

Free to roam among the clouds

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Nov. 11, 2009



Hilary Swank stars as Amelia Earhart in "Amelia." (Fox Searchlight Pictures)

Amelia Earhart always fascinated me. Her biography was one of the first I read in grade school. I loved that she traveled the world by air and wondered what she was searching for. The mystery of her disappearance over the Pacific, along with that of navigator Fred Noonan, left me sad. I have retained my interest over the years. Every time a new theory about what happened to them or when a possible discovery is made, I follow the news. When I was missioned to Guam back in the early '90s, I remember standing on a high point on the island and looking out over the Pacific in awe of its vastness and might and imagining what happened to her.

Now Amelia has been brought back to life in director Mira Nair's new film. Two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank stars in "Amelia," and bears a remarkable physical resemblance to America's best-known pioneer aviatrix.

The film is a crosscut of the timelines of Amelia's life as a flyer, writer, marketer, promoter and feminist, with her final flight to circumnavigate the world framing the story. Amelia grew up in Kansas and the film shows her as a tomboy running across the fields, gazing up as a primitive airplane flies above. She learns how to fly.

After Charles Lindbergh's successful transatlantic flight in 1928, Earhart was offered the opportunity to be the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. She accepted but was actually the commander of the flight, a euphemism for what she herself called "baggage." Two men navigated and piloted the plane. Later that year she made the first solo flight back and forth across the United States. In 1932 she finally became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, from Nova Scotia to Ireland, in just under 15 hours. For this feat Congress awarded her the Distinguished Flying Cross.

That first transatlantic flight in 1928, however, marked her meeting with publisher and publicist George Putnam, adequately played by Richard Gere. Unknown to Earhart, a carton of Lucky Strikes cigarettes also made the flight and she reluctantly signed an endorsement afterward at Putnam's behest, even though she was not a smoker. Product endorsements, lectures and writing supported her flying career. In 1935 she accepted a faculty role at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., where she did career counseling for women.

Putnam divorced his wife and married Earhart in 1931. The film depicts their unconventional open marriage by

having the word "obedience" removed from the Earhart's marriage vows. Earhart did not expect or require monogamy. Her relationship with West Point professor of aeronautics Gene Vidal (Ewan McGregor), father of author and screenwriter Gore Vidal, was known but Earhart returned to Putnam. Their affection at first seems practical; by the end they seem devoted to one another.

Vidal and Earhart, with others, became early promoters of aviation and commercial flying and cofounded companies such as Northeast Airlines and Trans World Airlines. At one point, Earhart took her friend Eleanor Roosevelt (Cherry Jones) for a short flight, even allowing the first lady the thrill of taking the controls.

Then came her doomed plan to fly solo around the world, accompanied only by Fred Noonan (Christopher Eccleston), an alcoholic, but one of the best celestial navigators available. The plane was equipped with radio but navigating by the heavens was considered a must for this journey.

Nair is able to create the world of her story with authenticity. This historical biopic uses brief clips of actual documentary footage taken at the time of Earhart's accomplishments. The film works because it is about a woman whose achievements and mysterious disappearance have taken on the power of myth. Based on the books *East to the Dawn* by Susan Butler and *The Sound of Wings* by Mary S. Lovell, "Amelia" does not tell us anything we wouldn't know from reading her Wikipedia entry -- in fact, less.

While I would have preferred to know and understand Earhart better, as a media educator, I found historic value in the film's emphasis on how the celebrity/hype/product promotion/sponsorship machine was utilized by Putnam and Earhart during the Depression. Earhart designed a clothing and luggage line that popularized her image in the 1930s and earned income. She did so many things in her life and struggled with a health condition -- too many details for a feature film. Never proud, Amelia marvels at one point that she is able to do so many things while most of the people in America are living in dire straits.

Cinema is not about facts, however. It is about telling a story, in this case based on a true story, that engages the viewer's emotions. However, I didn't find Swank's Amelia particularly nuanced or interesting. Many have questioned Earhart's sexual orientation over the years, but there is hardly an allusion to it the film. Her feminism and independence are understated, which was a good call.

What saved the film for me are the choice selections of Earhart's writings and poems as voice-overs. These pull the film together and let us feel her soul. Nair handles Earhart's final flight extremely well. As radio communication fails, the tragedy and loss are played out on the faces of the characters and the frantic but resigned transmissions on mistaken radio frequencies. This spare imagining of Earhart and Noonan's end is effective, a tiny plane falling forever from the nebulous unknown into the immensity of water.

Earhart never wanted to marry or have children or run a household. She was a pioneer reaching beyond the limits of the world. Amelia was a dreamer. All she ever wanted was to be free to roam among the clouds.

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