contemporary women.

The farfetched premise of *Reign of Fire* is that a male dragon has kept itself alive in the bowels of London since the age of the dinosaurs. It is waiting for the world to repopulate so that it can fertilize eggs left behind by its dead mates. By 2020, England's cities are deserts, and all that remains of humankind are some disparate communities hiding from dragon attacks behind iron and stone fortresses. Quinn (Christian Bale) heads one of these forts. The movie is about how, with an American military man named Van Zan (Matthew McConaughey), who appears at his doorstep accompanied by a crew of dragon fighters, Quinn set out to beard the sire in his lair.

Director Rob Bowman wants to stage a mythic adventure story, but the script is a mishmash of other people's ideas; it lacks distinction and structure. This is *Dragonslayer* crossed with *The Road Warrior*, and Van Zan is a hybrid of Rambo and Captain Ahab--at least in the first half. The film unaccountably scuttles Van Zan's obsessive-charismatic persona after he loses his men to dragon fire in his initial attempt to destroy the dragon--exactly the moment when you'd expect him to turn more nutty and single-minded than ever.

Reign of Fire also lacks humor, like so many recent genre movies. Who would want to make a serious dragon picture? The creatures themselves are finely designed (so are the maze-like neomedieval interiors), but the film treats them like scare objects, as if this were a particularly baroque entry in the *Alien* series. McConaughey, clad in a sleeveless marine vest, chomping on a stunted cigar like William Holden in *Stalag 17*, is entertaining in his first few scenes, but once Van Zan and Quinn begin to match swagger for swagger, the two leading men seem to be engaged in a bad-acting contest.

The two heroes are also competing for the attention of Van Zan's American lieutenant, Alex, who's played, for some reason, by a gorgeous Italian actress named Izabella Scorupco. When the dragons aren't flying, the movie's chief interest lies in seeing how many words Scorupco can get out without exposing her accent.