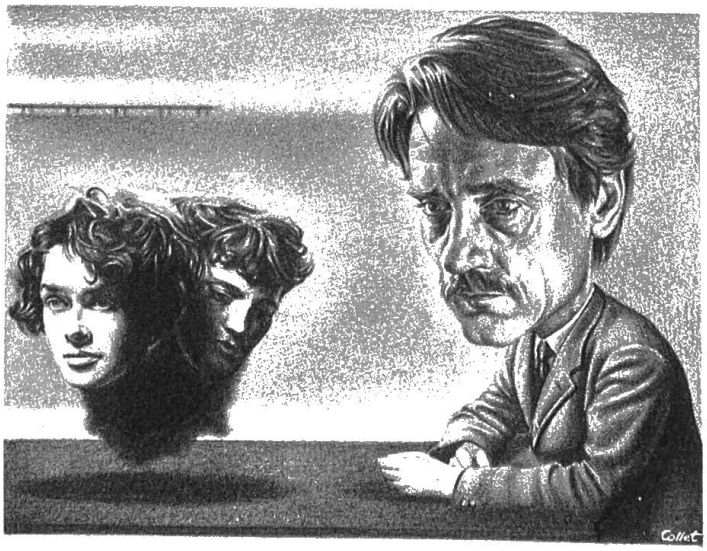
THE CURRENT CINEMA

MARRIAGES FROM HELL

by Terrence Rafferty

THE heroine of Stacy Cochran's "My New Gun" is a young suburban housewife named Debbie Bender (Diane Lane), whose husband buys her a revolver she doesn't want. Sunning himself on the balcony of their townhouse-style New Jersey condo unit, Dr. Gerald Bender (Stephen Collins) announces to his wife that he's uneasy living in such a "totally unprotected" spot. Debbie, in long shot, takes a slow look around her, as if to gauge the danger of her home's exposed location. The movie doesn't cut to what the heroine sees as she's gazing into the distance, because the previous shot has already shown us the view from the Benders' deck: a golf course. Most filmmakers would construct the sequence differently—would save the golf-course shot for a cutaway *after* Gerald's pompous speech about the "very sick world" we all live in. Picture it: he pontificates; she surveys; cut to her point of view, a pastoral vista of strolling golfers; big laugh. Cochran's way is better: the joke doesn't go off right in our faces, like an exploding cigar, but seems to come at us from offscreen somewhere, and with an echo. And not seeing Debbie's face in closeup as she drinks in the landscape that Gerald has just charged with unexpected menace allows us to imagine her expression, and the imagining expands the humor of the scene past the obvious point that Gerald is an idiot. By very simple means, Cochran gets us thinking about more interesting—and funnier—issues: What does it really feel like, moment by moment, to live with a fool like this? What, other than outright derision, would be an appropriate response to inanity of this order? How long, exactly, does it take to regain your composure after you've had a dumbfounding, out-of-the-blue pronouncement like Gerald's laid on you? In addition to sheer stupefaction, there's a weird, sweet, hilarious kind of tact in Debbie's pause to consider her husband's statement. She's very careful with Gerald, and we sense that her caution is based partly on affection and partly on fear. The heroine of "My New Gun" is married to a blustering male egotist of the sort that doesn't take kindly to being contradicted, much less laughed at; he's a clearer and more present danger to her well-being than the army of bogeymen supposedly advancing on the Bender condo from the direction of the fourteenth hole.



Lena Headley, Grant Warnock, and Jeremy Irons in "Waterland."

EDWARD COLLET

Cochran, who wrote as well as directed this picture, is a recent graduate of the Columbia University film school, and the assurance she shows in handling even a brief expository scene is astonishing. It's not just a matter of facility—of the ability to engineer audience-pleasing effects with smooth technique. Small decisions like placing the golf-course shot early in the scene and presenting Debbie's reaction in long shot rather than in closeup are indications of a natural and wholly personal style. They're choices that come out of the impulse to get *more* into every scene—to pass up the immediate, decisive audience response in favor of creating a mass of more ambiguous responses and teasingly suggestive possibilities, which may, down the line, give the movie a bigger payoff. "My New Gun" is a small-scale picture, and Cochran's style is clean, economical, unshowy; yet the movie never feels safe or trivial, because every detail is imbued with a real filmmaker's sensibility. It's in the rhythm of the scenes, her comic timing, her sense of where to put the camera—all the infinite tiny things that could be done in any number of ways but, done *this* way, link surprises and eccentricities with a fluency that makes them seem inevi-

table. This film-school graduate has the kind of "technique" that can't be taught; it's as elusive, both in its sources and in its effects, as a jazz singer's phrasing.

"My New Gun" is a picture that delights in fouling up the audience's expectations: every time you think you know where Cochran is going, she takes you somewhere else. She constructs a kind of inverted pyramid of unlikeliness, the whole thing balanced, precariously, on the initial absurdity of Gerald's decision that he and his wife need to be armed. The gun itself, which at first looks loaded with significance, proves relatively unimportant. For a while, it looms large in the characters' consciousness: on its first night in the Benders' home, Debbie is so nervous and distracted that she can't have sex with Gerald; later, she's awakened by a nightmare of the gun firing spontaneously in the drawer of their bedside table. As the movie goes along, though, the title firearm disappears from the screen for longer and longer stretches —crowded out by other sorts of dangers—and it plays no role in the picture's wild climax. By the end, the new gun is old news. The way Cochran uses it, the Benders' revolver finally seems just one object among many in the domestic suburban world that she has created; in terms of this story, the gun is a little more than a pretext and a lot less than a symbol.

The real subject of "My New Gun" is the heroine's changing relationship to the circumstances of her life, and especially her marriage. Gerald—with the doctor's arrogance that comes from knowing that anxious patients will hang on his every word and then accept unquestioningly whatever he tells them—dominates his wife completely. He knocks a pitcher of Martinis off the kitchen counter, and she picks up the pieces. When Debbie objects to the gun idea, he puts the brakes on the discussion with an impatient, stern-daddy pronouncement: "That's final." The movie doesn't portray Debbie as a cringing victim: she fights back. She just never wins. Her perspective is limited, bounded by (identical) condos on three sides and the golf course on the fourth. We see, as she doesn't, that the *last* thing she needs is better protection from the intrusions of the outside world. The movie contrives to remove Gerald from the household for a few days, and Debbie, on her own for a change, becomes embroiled in some pretty volatile outside-world action involving her across-the-street neighbor, Skippy (James LeGros). He's a scruffy young man with a goatee, a shifty manner, and a big crush on Debbie. Gerald, who loathes everyone who isn't exactly like him, is convinced that Skippy is a drug dealer, a Satan-worshipper, or a hit man, or perhaps all three. (Skippy claims to live with his mother, whom the Benders have never met; Gerald thinks of "Psycho.") Debbie isn't so sure; Skippy's manner with her is gentle and solicitous, and, God knows, he's easier to talk to than her husband is. Cochran and LeGros—who gives a wonderfully sly, seductive performance—keep us wondering about the character. Is Skippy a dangerous sociopath, and therefore a threat to the Benders' lives? Or is he a tenderhearted suitor, and therefore only a threat to their terrible marriage? What's this guy's story?

The comic grace of the picture's vision of suburbia is that Cochran shows us a world in which no one knows anyone else's story. The curious peer through their blinds or furtively size up their neighbors at the supermarket checkout counter. But their interest generally stops short of full involvement: embarrassment, or fear of turning up something really disturbing, cuts off the inquiry, reduces it to a quick take. Others, like smug Gerald, don't even know that there's more to know about how people live; any way of life that looks a bit strange (i.e., unlike that of a successful, well-dressed radiologist with a ravishing young wife) is horror-movie stuff, something to be repelled with deadly force. Cochran believes in doing justice to every kind of story, in prowling and rummaging through all these deceptively uniform-looking condos until she's found enough evidence to give each of her characters a real and individual history—a story that may make us laugh but also makes human sense. Debbie is Cochran's stand-in here, and Diane Lane's delicately funny performance conveys the movie's exploratory sensibility with thrilling clarity: she makes us feel the risky joy of venturing beyond your own narrow plot and becoming a part of someone else's story. One of the many surprises of "My New Gun" is the richness and beauty it imparts to the suburban setting—qualities deriving from interest in and respect for the vari-

ety of experience that even the dullest landscapes contain. Cochran's condoland isn't a satirist's world, or a cartoonist's, or a fairy-tale teller's; it's more like a novelist's. Yet the sort of liberation that "My New Gun" proposes, and embodies, is the product of a true filmmaker's vision. Its heroine frees herself by throwing open the picture-window curtains and taking a longer and more penetrating look outside. At the end, she's totally, beautifully unprotected from what she sees.

TOM CRICK (Jeremy Irons), the protagonist and narrator of Stephen Gyllenhaal's "Waterland," is another oppressed spirit in a hellish marriage; the story he's trapped in, however, is hermetic, inescapable, and has mirrors where the windows are supposed to be. He's a middle-aged history teacher immobilized not by outside forces but by his own past, which seems to have tangled and tightened inside him like a piece of string in a cat's stomach. Graham Swift's 1983 novel is a brilliant soliloquy, delivered by Crick to his captive secondary-school students, on the sources of his misery. (The hero's name is surely meant to remind us of Francis Crick, who was one of the discoverers of the structure of DNA—the spiral threads that encode and perpetuate genetic history in every cell.) The book is full of scholarly digressions on the culture and natural history of the fen country of East Anglia, the flat region—mostly land reclaimed from the sea—where Tom grew up, and where the events that effectively stopped the forward progress of his life took place. It's a determinedly, necessarily inward-looking novel: the reflections of a man who's stuck in the mud of his adolescent errors and has nothing to do but spin his intellectual wheels.

This is unpromising material for a movie. The chief virtue of the novel, which is Swift's staggering metaphorical agility, can't be reproduced adequately on the screen. (Even if it could, it would probably strike us as annoying and tiresome.) And the hero—a hopeless, defeated, rumpled-corduroy man, marking time with cleverness as he slides inexorably toward decrepitude and merciful extinction—isn't the sort that movie audiences tend to clasp to their bosoms. Yet the picture is, in its gray way, absorbing and often moving. The screenwriter, Peter Prince, has streamlined the novel's