



# f i l m

## THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD

**Director:** Dan Ireland

**Cast:** Vincent D'Onofrio, Renée Zellweger, Ann Wedgeworth, Harve Presnell, Benjamin Mouton  
(Columbia TriStar, 1996) Rated: PG  
**DVD release date:** 29 July 2003

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PopMatters Film and Book Critic



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### Weird Tales

There's a word for it, that nostalgia for an experience one never had. I get it whenever, in the course of reading, I come across a story reprinted from a pulp magazine of the '30s and '40s. Here I find memorable characters: Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze. The Shadow and THE SPIDER (always in caps). Lovecraft's shambling, slithering minions of the dark god Cthulhu. The "defective detectives," like the hemophiliac sleuth called The Bleeder or Nicholas Street, who could remember everything except his own name. Endless stories where the scientists were *really* mad, the hordes of hell lurked around every corner, and damsels by the truckload found themselves in distress and out of their dresses.

What it must have been like to be a kid then, sweaty palm closed around a hard-won dime, hurrying to the newsstand to pick up the latest issue of *Weird Tales* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories* to take to a secluded spot -- Mom was sure to take it away and trash it for the racy cover alone -- and be swept away for hours in a relentless current of lurid adventure. Amid the doldrums of the Great Depression, these pulps flourished by feeding their readers a steady diet of escapism loaded with contrived and implausible plots -- at the half-cent per word the pulps paid, writers tended more toward quantity than quality -- appalling violence, and sexual situations that, in the context of the times, stopped a whisker shy of outright porn.

No pulp writer exulted in his own audacity more than Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, King Kull, Bran Mak Morn, and a gaggle of other brawny heroes who slew and wrenched their way through nightmarish otherworlds rife with demons, sorcerers, and mad gods. Howard wrote as if he had siphoned the testosterone from his own glands to use for typewriter ink, and his editors did nothing to dispel the illusion among many of his fans that the writer was every inch a steely adventurer in the mold of his characters.

In reality, the creator of Conan was a reclusive kid from the little town of Cross Plains, Texas, a manic-depressive whose codependent relationship with his mother ran so deep that upon her death, he immediately committed suicide. He was something of a local scandal, that weird boy whose smutty stories and penchant for demonstrative behavior made him a pariah among the God-fearing folk of Cross Plains, nothing like the romantic figures of his imagination.

Which is why Dan Ireland's 1996 film *The Whole Wide World* comes as a complete, and pleasant, surprise. Based on the memoir, *One Who Walked Alone*, by Novalyne Price Ellis, the movie chronicles the two-year relationship between Novalyne (Renée Zellweger), a

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+ + + +

**Pieces of April** | A sits in the window | hair damp, contemp the disaster she exp day to become  
+ + + +

**Radio** | The white | black son relations initiated by the white need for redempt  
+ + + +

**Scary Movie 3** | Ju: you thought the S *Movie* franchise had of ideas, here it c again -- looking like out of ideas.  
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DVD/VIDEO

sheltered but independent-minded schoolteacher, and Howard (Vincent D'Onofrio), a relationship as rocky and tempestuous as any pulp adventure. The film's initial release was, to put it kindly, miniscule, an unlikely love story starring two then-relative unknowns. Since then, between D'Onofrio's higher profile on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and Zellweger's in, well, *everything*, suddenly this low-budget early effort is marketable, which is good because the film deserves to be seen.

In 1933, Novalyne's friend Clyde (Benjamin Mouton) introduces her to Bob Howard, "the greatest pulp writer in the world." Novalyne is an aspiring writer herself, a frequent but unsuccessful submitter to the confession magazines that rivaled the adventure pulps in popularity at the time. She knows nothing of Howard's work, only that, incredibly, he seems to be able to make a living with words, and she is desperate for someone with whom she might talk shop.

In fact, Novalyne is desperate for someone to talk to, period. While hardly a firebrand, she has little use for Bible-belt conventionalism. She has ideas and ambitions, and the company of friends who are scandalized when she says "damn" on a Sunday just won't cut it. Unable to get past Howard's watchdog of a mother (Ann Wedgeworth) on the phone, Novalyne boldly heads out to the house where the writer lives with his parents and catches Howard at work, shouting his lurid descriptions of bloodshed and mayhem at the top of his lungs as he types. Like his prose, Howard is larger-than-life, swaggering and blustering, a performer as much in need of an audience as Novalyne is for a mentor. At last, Howard has found someone to whom he can dole out his words face-to-face.

The trouble is, for all his bravado, Howard is virtually nothing *but* words. A stranger to his distant doctor father (Harve Presnell) and the primary caretaker of his consumptive and possessive mother, Howard sorely lacks more than rudimentary social skills. He chafes in the suit Novalyne insists he wear and manages to turn every conversation they have into some sort of embarrassing argument.

And then there's Howard's fantasy life. Shadowboxing on a public street as he spins a prizefight yarn in his head or showing Novalyne the gun with which he will eventually take his own life but which he carries to fend off the teeming legions of lowlifes and rednecks just waiting to jump him, Howard appears to be moving constantly from story to story inside his own head, and the reality of Novalyne refuses to conform to the plot. When he blithely tells her, "I walk alone -- I can't be tied down to anyone," he is honestly surprised when his cowboy monologue fails to seduce her. Thus Howard becomes Novalyne's bugbear, drawing her inexorably to his fiery imagination and lust for life and then repelling her with his mercurial moods and lack of inner substance.

*The Whole Wide World* is as unusual as its subjects. Filmed with all the trappings of a pastoral love story -- truly breathtaking Texas vistas and a lovely score by Hans Zimmer and Harry Gregson-Williams -- it is, ultimately, anything but. The romantic hero is so fixated on his heroism that he endangers the romance, while the heroine longing to be swept off her feet is required to be the levelheaded, grounded one. Their relationship is both stormy and chaste, and complexities abound. Chick-flick fans, beware. But the film's defiance of its own conventions is ultimately what makes it satisfying.

Well, almost satisfying. While Zellweger's steel-magnolia character is well suited for her limited range, D'Onofrio's penchant for overacting is given free rein here. At crucial moments, such as when the unstable Howard flies into a manic rage because his car won't start, he can be electrifying, but at other times, D'Onofrio approaches high-Dennis-Quaid-level histrionics -- Texas is an awful large hunk of scenery to try to chew all at once. Still, one must expect some bluster in a pulp romance, and this one is definitely worth one's hard-won dime.

— 4 August 2003



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**A Decade Under**

**Influence** | "Steal us," Coppola tells the young directors. It's than a shame that that's left for anyone

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**The Cars That Ate**

"As a result of their acts, the young people corrupted, totally. I grown up with this violence and we uncontrollable

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**The Devil and Dr.**

**Webster** | Featuring long-lost complete of the film, Criterion magnificent DVD of Devil and Daniel W illustrates contrasts between Heaven and Hell

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**The Family Guy, ' (Season 3)**

| While *Family Guy's* humor obliterates the bounce good taste, it also es faith in the American Family.

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**Whale Rider**

| Paid into her own by juvenile expectations and dreams

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