

## Vital Signs ★★★½

**Year of Release:** 1990

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

---

*Vital Signs* is a fascinating look at five students during one of the most grueling and exciting periods of their lives: the legendary third year of medical school. It's time to sink or swim: the students must leave behind the security of the classroom and plunge into the life and death reality of practicing medicine in a bona fide hospital.

A true ensemble film, *Vital Signs* skillfully juggles half a dozen plot strands. It follows each of the five students as they proceed through the year—working 30 hours a day and fiercely competing with one another to earn honors, an achievement which can make or break their careers. For the first time in their education, the students are getting hands-on experience—discovering the joy of saving lives and the heart-break of losing them.

Most of the cast members are unknowns, but their performances are surprisingly vibrant and self-assured. Adrian Pasdar is outstanding as Michael, the son of a famous surgeon who is trying to live up to his father's sterling reputation. Michael is an exceptionally good student, but he doesn't become a good doctor until he learns from a cancer patient (Norma Aleandro) that people are as important as facts.

Diane Lane plays Michael's love-interest, a fellow student whom he finds attractive both for her extraordinary beauty and for her sensitivity. Lane began her film career in 1979 as a young girl (in *A Little Romance*); she has blossomed into a lovely young woman and a fine actress. Lane is integral to the movie's most heart-breaking sequence; unfortunately, she's also integral to the film's most serious blunder: an altogether gratuitous love scene which goes on and on and on...

Jack Gwaltney is effective as Kenny, an ambitious student who is more committed to his career than to his marriage to Laura San Giacomo (whose character is amazingly subdued and restrained compared to the over-the-top characters she plays in *Pretty Woman* and *sex, lies, and videotape*). Kenny is Michael's main competition for the coveted surgery internship; in fact, their ferocious rivalry is really the blood and guts of the film, the conflict which drives the story forward.

Another sub-plot, which is less fully-developed (but no less compelling), involves Jane Adams and Tim Ransom as a *When Harry Met Sally*-like couple: best friends who jeopardize their friendship by sleeping together. Adams and Ransom have precious little screen time, but they make it count by creating lovably goofy characters. Finally, Jimmy Smits (from "L.A. Law") is on board as the hospital's head surgeon, an educator who mixes stern authority and light-hearted humor to command respect and admiration from his students.

*Vital Signs* stands out because it absorbs us so deeply into its characters and because it conveys so vividly the intensity of medical school. The movie offers an intimate glimpse into the lives and loves of five genuinely compelling characters; as they change and mature, we celebrate their victories and grieve over their defeats.

The film convinces us that we are witnessing the real thing. In fact, the surgery scenes are uncomfortably realistic and incredibly riveting. Director Marisa Silver wisely silences the soundtrack and allows the operations to generate their own drama and suspense. Only the ending seems a little Hollywood, a bit too neat and tidy; everything else in *Vital Signs* seems brutally authentic and vital.