

The Secret Life of Words (2005)

On Video

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour 55 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our stars (1-5): 4.5

*Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized
me,*

*like the pangs of a woman in labor; I am bowed down so that
I cannot hear,*

*I am dismayed so that I cannot see. My mind reels, horror has
appalled me;*

*the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into
trembling.*

Isaiah 21:3-4

Spanish director-writer Isabel Coixet's 2005 English language film is such a sensitive study of human anguish and potential healing that it is a wonder it fared so poorly in the US—especially because its three stars, Sarah Polley, Tim Robbins, and Julie Christie (the latter in a cameo role) are so well known and respected. Many critics received it warmly, but apparently with the distributor offering near-zero publicity, the public never learned how good the film is. Let's hope it is doing better in its video versions.

The film opens with a fire aboard an oil-drilling platform off

the coast of Northern Ireland. One man is killed, and another seriously burned. After this very brief sequence the film switches to a factory in the United Kingdom where the partially deaf Hanna (Sarah Polley) works at a repetitive job that calls for no real skills. When she speaks, which is seldom, it is with a slight accent, indicating that she is from Eastern Europe or the Balkans. Hanna keeps to herself, her daily lunch brought from home as bland as her life—chicken, rice, and an apple. Picking up her mail at home, she drops it in a pile of unopened letters, mostly from the same person. At night she does needlepoint, but not for the sake of the finished product, as she discards it as soon as she is finished. It is simply something to do to fill the lonely hours.

We do see her reach out once to another when she makes a telephone call. An older woman, whose name we later learn is Inge (Julie Christie), answers, but Hanna does not speak. She remains on the line, and the older woman, whom I mistook to be her mother, realizes the identity of her caller and tries to get her to speak.

For several years Hanna has not taken a vacation or break, which causes her fellow workers to complain about her behavior. Her boss calls her in, explaining that her work is fine but that she must now go away for a month. "Go someplace warm, with palm trees and aerobics in the pool!" Instead, she goes to a colorless seaside village. Eating alone in a restaurant, she overhears a man talking on his cellphone. He is worried that he has not yet found a nurse to care for the badly burned oil rig crewman. On impulse Hanna walks over to his table and makes the surprising (to viewers) revelation that she has been a nurse, and yes, she has cared for burned victims.

Dimitri (Sverre Anker Ousdal) welcomes her aboard the rig and points out that it is a good place for someone who wants to be alone. Her patient Josef (Tim Robbins) is badly burned, his

face cut and seared in several places, and he has been temporarily blinded. However, despite his continual pain, he is not self-obsessed, but very curious about his nurse. "You're a blonde, right? I can tell from your voice." She barely returns his queries, not even revealing her name. He decides to call her Cora, the name of his best friend's wife, and she makes no objection.

Due to the fire damage, the future of the rig and its now skeleton crew are in doubt. Most noteworthy of the crew besides the friendly Dmitri are Simon (Javier Camara), the Spanish cook who serves up fine cuisine that most of the crew do not appreciate and Martin (Daniel Mays), the oceanographer whose official job is to measure the waves, but whose secret passion is to study and save the mussels that the filthy water from drilling is threatening to extinguish.

Hanna tends well to Josef's wounds and gradually warms to his rough-hewn charm. Some of his questions seem intended to shock, such as does she prefer uncircumcised men? Josef shares personal secrets, one being that he cannot swim. Still, she continues to deflect his stream of questions about her life, even as to her real name. However we know her reserve is melting when she, carrying away Josef's tray one day, notices that he has not eaten his dessert. She dips a spoon into the pudding and slowly samples it. Then she wolfs it down as if it were the first food in a long time that she has enjoyed.

Hanna does at last open up, realizing that she and her secret shame are safe with this compassionate man. In a long (for her) speech she reveals her horrible experience during the Balkan wars when she was captured and raped by enemy soldiers. Her years of retreating into silence and routine factory work had become part of her survival technique. In Denmark Inge, the woman who writes to her and whom Hanna had called, had been of some help (was she her therapist?), at least to where Hanna had been able to exist in the outside world, but without really being healed. Josef reaches out to her and they

passionately embrace in his bed.

This is not the final turning point for the wounded Hanna. The time soon comes when Josef is recovered enough to be transported by helicopter off the rig to an on-shore hospital. Hanna holds his hand during the flight, but when they land, the two are separated, she walking away while her former patient is loaded into an ambulance. He calls out plaintively for her as they part, but she does not turn back.

What happens after that will warm your heart. It is what you hope for, but this being a non-Hollywood film, you are not sure, because we find Hanna back at her old factory job. She still has a blank expression on her face and keeps to herself. When she is offered an opportunity for a new life she almost rejects it—her psyche is still far from being healed, even though the journey back at has least begun on the oil rig. She has experienced during the past month the compassion and support that has begun to counteract the unspeakable horror that had torn body and soul. And so the positive ending that unfolds is not a lugubrious Hallmark movie one, but a conclusion stemming from the kind of love that the apostle Paul wrote “hopes all things, endures all things.”

I am indebted to 2016’s wonderful Movies and Meaning Film Festival, hosted in Albuquerque N.M. by [Gareth Higgs](#), for the privilege of seeing this powerful film. Gareth introduced the film and joined with trauma survivor and therapist [Teresa Pasquale](#) in leading an interactive discussion of the film. Affirming the truth and honesty of the film, Teresa emphasized how Hanna started on the road to recovery only when she found Josef’s sick room to be a safe place where she could confess the shame and pain she had endured. Although we had already seen that this film was more than entertainment, the insightful remarks by this wounded healer made us appreciate the film all the more. Although I am not suggesting that your film group become a therapy session, the film will certainly inspire and inform your members, making them more sensitive to

the often unvoiced pain around them because of the secret silence of words. This is a movie to embrace, cherish, and unpack with others rather than to watch alone.

This review will be in the April 2016 issue of VP with a set of discussion questions.