

Sibling conflict, etc.

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

*You Can Count on Me* (2000), directed by Kenneth Lonergan

*The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), directed by Abbas Kiarostami

The dual protagonists in Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count on Me* have an on-screen relationship that is electrifying. Sammy (Laura Linney, Truman's wife in *The Truman Show*) is a party girl-gone-straight, while Terry (Mark Ruffalo), about 30, never left adolescence. After a long separation, Sammy is thrilled about seeing Terry again, but old problems reappear quickly. The reason Terry didn't write for months was because he was in jail. He's still not attending church. And Sammy begins to suspect that Terry's visit has less to do with love than with a dire financial situation. "I wish you'd just sent me an invoice," says Sammy.

Sammy and Terry are not lovers; they are brother and sister, a relationship Hollywood occasionally acknowledges but rarely make the crux of a story. What Lonergan is able to mine from their relationship is engaging: the unconscious spite, the stubborn judgment and the rankled affection. He's certainly helped by Linney and Ruffalo, who say more with body language than with syllables.

The third leg of the film's delicate emotional triangle is Sammy's son, eight-year-old Rudy (Rory Culkin, brother to Macaulay), who is jerked in opposite directions by his strict mother and his carefree uncle. Most films--even a serious costume drama like 1997's *Mrs. Brown*--side with the carefree rather than the strict; Lonergan, who also wrote the film's screenplay, bravely chooses not to take sides.

Sammy's defensive decision to put some distance between Rudy and Terry is perhaps misguided, since Terry is slowly becoming the father figure the child needs. But even more misguided are Terry's attempts at rubbing Rudy's face in selective honesty about Terry's personal targets of ire. Lonergan shows the painful results of Terry's transgressions.

Sammy talks to a minister (played by Lonergan himself) twice during the film--once when she is concerned about her brother's behavior, once when she is concerned about her own (she's having an affair with her boss). Both times, there is a reversal

of expected roles: Sammy is nostalgic for the day when clergy would scare sinners with thoughts of hell, while the new pastor is more concerned with identifying motives than with condemning behavior. It's Lonergan's ability to twist the expected into something authentic, compelling and unexpected that makes *You Can Count on Me* such a joyous film.

The main character in this Iranian film, called "the Engineer" by the townfolk, is another person concerned about behavior. He even asks a village boy point blank, "Do you think I'm bad?" It's not an unexpected question given his predicament: he can't complete his job in the village, which apparently is to photograph a ceremony, until an invalid woman dies. It doesn't take long for him to become impatient. A villager, not knowing the nature of the Engineer's problem, asks if any of his tools would help. The Engineer's answer: "One blow from the pickaxe would do." Later, he kicks a turtle onto its back in a vain attempt to control the life and death of something, anything. As he turns around to leave, the turtle amazingly rights itself. Death is thwarted again.

There are serious questions that *The Wind Will Carry Us* is obliquely trying to bring up: How much control do humans have over their destiny? How responsible are we for saving others' lives? The questions are probably chapter headings in some Philosophy 101 textbook, but the film's saving grace is that it never brings them up directly; it's through our interest in the characters, particularly Behzad Dourani's agitated engineer, that the implied questions become interesting. Further, the film has a dry wit that lessens any pretentiousness. The pickaxe episode is played for humor, albeit black.

Abbas Kiarostami is Iran's most acclaimed director (at least among American critics), and *The Wind Will Carry Us* displays not only his keen eye for scenery--this must be the most picturesque film released this year--but also his keen sense of realism. Like last year's Japanese film *After Life*, which had a similar theme, many of the actors are amateurs playing versions of themselves. And as in *After Life*, the method helps create a film in which nary a gesture or line, no matter how improbable, rings false.