

# Rerouted

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 27, 2003](#) issue

With a trio of photogenic stars, a top-shelf crew and outstanding writer-director Anthony Minghella on board, ***Cold Mountain*** tries valiantly to match the epic sweep of Charles Frazier's novel, which won the 1997 National Book Award. But it lacks a clear understanding of what the book is about, and that's a problem.

*Cold Mountain* is both a Civil War love story and a spiritual journey. The romance is between a shy Confederate soldier named Inman (Jude Law), who deserts the rebel army and heads home after being wounded in battle, and the lovely Ada Monroe (Nicole Kidman), a girl he met only briefly before the war, but who promised in a moment of tenderness to wait for his return.

This anticipatory romance leads to two separate adventures: Inman's long trek through the southern countryside, where he must prove his moral worth as a man, and Ada's growth as a woman, which is helped along by the resourceful Ruby (Renee Zellweger), a mountain girl who moves in with Ada to teach her about the bounty of nature and the value of hard work.

The film begins with a burst of power as it masterfully re-creates the bloody battle of Petersburg, where 4,000 men died in a single morning. Minghella employs swooping crane shots to reveal both the size of the massive Union army and the extent of the carnage after its ill-fated attack. The film never shows us another battle scene, and it doesn't need to.

But the momentum Minghella gains is soon lost as he fashions a choppy set of flashbacks and intercuts to catch us up with the story. In addition to observing the aftermath of the battle, we see quick cuts of Ada with her father before the war, Inman meeting Ada at Cold Mountain, Inman getting wounded at Petersburg, Inman in the hospital after the battle, Ada coping with the death of her father, and so on. The camera never lingers anywhere long enough to establish a mood or tone. It's pure exposition, and so disorienting it makes us long for the simple storytelling of a film like *Gone With the Wind*, which is told in old-fashioned chronological order.

The film gets back on its feet once Inman hits the road, adopting the standard cross-cutting style employed in the book as it follows Inman's attempt to get home and Ada's struggle to survive.

But Inman's journey is also where Minghella makes his key miscalculation. At 450 pages, the novel is thick with people and places the wounded Inman encounters on his journey home. No filmmaker should try to cram all of them into one film. But the choices Minghella makes speak volumes about his attitude toward Inman's pilgrimage. He has chosen to include almost all of the encounters that involve danger for Inman. Will he be wounded? Captured? Shot? Killed? Will the cruelty of fate keep him away from his beloved?

To add to the danger (not to mention the violence), Minghella also builds up the band of low-lives identified as the Home Front, a motley crew of vigilantes who hunt down deserters and kill them on the spot. They are led by the sadistic Teague (Ray Winstone), who is also supplied with a salacious interest in Ada and her patch of land.

There are a lot of scenes in which assorted villains (and there are plenty of them) do horrible things to innocents so that Inman can make things right. This simplistic approach reaches its nadir in a scene (invented by Minghella) in which a couple of Yankee raiders are tomahawked to death as they try to rape a southern widow while her freezing baby cries in the background.

By filling his movie with such fleshy action sequences, Minghella has no room for more revealing moments, scenes that could suggest a deeper meaning to Inman's journey. There is the issue of his guilt, for example—not only for the killing he has done, but for the twisted values of patriotism he once believed in. The film leaves out the most telling scenes from the book, such as when he identifies with a mysterious gypsy; meets an old slave who saves him from death; gets to know a former plantation owner whose life was ruined by his love for a black girl; and helps build a coffin for a child. The one pensive scene that is retained—in which Inman's wounds are treated by a mysterious goat lady—is severely truncated.

Minghella might argue that these excised scenes are superfluous since they don't further the love story. But these are the elements of the tale that give the love story its weight by showing how Inman the boy is becoming a man. Minghella's approach is like reducing *The Odyssey* (on which *Cold Mountain* is clearly based) to the story of Odysseus trying to get home to Penelope, and leaving out the complex and

challenging adventures he has along the way.