

FilmReview



Swank Stresses the Uplifting Side of Human Rights

By Michael Wilmington
Contributing Columnist

Hilary Swank gives a powerhouse performance as a maverick high school teacher in "Freedom Writers," an often gripping and sometimes even inspiring film drama taken from the real-life story of Erin Gruwell. The first-time freshman English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, Calif. turned a rough classroom situation into a local educational triumph.

Like Erin Brockovich in the movie made from that real-life story, this California Erin offers the type of role that actresses love to play - especially Oscar-winning actresses with artistic ideals and high ambitions like Swank. And who can blame her? Erin is smart, dedicated, warm-hearted, a battler for the rights and potential of her mostly lower-class students, and a woman who defies grievous personal problems and nasty office intrigue to kindle the flame of knowledge among her white, black, Asian and Latino kids.

In her first go-round as a teacher, after abandoning a seemingly sure-fire career as a lawyer, shepherded by her successful attorney dad (Scott Glenn), Gruwell takes over a class of hard-case students who at first ignore or ridicule her, while working with cynical or contentious colleagues who think that teaching these kids is a waste and mock her for wearing pearls to a school that needs security patrols.

But Gruwell breaks through, giving



In Freedom Writers, Hilary Swank teaches underprivileged kids

them a taste for "The Diary of Anne Frank" and Homer's "Odyssey," even though their own lives are riddled with broken homes, turf wars, drive-by shootings and personal tragedy - and even though many of them have lost at least one friend to gang violence.

Out of her efforts came "The Freedom Writers Diary," an anthology of journals and personal writings done in Gruwell's class. These memoirs convey the tension and danger - and sometimes overwhelming sadness - of the students' lives, and bits of them are used in voice-overs during the film.

The film's emotional high comes when

Gruwell (as it happened in life) brings to her class all the way from the Netherlands - one of the main characters in Anne Frank's diary: Anne's friend and protector, Miep Gies, now an elderly woman played by Pat Carroll. If this were fiction, the average screenwriter probably would have dismissed that scene as unbelievable - but it's precisely why Gruwell's story is worth telling.

Swank makes the role her own, and she helps her fellow actors shine, too, including Patrick Dempsey as her initially supportive but eventually alienated husband, Scott, and Imelda Staunton (the great "Vera Drake") as her most persistent

Freedom Writers

Running Time: 2 hours, 3min.
Rated PG 13 (Violent Content)
Directed by Richard La Gravenese


Rating:


(out of 4 manatees)


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foe at school - as well as younger actors like April Lee Hernandez as gang girl Eva, Mario as street guy Andre, and Deance Wyatt as nasty class clown Jamal.


If "Freedom Writers" weren't based on a true story - and if some of its most amazing scenes, such as the Miep Gies visit, weren't taken from life - it might be damned as sentimental and improbable. But writer-director Richard LaGravenese (who scripted "The Fisher King" for Terry Gilliam and "The Bridges of Madison County" for Clint Eastwood) can mix reality, sentiment and high drama with a balance that catches the story's raw anxiety and pathos.

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1 **Sunrise/Sunset – Bay/Beach Beauty!** Dramatic sunrise & sunset views included in this immaculate, well priced Siesta Key condo. Built in 2002, this 3/2.5 unit is designer decorated with beautiful furnishings included! Large deck overlooking the Bay seems like another room. White sand of Crescent Beach is just a short stroll away. #334426 **\$1,165,000 Furnished**

2 **Sitting on the edge of the Bay!** Nestled one lot in from Sarasota Bay sits a carefully crafted Mediterranean yachtsman's refuge. Meticulous craftsmanship & fine finishes including marble flooring and fine wood cabinetry are apparent throughout this 4/3.1 home. The elegant pool and spa compliment the backyard waterfront entertainment area. #334365 **\$3,195,000**

3 **Swimsuits Optional!** All doors lead to the private pool and patio, set amid lush plantings and colorful flowers in this picture-book backyard. The meticulously maintained residence has been completely remodeled with fine finishes and attention to detail and is situated on a large corner homesite. #335391 **\$1,135,000**

4 **Island Lot – Anna Maria Lifestyle!** Situated in the heart of the casual island community, flanked by Gulf & Bay, is a lot with promise. Design your own dream house or work from internationally acclaimed artist Barbara McCann's rendering. Begin to build your island dreams! #335497 **\$399,000**

5 **Southern Coastal Waterfront Charm!** Enjoy casual island living in this updated 3/2, canal front bungalow. Tongue-and-groove vaulted ceilings increase the home's spacious feeling and wood flooring adds to its warmth. Launch your boat from the private dock directly to the Bay. Close to beach, botanical park and award-winning restaurants. #334393 **\$699,000**

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(941) 552-5463
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