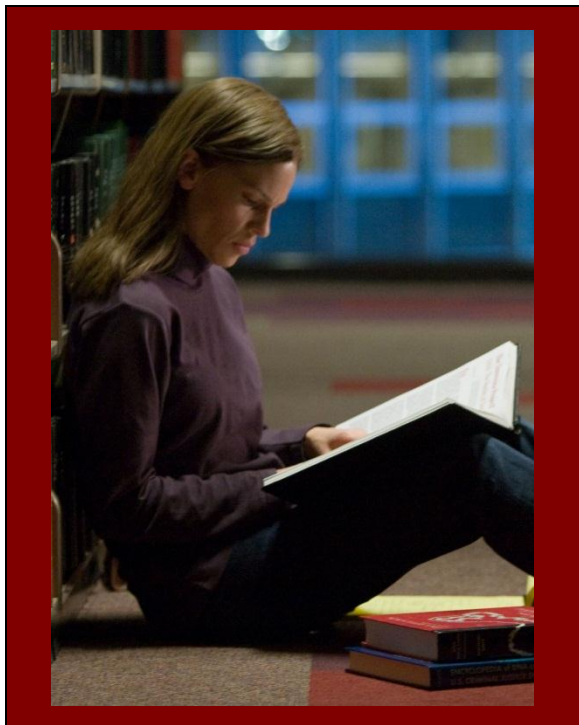


Conviction

Directed by Tony Goldwyn

Original Screenplay by Pamela Gray
(Based on the life of Betty Anne Waters)

Starring: Hilary Swank with Minnie Driver and Sam Rockwell



Crack the books then crack the case!
Hilary Swank as "Betty Anne Waters."

After a difficult childhood spent in and out of foster care, "Betty Anne Waters" (Hilary Swank) marries young and starts building a little nest. But when her volatile older brother "Kenny" (Sam Rockwell) is arrested, Betty Anne's world slowly turns inside out. Much to her own surprise, Betty Anne learns she's not the kind of woman who can just walk away, and thus begins a twenty-year odyssey that starts with education (she's a high school dropout!) and ends with passing the Bar Exam so she can become Kenny's attorney of record.

Conviction is based on a true story from the files of The Innocence Project (pioneers in using DNA evidence in the appeals process), but as a narrative feature, Conviction is more concerned with character arcs than historical facts.

Although none of the actors falter, and Sam Rockwell, in particular, gives the performance of his career to date as Kenny, Conviction belongs to its actresses. Major parts, minor parts, bit parts, walk-on parts, no matter—the female talent on display in this film is extraordinary.

Beneath the legal drama (with its DNA evidence, motions and appeals) lies the story of a woman who transcends her circumstances, remaking herself into a 21st century heroine of epic proportions

Penny's Points: ****½ ½

After a difficult childhood in and out of foster care, "Betty Anne Waters" (played by Bailee Madison as a child and two-time Oscar-winner Hilary Swank as an adult) just wants to live a normal life. So when she meets Mr. Right, Betty Anne marries young and builds a little nest, lavishing attention on her newborn son. Then her volatile older brother "Kenny" (played by Tobias Campbell as a child and Sam Rockwell as an adult) is arrested, and slowly but surely, Betty Anne's world turns inside out.

<http://www.WomenArts.org/Reviews/Conviction.htm>

At first she's not too worried. Even knowing Kenny's been in trouble all his life, Betty Anne is certain he could never commit murder, so she's sure there's no real evidence against him. But "Nancy Taylor" (Melissa Leo), the arresting officer, is relentless, and Kenny's weak public defender (Marty Bufalini), already overmatched by the zealous prosecutor (Talia Balsam), simply has no good cards in his hand. So Act One of Tony Goldwyn's new film *Conviction* ends with Kenny in jail. Sure it's unfair, says Betty Anne's sympathetic husband "Rick" (Loren Dean), but there's nothing more to be done.

Much to her own surprise, however, Betty Anne learns she's not the kind of woman who can just walk away, and she becomes obsessed with proving Kenny's innocence. In the beginning, her only asset is determination, but as the years pass, she completes a G.E.D., then a community college certificate, then a college degree. By the end of Act Two, about a dozen years after the trial, Betty Anne Waters has passed the Bar Exam, become Kenny's attorney of record, and enlisted the aid of "Barry Scheck" (Peter Gallagher), co-founder and director of The Innocence Project, in her appeal process.

So far, everything I've said above is a matter of historical record, but *Conviction* isn't a documentary, *Conviction* is a narrative feature. Yes, these characters (all defined as characters by placing quote marks around their names the first time I introduce them) are based on real people, but real life isn't neatly divided into "acts" played by actors. As a narrative feature, the goal of a film like *Conviction* is to use the tools and techniques of cinema to go beyond fact in order to elucidate the human condition. This it does brilliantly, making *Conviction* one of the very best films I've seen so far in 2010. (I'm a film critic, so in round numbers that means "Top Ten" in a field of at least 200 candidates.)

My first set of kudos goes to Pamela Gray for her eloquent screenplay. Gray creates a feisty young "Betty Anne Waters" character (age 8 or so) and then moves her through decades of increasingly intense life experience. Clever, resourceful, and loyal as a kid, Gray's Betty Anne has no idea how smart she is and no acquaintance with her own inner tigress. Gray makes Betty Anne's professional growth as a lawyer fully believable, all the while showing how the power of her personality drew people to her and kept them on her side through inevitable ups and downs over twenty years.

My next set of kudos goes to director Tony Goldwyn for his excellent casting. The female talent on display in this film is extraordinary. Major parts, minor parts, bit parts, walk-on parts, no matter—in each case, Goldwyn somehow found just the right actress for each role. Since I'm someone who fixates on and remembers female performances, I can tell you he culled from a diverse universe of multiplex, Indie, TV, and stage actresses, each one of whom brings depth and resonance to her own unique corner of Betty Anne's world.

None of Goldwyn's actors falter either. Loren Dean as husband "Rick" is a protective macho presence. Sons "Richard" (Conor Donovan) and "Ben" (Owen Campbell) fill Betty Anne's life with warm sibling banter. Peter Gallagher endows his "Barry Scheck" with compassion and dignity. And Sam Rockwell gives the best performance of his

career as “Kenny.” If Rockwell isn’t nominated for a Best Supporting Oscar in January, then there really is no justice for Kenny Waters in this world

As a filmmaking team, I also give Goldwyn and Gray kudos for understanding there are no villains in their story. Absolutely every character has a legitimate point of view. In fact, part of Rockwell’s accomplishment is to make Kenny so mercurial that we can’t really fault “Nancy Taylor” (the arresting officer so poignantly played by Melissa Leo) for thinking he must be guilty even when Betty Anne’s evidence shows otherwise.

The last set of kudos belongs to five actresses in ascending order, beginning with Kenny’s ex-girlfriends “Brenda Marsh” (Clea DuVall) and “Roseanna Perry” (Juliet Lewis), first seen when they take the stand to testify against him in Act One. Beyond their Act Three contributions to the unfolding legal drama, Brenda and Roseanna are there to remind us who Betty Anne’s peers were before Kenny’s incarceration sent her down a different path. Since this story is set in New England, I’ll invoke Robert Frost here: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...”

The person Betty Anne meets on the road “less traveled” is “Abra Rice” (Minnie Driver) a law school classmate who surfaces midway through Act Two and becomes a driving force in Act Three. Driver is so quick-witted and funny as Abra that audience members (especially male audience members) may not fully appreciate her multiple contributions to the narrative. The Betty Anne of Act One has no room in her life for “comic relief,” and the Betty Anne of Act Two has no time in her already hectic schedule for a BFF (“Best Friends Forever”). But by Act Three, Abra has become a critical part of Betty Anne’s personal and professional life.



Then there’s Kenny’s daughter “Mandy Marsh” (Ari Graynor). Mandy appears late in the film, well into Act Three, but Graynor’s performance packs a totally unexpected emotional wallop. Betty Anne searches for Mandy because she needs something from her mother Brenda, but once they’ve made a connection, it’s Mandy who shows audiences the degree to which Betty Anne has transcended her childhood circumstances and transformed herself into a role model for young women of a new generation. Although Graynor has had several well-regarded supporting roles in other films, “Mandy” is a break-out role for her and she stole my heart.

My final kudos go to *Conviction*’s star: Hilary Swank. The actress playing Betty Anne Waters must embody this heroine’s magnanimous spirit, of course, but it also helps that Swank already has two Best Actress Oscars on her shelf. With nothing more to prove to anyone but herself, Swank melts into the role, anchoring all the other performances with quiet confidence. And I think she, most of all, appreciates the irony here: in what may well be a Hollywood first, the real person is actually prettier, softer, and more feminine than the actress who plays her!

A few closing words from my October 8th telephone conversation with screenwriter Pamela Gray.

Jan: So Betty Anne's network—being a mother, being a sister, being an aunt, being a friend—these relationships pulled Betty Anne through?

Pamela: Absolutely, absolutely. And I believe that's just one difference between movies where the woman is the heroine [versus a male hero]. Often the male hero is the solo person, moving through [the film] without that community. But I do think the heroine's journey is different in that way. I see that in a lot of movies that are female-driven: they've got community; they're not working in isolation.

Readers, if you don't get this, if you still think *Conviction* is fundamentally a legal drama about DNA evidence, motions and appeals, then I suggest you go back and see it again.

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Clockwise from Top Left:
Sam Rockwell as "Kenny" with Melissa Leo as "Nancy Taylor."
Director Tony Goldwyn on set with Hilary Swank
Screenwriter Pamela Gray in London with Betty Anne Waters.
Minnie Driver as "Abra" with Hilary Swank as "Betty Anne."

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Ari Graynor at NYC Premiere (10/13/10).
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Pamela Gray/Betty Anne Waters at London Premiere (10/15/10).
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SPOILER ALERT:

Please do not read until after you've seen *Conviction*

Betty Anne Waters devoted almost 20 years of her life to Kenny's case. Then, approximately 6 months after his release from prison, Kenny had an accident and he died.

Conviction provides this sad bit of information in the end notes, but should it have been incorporated into the body of the film? No. The story told in *Conviction* is Betty Anne's story, and it ends when she succeeds in freeing him from prison. Kenny's death, however sad, may have ended Kenny's story, but not Betty Anne's.



www.TheHotPinkPen.com

"The Hot Pink Pen" (aka "Penny") is the nom de guerre of **Jan Lisa Huttner**, a longtime Feminist activist & self-professed advocate for women filmmakers. Jan writes reviews of films by women directors & screenwriters for **WomenArts** (www.WomenArts.org), as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. She is the founder of **WITASWAN** (Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now) & co-creator of **International SWAN Day** (with WomenArts' Executive Director Martha Richards). Jan's article on the '04 Oscars for *Women's eNews* received the award for "Best News Writing-Web" from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.



To surf Jan's database (with dozens of films written &/or directed by women), visit:

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