Miss Potter

Talent: Renee Zellweger, Ewan McGregor, Bill Patterson, Emily Watson.

Director: Chris Noonan
Classification: G – General Audiences
Duration: 109 minutes
We rate it: 3 stars.

Date of review: 25\textsuperscript{th} January, 2006.

To answer the most pressing question first: no, this isn’t a film about Harry Potter’s sister. Miss Potter, the charming new film by Chris Noonan (best known on our shores as the director of the original Babe) is a biopic built around the life and writing experiences of beloved children’s author Beatrix Potter. The creator of Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck and scores of other indescribably adorable animal characters is apparently still the highest-selling children’s author in history, beating everyone from Enid Blyton to latter-day picture book creators. Born in 1866, Beatrix Potter was a member of a reasonably affluent London family that had made its fortune in industry. As a young woman interested in making her own way in the world rather than settling for a convenient marriage, Beatrix spent many years proving to her rather strict and traditional parents that earning her own living as a writer and illustrator was nothing to be ashamed of. Potter’s mother in particular was deeply sceptical about her daughter’s talents and prospects, even in the face of Beatrix’s growing fame in the early years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Alongside these family struggles, Beatrix faced that with which we are all confronted in our growing up: romantic yearnings. These twin threads, family and romance, are really what the story of Miss Potter is built upon.

Renee Zellweger proved herself capable of voicing a most convincing English accent with her charming turn as Bridget Jones a few years ago. Here again the Texan actress convinces us that she’s been born and raised within the bounds of London, and in Zellweger’s hands Beatrix is an engaging and sensitively presented character. Ewan McGregor does his usual dashing work as Norman Warne, the man who becomes Potter’s publisher and fiancee, and the always-wonderful Emily Watson is terrific value as Warne’s eccentric sister. Rounding out the solid cast is much-loved Scots actor Bill Patterson (playing Potter’s father) and Barbara Flynn as the rigid mother. The cast is uniformly good, and
Richard Maltby Jr’s script gives them all intelligent and polished material with which to work.

If there’s any real fault with Miss Potter (and I’m aware that this is going to look like an odd criticism) it’s the fact that as a film it remains extraordinarily gentle, even when depicting the tragedy that sometimes touched Potter’s life. Many audience members will remember the full-blown despair that characterised Shadowlands, the 1993 film about the life of another British children’s author, C. S. Lewis. There’s none of that profound sorrow to be had here, though the bereavement Potter suffered at a crucial point in her life was heartbreaking indeed. Noonan’s film holds back in that area and treads softly at all times, and while it’s a beautiful and quite uplifting portrait of a woman and artist, Miss Potter lacks complexity in its depictions of recognisable human sadesses like heartbreak and loss. What the film shows most strongly, in loving and charming detail, is the complex relationship Beatrix shared with her characters, whose “behaviour” is depicted through judicious use of very fine animations that have Potter’s drawings come to life as she works on them, keeping their creator company as she fine-tunes her creatures and incorporates them into her experience of the world.

This is a film first and foremost for lovers of Beatrix Potter’s work, and it is indeed a well-crafted and charming biography.

Nick Prescott