

When Harry Met Sally... ★★★★★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Harry says “tomaytoe.” Sally says “tomahto.” Harry says men and women can’t be friends because sex inevitably gets in the way. Sally says nonsense! And that in a nutshell is the premise of *When Harry Met Sally...*, starring Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan. Director Rob Reiner has hit pay dirt with *When Harry Met Sally...*; the movie is a masterpiece, one of the finest romantic comedies I have ever seen. Like *Dead Poets Society*, it’s the kind of movie that leaves you high and restores your faith in the magic of motion pictures.

Harry Burns and Sally Albright first meet in 1977 after graduating from college. They share a car from Chicago to New York and discover they really don’t like each other. Their feelings haven’t changed five years later when they run into each other on a plane. However, after another five years have passed, Harry and Sally meet once again just as Harry’s wife has left him and Sally has broken up with her boyfriend. This time they click and a deep platonic relationship blossoms; they become best friends. The movie explores their tumultuous relationship as they unwittingly fall in love.

Reiner (*Spinal Tap*, *The Sure Thing*, *Stand By Me*) frames the story within a series of recurring pseudo-documentary clips in which old, long-married couples describe how they met and fell in love. The people in the clips are actors, but the stories they tell are real and range from the absurd to the charming to the compelling. The funniest husband and wife talk simultaneously as they tell their love story. Neither one will shut up while the other is talking. The documentary couples and their stories provide timely commentary on the developments in Harry and Sally’s relationship.

At the heart of *When Harry Met Sally...*, crucial to its success, are the exceptional performances by the two leads. The biggest surprise is Crystal, whose subtle performance looms head and shoulders above everything else he has ever done. For a change, Crystal makes his character much more than a cardboard cut-out. In the tradition of Woody Allen, Harry is self-conscious and sees both the absurdity and tragedy in life. His dark side makes him pessimistic and cynical, but it also gives him a biting, sarcastic sense of humor. Crystal is extraordinarily adept at conveying both the pathos and humor within Harry.

Ryan, also delivering her finest performance to date, is equally engaging as Sally, whose compul-

sive, structured personality tends to cut her off from other people. Like Harry, Sally is a full of quirks and idiosyncrasies which make her seem genuine. For instance, when ordering from a menu, Sally drives waiters and waitresses crazy with her detailed instructions about how her food should be prepared.

Both of these characters are complicated, confused, and also irresistibly appealing. Their authenticity is refreshing, their motives and behavior thought provoking, enough so to inspire inner reflections of our own. Watching Harry and Sally grow and mature and their relationship develop is fascinating and moving.

When Harry Met Sally... is the consummate mix of humor, romance, and human nature. The movie is more than the sum of its parts—a true collaborative effort. Everyone involved in the film is in top form, including Carrie Fisher in a supporting role as Sally’s best friend. You know a movie is great when even Fisher delivers a good performance. Bruno Kirby, who plays Harry’s best friend, also deserves mention for bringing depth to his small role.

Reiner’s direction is authoritative and imaginative yet unobtrusive. He breathes new life into the technique of splitting the screen in half during phone conversations; he takes it even one step further and splits the screen into thirds in one ingenious scene. The story of Harry and Sally’s relationship spans 11 years, and Reiner uses the documentary clips to punctuate each chapter of their friendship. The passage of time in the film is unusually smooth and fluid.

The screenplay by Nora Ephron (*Silkwood*, *Heartburn*) is wonderfully clever. Her dialogue is witty and frank; the characters talk and behave like real people. Production designer Jane Musky has taken advantage of New York’s picturesque scenery (the browns and reds of autumn, the snowy white of Christmas) to help Reiner capture the city’s beauty. The movie’s romanticized version of New York is refreshing after the disturbing depictions we have seen recently in *Do the Right Thing*, *Ghostbusters II*, and even *Batman*. The soundtrack of classic jazz standards—featuring Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Harry Connick, Jr.—always evokes just the right mood.

When Harry Met Sally... is so true to life that it cuts almost too close to the bone as it shifts effortlessly between uproarious comedy and poignant

drama. In exploring the possibility for platonic friendship between men and women, Reiner has hit a nerve. He has shed light on those fundamental similarities and differences that unite and di-

vide the sexes. In case you're wondering, I haven't offered any criticisms of the film because I don't have any.

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