

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

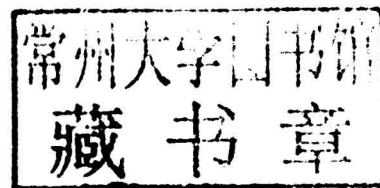
**CLC 385**

Volume 385

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Lawrence J. Trudeau**  
EDITOR



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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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## Preface

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# Gillian Armstrong

## 1950-

(Full name Gillian May Armstrong) Australian film director and producer.

### INTRODUCTION

Known for historical movies that focus on the experiences of women, Australian filmmaker Gillian Armstrong was one of the first female members of the Australian New Wave, a movement which transformed that country's cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. As a student at the Australian Film and Television School, Armstrong was educated alongside fellow New Wave film directors Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi, Chris Noonan, and Phillip Noyce. Like other directors of her generation, she has frequently focused on Australian culture, fulfilling government mandates for the representation of national culture and the employment of indigenous actors in cinema. Armstrong's films often depict female relationships, as seen in her earliest documentary work with working-class teenage girls in Adelaide and in her first successful feature film, *My Brilliant Career* (1979). Armstrong's most commercially successful work to date is her 1994 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel of nineteenth-century American girlhood, *Little Women*.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Armstrong was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1950, the second of three children. Her father, a real estate agent with a frustrated passion for photography, supported her artistic inclinations from a young age. Her mother had been a primary-school teacher before having children. Armstrong grew up in Mitcham, a suburb of Adelaide. She attended a local high school in Victoria and decided to enroll in art school. She originally intended to study theatrical costume and set design at Swinburne Technical College but grew increasingly interested in film over the course of her studies. Armstrong graduated in 1968 and promptly began work on a series of short films, finding additional work for a year as an assistant editor with a commercial film house. Armstrong served as producer, writer, and director for the short films *Old Man and Dog* (1970) and *Roof Needs Mowing* (1971). In 1972 she won a scholarship to become one of the first dozen students at the newly established Australian Film and Television School, an institution that helped to foster the flowering of national cinema in the 1970s and 1980s known as the Australian New

Wave. Armstrong graduated in 1973, part of its first class of directors.

Armstrong soon found work in various areas of the Australian film industry. In addition to designing costumes for several films, she was assistant to director Fred Schepisi on *Libido* (1973), and she continued to produce short films of her own. These include *One Hundred a Day* (1973) and *The Singer and the Dancer* (1977), both adapted from stories of working-class life by Australian author Alan Marshall. *The Singer and the Dancer*, with its strong feminist themes, was honored at the Sydney Film Festival in the year of its release. The South Australian Film Corporation commissioned Armstrong to produce a series of documentaries about the lives of working-class women from the Adelaide area. The first of these, *Smokes and Lollies* (1976), which documents three girls' experiences as teenagers, was her first film as a paid director. She returned to her three subjects at regular intervals in the follow-up documentaries *Fourteen's Good, Eighteen's Better* (1980); *Bingo, Bridesmaids & Braces* (1988); and *Not Fourteen Again* (1996).

Armstrong's reputation as a director of feature films was established in 1979 with *My Brilliant Career*, based on Miles Franklin's classic Australian novel of the same title. The movie won six Australian Film Institute awards in the year of its release, including Best Picture and Best Director, and in 1980 it was admitted to the competition at the Cannes International Film Festival. It also made Armstrong the first woman to direct an Australian feature film in more than four decades. *My Brilliant Career* garnered her recognition as a successful director of period pieces, a genre in which Armstrong continues to work. Armstrong later transitioned from Australian to Hollywood cinema, releasing the American film *Mrs. Soffel*, starring Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson, in 1984 before returning to Australia for *High Tide* (1987), a drama that combines her interests in women's experiences and the persistence of history. Although critically acclaimed, both *High Tide* and the subsequent *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992) found little success outside of Australia. A 1991 film, *Fires Within*, was such a disappointment that Armstrong publicly dissociated herself from the picture. Armstrong's return to Hollywood with her 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* also marked her return to mainstream commercial success and critical acclaim. In 2008 Armstrong's tenth feature film, *Death Defying Acts*, a supernatural thriller about 1920s escape artist Harry Houdini, was widely released after a special screening at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival. *Love, Lust & Lies* (2010) won

Armstrong an Australian Director's Guild award for best direction in a documentary feature.

In addition to her feature films, Armstrong has also been involved in music videography, directing concert documentaries, the rock musical *Starstruck* (1982), and the 1984 music video for Pat Wilson's "Bop Girl." Her documentary *Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst* (2006), was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Armstrong is married to John Pleffer. They have two daughters.

## MAJOR WORKS

Armstrong's debut feature, *My Brilliant Career*, established many of the themes for which her work is known. Based on a 1901 novel by the Australian feminist novelist Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin (published under the pseudonym Miles Franklin while the author was still a teenager), the story follows Sybylla Melvyn, a headstrong nineteenth-century working-class girl from Possum Gully, Australia, who longs for a life of grandeur. Despite her ambitions, Sybylla is forced by circumstance to work as a governess and housekeeper for an illiterate neighbor to whom her family is indebted. Ultimately courted by two men, the jackaroo Frank Hawdon and the eligible bachelor Harry Beecham, Sybylla rejects both in favor of creative independence. Although Sybylla and Harry become close, with two proposals of marriage exchanged, at the end of the film she leaves him in favor of her burgeoning writing career. The film closes with a voice-over of Sybylla reading aloud from her first novel, titled *My Brilliant Career*, as she is shown sending it off for publication. The project had been in development for several years, with the rights to the novel originally having been purchased by prominent Australian film producer Margaret Fink with the support of the Australian Film Development Corporation. Fink, acquainted with Armstrong through work in the Australian film industry, was impressed by her short films and hired her to direct the film, jump-starting Armstrong's career. Shown at Cannes in 1979, the film won the Australian Cinematographers Society Cinematographer of the Year award; two BAFTA awards, including Best Actress in a Leading Role; and a London Critics Circle Film Awards Special Achievement Award.

Armstrong's follow-up project took her to Hollywood, making her the first foreign woman to be approached by MGM studios as a director. *Mrs. Soffel* is based on the true story of a prison escape by two condemned brothers, Jack and Ed Biddel, who were aided by Kate Soffel, the warden's wife. *Mrs. Soffel* was filmed on location in Mulmer, Ontario, and was moderately well received. Armstrong returned to Australia for her next film, *High Tide*, which treats similar themes relating to the long-term difficulties resulting from women's personal choices. The film's protagonist, Lilli, played by Judy Davis, meets her teenage

daughter, Ally, after losing her job as a backup singer. Lilli has not seen her daughter since she was an infant, when she gave the child to the mother of her deceased husband to raise. Armstrong's 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* garnered substantial international and popular recognition. Starring Winona Ryder, Susan Sarandon, and Claire Danes, the film, which tells the story of four sisters growing up in nineteenth-century New England, was the first film adaptation of the novel since 1978. Armstrong's updated take on the American classic emphasizes the novel's feminist themes and, as critic Eva Rueschmann (2000; see Further Reading) observed, "offers a brilliant and skillful synthesis of the sentimental conventions of Alcott's Victorian storytelling with the melodramatic traditions of the Hollywood woman's film."

Armstrong has also received recognition for her work with Australian actress Cate Blanchett, whom she has directed twice: in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997) and in the spy drama *Charlotte Gray* (2001). In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Armstrong returned to the Australian colonial period, a favorite of Australian New Wave directors. Set in France and the United Kingdom, *Charlotte Gray*, based on the 1999 novel of the same name by Sebastian Faulks, tells the story of a young Scottish woman who becomes involved in the French Resistance during World War II.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Much of the critical discussion of Armstrong's career has concerned her status as a transatlantic success. As Mark Mordue (1989) asked, "How many directors leave a Hollywood which still wants them, return home to make a low-budget movie, then follow it with a documentary on working-class women? Not many." Mordue identified the central concern of Armstrong's non-Hollywood work as the "small lives that keenly matter in the Australian social landscape," an assertion further developed in the analyses of Felicity Collins (1999), which probe Armstrong's persistent thematic concerns with Australian history and the figure of the abandoned woman. Lizzie Francke (1995) identified Armstrong's interest in women's history as an indicator of her good fit for the project of updating *Little Women*. Although Linda M. Grasso (1998; see Further Reading) criticized the film for presenting a rosy view of women's history, claiming that Armstrong gave her female characters a level of personal agency that they would not historically have been able to assert, Rochelle Mabry (2001; see Further Reading) celebrated the movie as a work that subverts patriarchal narrative and visual conventions.

Twenty-first-century criticism has often focused on Armstrong's position in Australian New Wave cinema, both in her early works, as noted in Mary G. Hurd's 2007 retrospective of Armstrong's career, and in later films like *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Charlotte Gray*. Rose Lucas (2007) commented that, in the case of the former, Armstrong was even

more closely tied to Australian cultural history by her decision to adapt key national texts. In a 2008 interview with Brian McFarlane, Armstrong asserted the international character of contemporary filmmaking, claiming that “casting now is a global enterprise” and elaborating that “[p]roducers are doing it all over the world, taking a piece of money here, another piece there” in an industry that is “now mainly just for backing the big action, popcorn movies.”

Carina Saxon

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Old Man and Dog*. Screenplay by Gillian Armstrong. Dir. Armstrong. 1970. (Film)

*Roof Needs Mowing*. Screenplay by Armstrong. Dir. Armstrong. 1971. (Film)

*Gretel*. Screenplay by Hal Porter. Dir. Armstrong. 1973. (Film)

*One Hundred a Day*. Screenplay by Armstrong. Dir. Armstrong. Australian Film, Television, and Radio School, 1973. (Film)

*Smokes and Lollies*. Dir. Armstrong. South Australian Film, 1976. (Film)

*The Singer and the Dancer*. Screenplay by Armstrong and John Pfeffer. Dir. Armstrong. Spectrum Films International, 1977. (Film)

*My Brilliant Career*. Dir. Armstrong. Greater Union Organization, Margaret Fink Productions, and New South Wales Film, 1979. (Film)

*A Busy Kind of Bloke*. Dir. Armstrong. Baseline Studio-Systems, 1980. (Film)

*Fourteen's Good, Eighteen's Better*. Dir. Armstrong. 1980. (Film)

*Touch Wood*. Dir. Armstrong. 1980. (Film)

*Starstruck*. Dir. Armstrong. Australian Film Commission, Palm Beach Pictures, 1982. (Film)

*Mrs. Soffel*. Dir. Armstrong. MGM, 1984. (Film)

*High Tide*. Dir. Armstrong. FGH, Helmdale Film, SJL, 1987. (Film)

*Bingo, Bridesmaids & Braces*. Dir. Armstrong. Film Australia, 1988. (Film)

*Fires Within*. Dir. Armstrong. MGM, 1991. (Film)

*The Last Days of Chez Nous*. Dir. Armstrong. Fine Line, 1992. (Film)

*Little Women*. Screenplay by Robin Swicord. Dir. Armstrong. Columbia Pictures, 1994. (Film)

*Not Fourteen Again*. Screenplay by Armstrong. Dir. Armstrong. Beyond Films, 1996. (Film)

*Oscar and Lucinda*. Dir. Armstrong. Australian Film Finance et al, 1997. (Film)

*Charlotte Gray*. Dir. Armstrong. Ecosse Films, FilmFour, Pod Films, Senator Film Produktion, 2001. (Film)

*Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*. Dir. Armstrong. Becker Entertainment, Film Australia, Northern Pictures, 2006. (Film)

*Death Defying Acts*. Dir. Armstrong. Australian Film Finance et al, 2007. (Film)

*Love, Lust & Lies*. Dir. Armstrong. Australian Broadcasting Company et al, 2010. (Film)

## CRITICISM

### Robyn Everist (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: Everist, Robyn. “Her Early Career: Gillian Armstrong’s Short Films.” *Don’t Shoot Darling! Women’s Independent Filmmaking in Australia*. Richmond: Greenhouse, 1987. 314-22. Print.

[In the following essay, Everist analyzes Armstrong’s earlier films. She argues that in these works, “old clichés—especially those about women—are not reinforced. Instead, Armstrong is committed to a less stereotyped representation of her characters’ feelings and attitudes.”]

Gillian Armstrong is a contemporary Australian film director who has rocketed into a prominent position in the film industry. She has directed films which range from short documentaries and independent films to commercial productions such as *My Brilliant Career*, *Starstruck* and *Mrs Soffel*.<sup>1</sup> Most of her films have received awards and wide acclaim by critics.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on two of Armstrong’s ‘independent’ productions. *One Hundred A Day* (1973) is a short, black and white film, written and directed by Armstrong. The central character, Leila, is drawn from a short story by Australian author, Alan Marshall. The other film, *14’s Good, 18’s Better* (1980), is a forty-seven minute colour documentary, incorporating footage from her earlier film, *Smokes and Lollies* (1975), which examined the lives of three fourteen-year-old South Australian girls, and extending its themes by documenting the same girls aged eighteen. Both films reveal a director who seems prepared to experiment imaginatively with the film medium.

Most of Armstrong’s films revolve around women and issues related to women. *The Singer and the Dancer*,

made in 1976, bridges Armstrong's movement into mainstream cinema. A conventional narrative, the film focuses on the story of a young woman's entrapment, paralleled in, and mirrored by, the predicament of her older friend, Mrs Bilson. A series of symbolic and slightly stilted shots emphasise their shared plight. The film's themes are relatively provocative, yet the techniques employed by Armstrong seem more closely guided by the conventions of commercial cinema than those employed in either *One Hundred A Day* or *14's Good, 18's Better*.

Her next film, *My Brilliant Career* (1978), suggests the influence of commercial filmmaking on her style of direction. *My Brilliant Career* is a significant film, not only for its subsequent success, but also because it is the first major feature film to be directed by a woman in Australia since the films of the McDonagh sisters in the 20s and 30s.<sup>3</sup> This fact, combined with the weight of a million dollar budget, appears to have influenced Armstrong to downplay the strong feminist themes of her earlier work and to abandon her technical experimentation. She commented that, in *My Brilliant Career*, 'we couldn't overdo it . . . we wanted the film to work and we didn't want to turn people off.'<sup>4</sup>

The film is consciously designed to appeal to a wider audience and inadvertently perpetuates dominant male values. The woman's voice is subverted as the story is informed by 'an ideology which is more interested in her romantic life than in her brilliant career.'<sup>5</sup> Sybylla and Harry embrace only once (the film's gesture towards the constraints of the Victorian era) yet this shot is used as the film's major advertising still. It represents a sexist and stereotyped image of 'romantic' love; Harry's placement higher up in the frame signifies male dominance and implies that Sybylla's 'brilliant career' lies in marriage to Harry rather than in her career as a writer. This publicity still compromises the feminist overtones of the film's title.

In Armstrong's independent films, old clichés—especially those about women—are not reinforced. Instead, Armstrong is committed to a less stereotyped representation of her characters' feelings and attitudes. These films 'jar' the audience rather than attempt to satisfy conventional expectations. In both *One Hundred A Day* and *14's Good, 18's Better*, Armstrong concentrates on the limited options and rights of women.

In *One Hundred A Day*, Leila's fragile economic circumstances as a young, single, working-class woman mean that she has no option but to have a backyard abortion while continuing to work at a shoe factory. Armstrong swiftly moves us around the factory floor to convey the monotony and poor conditions of employment. The audience is confronted by rapidly changing, close-up shots of machines pounding the hardened shoe-leather, while other mechanisms press and cut it into jigsaw-shaped pieces. These are then sewn together by the machinists, as uncomfortable-looking heels are turned and fitted. Grinding noises and

roaring machines also help to create an appreciation of the difficult working conditions at the factory. Leila and her friends use the lavatory as their only meeting place which adds to the sense of secrecy and shame surrounding Leila's abortion, as well as representing the bleak conditions of the workplace.

As these details accumulate, the viewer realises that the director is deliberately making visible something that is usually obscured—the deep friendship and camaraderie that develop when women share oppressive working conditions. Mainstream films usually avoid serious examination of controversial topics such as unwanted pregnancies and abortion. Yet Armstrong risks audience disapproval by showing concern, in both this film and *14's Good, 18's Better*, for this important issue.<sup>6</sup> Both Leila, in *One Hundred A Day*, and Josie, in *14's Good, 18's Better*, face loss of 'reputation,' rejection by their parents, and the fear of being sacked from their jobs because of pregnancies. As a single parent, aged fifteen, Josie experiences poverty and the hardship of bringing up an asthmatic child alone.

Armstrong reveals the plight of women 'in trouble' without heavy didacticism. Her treatment of the subject in *One Hundred A Day* is typical. She creates a mood of emotional tension in order to encourage audience identification with the plight of the heroine. Rather than simply presenting the operation, she portrays the emotional distress and disturbance caused by the abortion. A medium shot concentrates our attention on Leila's friends, Sadie and Mabel, as they wait nervously on the couch, chewing gum, smoking, and clutching their handbags tightly, obviously concerned about 'poor Leila.' The sound of instruments and bottles in the background add to the tension and elicit our sympathies as we imagine the inadequate medical standards. The film then cuts to a medium close-up shot of Leila machining. The following close-up on her face intensifies the spectator's awareness of her sufferings. We watch her eyes suddenly jolt open in pain and perspiration collect on her forehead. The black and white photography heightens the contrast of shadows on her face, and the brutality of her experience. The series of shots establish Leila's courage as she fights the agony, in the hope of maintaining concentration on her work. Suddenly, the rasping noise of the machines stops and Leila is unable to sew the leather. A new scene opens with the sound of raucous giggling and a close-up of Sadie and Mabel still waiting in the abortionist's house. The audience is shocked by the juxtaposition; the girls' laughter is sufficiently inappropriate to seem cruel—and yet is understandable, given their nervousness. This emphasises the solitude of Leila's suffering and encourages the audience to sympathise with her.

In *14's Good, 18's Better*, sound, editing and camera work also combine to work on the spectator's emotions. The camera steadies on Josie's face as she tells of the lack of support and the judgemental reactions she received over the birth of Rebecca. Her tone of voice and facial expression

are half amused as she recollects sending herself extravagant baskets of flowers to the hospital so that she could be like the other mothers. Josie's composure is dignified as she recalls sitting in her empty flat listening to Rebecca crying and the ticking of the clock—her only company. The camera methodically captures images of Josie as she performs the roles of a capable mother—aged eighteen. Lacking specific footage of the intervening years, the film requires the audience to fill in the gaps and imagine for themselves her difficulties on a single mother's pension. The editing techniques, combined with the unpretentious and sincere tone, compel the spectator's involvement. Society may regard abortion and illegitimacy as 'unacceptable' but Armstrong depicts supposedly erring women as characters with whom we can identify.<sup>7</sup> She offers no concrete 'solutions' to these complex problems but, rather, unmask the subject for discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Armstrong influences our reading of the film texts by directing our sympathy towards the female characters. In *One Hundred A Day*, the extreme loneliness which marks Leila's experience is effectively revealed in the relatively short thirteenth scene. A medium shot establishes Leila by herself in the lavatory of the shoe factory. She is sitting on the last toilet in the row which adds to the impression of her isolation. The stark, grubby white walls emphasise the sordidness of the scene. The camera remains focused on Leila who suddenly convulses forward, her body doubling over in agony. Armstrong then freezes this shot for a few seconds, heightening our awareness of Leila's extreme physical pain. The cinematic devices mesh together effectively with a tightness that causes Armstrong herself to claim: '*One Hundred A Day* works more as a piece of film than anything else I've done.'<sup>9</sup>

Armstrong's interest in, and genuine esteem for, her female characters also pervades *14's Good, 18's Better*. The film encourages us to understand the three girls through a collage of images, voice-over opinions and recollections. The frank enthusiasm of the girls at age fourteen is captured in close-up, as they reveal their romantic notions of the future. Armstrong's preference for close-ups continues with the filming of the girls at eighteen. The use of this intimate form indicates that Armstrong must have established a relationship of trust with the girls and with their families. Fights at the dinner table and snapping comments such as: 'Stop chewing those damn lollies!' and 'Been to the shop again?' record the subject's everyday interactions.

Occasionally, the camera-work draws attention to particular details, for instance, one of the family members spilling heaps of salt and tomato sauce on their meal. But it is the editing which emphasises the way Armstrong manipulates audience response. The juxtaposition of ideas against a kaleidoscope of images deliberately draws the viewer's attention to the film's editing techniques—a process which also makes it clear that this is a documentary which does not pretend to be a mirror of the 'real' world or an uncon-

structed record of the 'truth.' Armstrong's editing style thus partly, but not entirely, destroys the continuity of the cinematic discourse. The film concludes in a more conventional manner, with the director enquiring about the girls' future prospects. Armstrong's use of cinematic techniques helps to construct intriguing insights into the lives of the three girls, aged fourteen and eighteen.

I'm not having more fun now than when I was fourteen, because, well, I'm married.

(Diana)

With obvious intent, Armstrong places Diana's comments at the beginning of the film to draw attention to the girls' common dilemma. She gently charms the audience through her nonjudgemental presentation of the girls' perceptions and attitudes. *One Hundred A Day* and *14's Good, 18's Better* both resonate with scepticism about the assumed equality and liberation of women in society. The women in these films endure their situations. Unlike the female protagonists in her commercial films, they are not women who are able to take chances and move beyond societal constraints.

*My Brilliant Career*, *Starstruck* and *Mrs Soffel* all represent women who pursue their personal aspirations and who do not accept things: 'that they don't necessarily have to accept.'<sup>10</sup> With verve and boldness, these heroines strive to establish their individual identities and emerge, at the end, triumphant in terms of their own desires. In contrast with her early films, Armstrong's commercial feature films are more conventional in their cinematic style, and in their closed, 'happy' endings. Yet, her heroines are less conventional than those portrayed in many other contemporary popular films. It would seem that Armstrong, although working within the constraints of commercial cinema, nevertheless continues to pursue her interest in issues which affect women—an interest which is clearly at the heart of *One Hundred A Day* and *14's Good, 18's Better*.

*One Hundred A Day*, *14's Good, 18's Better* and *The Singer and the Dancer* risk leaving the audience with some feelings of discomfort. The endings do not attempt to close off the issues raised by the films' major discourses. The significance of the titles of the films becomes evident in the context of viewing. The connotations of the titles epitomise the concerns raised. *One Hundred A Day* refers not only to one hundred shoes being made in the factory each day, but also to the more alarming statistic of one hundred women suffering abortions each day. The title *The Singer and the Dancer* alludes to the dreams and aspirations of two trapped housewives, Charlie and Mrs Bilson, and is particularly tinged with irony, while the title, *14's Good, 18's Better* poses a central question about growing up and whether, in fact, women's lives do improve as their energies become more channelled and choices further reduced. It is clear that Armstrong's independent films make no attempt to offer palliatives to the