

of the town. Frank Bennett comes nosing around a couple of times, threatening to take Ruth and the baby away with him. When he disappears after one of these visits, Iddie is accused of murder.

The story comes out in episodes over the course of several months as Evelyn continues to visit Mrs. Threadgoode. Evelyn can't hear enough about Ruth and Iddie, and as time passes, she is transformed by them. She quits her marriage classes, loses weight, stands up to Ed, and gets a job. When circumstances require it, she yells Iddie's war cry of "Towanda!" and becomes a female avenger.

The framing device of Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode works very effectively in this film, in several ways. First, it builds suspense. Although Evelyn is an appealing character, and much of her story is very funny, when we are in the present, we are as anxious as she is to return to the past, and find out what happens next to Iddie and Ruth.

It also reminds us that Iddie and Ruth's story is long over — these are memories of youth, and youth cannot last. The characters from the 1930s whose story we become so involved in are now either old, like Mrs. Threadgoode, or dead. The colors and tone in the Whistle Stop scenes are soft and gentle, in contrast to the present, which is brighter, more strident and altogether familiar and ordinary, underscoring the fact that Whistle Stop and the people who lived there are lost to us.

It is unclear whether this softness is an accurate representation of life in Whistle Stop, or if that's just how Mrs. Threadgoode remembers it — one of several

pleasing ambiguities in the film. Another is that the film strongly suggests but never confirms that Mrs. Threadgoode is in fact Iddie grown old. Both, for example, are characterized as story-tellers. A third ambiguity is of course the fact that Ruth and Iddie's relationship is never labeled. The film's reticence about the relationship, however, is consistent with the slight air of mystery surrounding life in Whistle Stop in general, and this saves it from feeling like a betrayal of the audience.

The vanished Whistle Stop is a wonderful place, almost completely cut off from the outside world. Ruth and Iddie are its moral center. Although this is the Deep South, there is a surprising amount of racial harmony there. Ruth and Iddie serve all the townspeople, black and white, at the cafe. When the Ku Klux Klan makes an appearance, they are chased away by the local constable, an old buddy of Iddie's, and no one gets seriously hurt. We never quite believe that the murder rap will stick. And Frank Bennett, the only genuinely wicked character in the film, doesn't ever seem to be much of a match for Iddie.

Nobody else does either. Iddie, who strides through life on her own terms, fights back, and doesn't appear in a dress or skirt after the age of 11 — in short, the very model of a dyke—is never criticized for being different. The townspeople accept her and her relationship with Ruth, and love them both. Iddie is the axis on which the entire film past and present, turns. Whenever she's on screen, she lights it up.

And what about the relationship? It is romantic (the bee-charming scene), mildly erotic (a food fight in the cafe); and Master-

son and Parker make it come alive. The two women laugh and have fun together, work together, take care of each other, raise a child together, and clearly live their lives as a couple. At different times, each of them openly declares her love for the other. When Ruth tells Iddie that perhaps she should leave because Frank is causing so much trouble, Iddie asks her to stay and tells her with great intensity, "This is as settled as I ever hope to be." Later, when Ruth is asked in open court why she left Frank Bennett to go away with Iddie, she replies, "Because she is the best friend I have ever had, and I love her." Their relationship, which is perfect, is contrasted to the dubious pleasures of heterosexuality, represented by Frank, who is loathsome, and Ed, who is ridiculous.

The relationship may be perfect but the film, unfortunately, isn't quite. Several of the plot devices are more than a little shopworn — among them, Evelyn's transformation, the cross-generational friendship between Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode, Ruth's fate, and the Brigadoon-like quality of the town. The ending of Ruth and Iddie's story is disappointing, and it is only the knowledge that youth and perfection cannot last that saves it from being more of a let-down than it is.

The vividness of Ruth and Iddie's love and the performances of Kathy Bates, Mary Stuart Masterson, Mary Louise Parker and Jessica Tandy lift *Fried Green Tomatoes* out of the ordinary. In spite of its flaws, I loved this movie. The feelings it evoked stayed with me for days after I'd seen it because, like Evelyn, I'd come to believe in the reality of what I'd seen at the Whistle Stop Cafe. ▼

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