

SWANSONG

at hanging rock



(QUEERING
THE
1975
FILM)

(mordecai alba)

CONTENT WARNINGS

Homophobia

Suicide

Missing persons

Sibling separation

Child abuse

Restraint

Misogyny



INTRODUCTION

Picnic at Hanging Rock is a 1975 Australian film based on Joan Lindsay's earlier novel of the same name.

It's not particularly action-heavy—it's from the 70s, after all—and therefore carries a much different feeling than other sci-fi or fantastical films. I'd recommend watching the film before you read this zine, but I watch so many YouTube videos analyzing stuff I've never actually read or watched. At this point, telling you that you absolutely *must* watch the movie before reading this zine would just be ridiculous, so do what you like.

As a quick side-note, I haven't read the original novel, nor have I watched the more recent TV adaptation, so this zine will focus solely on the film and its portrayal of the characters. From what I can find online, the more recent TV adaptation features explicit queer representation of several of the characters, which is pretty cool.

I haven't looked too much into exactly which, so any crossover is entirely coincidental—or maybe, just two people looking at a very obviously queer person and thinking the same thing.

PLOT

In case you haven't watched the movie, or just need a refresher, the plot of the film is as follows:

A girls' boarding school in Australia, Appleyard College, takes a day trip to a local mountain called Hanging Rock.

Four of the girls (Miranda, Irma, Marion, and Edith) explore the rock while everyone else, save for one of the teachers, Miss McCraw, falls into a mysterious slumber back where they've been picnicking.

Edith serves as the classic whiny worrywart, constantly falling behind and complaining about the heat and dirt. Once they reach the top of the rock, all four girls fall asleep, seemingly for no discernible reason. Edith wakes up to find the other three disappearing, as if in a trance, into a crevice without her.

She screams for them to stop, and when they don't, she runs back down the mountain, passing Miss McCraw, who for some reason is running back up the mountain in nothing but her undergarment.

Edith wakes the rest of the students and staff up, and the three girls and Miss McCraw are proclaimed missing after the rest of the girls return to the school. The entire student body is visibly shaken.

Eventually, two local men, the police force, and Edith's confused memories are used in largely unsuccessful attempts to locate the missing party (although Irma is eventually found).

In the end, the yet-unsolved case results in the girls' college being shut down, and the case haunts the locals and their descendants for generations.

The story of the missing expedition at Hanging Rock has drastic effects—students suddenly withdraw enrollment from the school, teachers and students alike begin verbally and physically berating each other, and one student even seemingly commits suicide.

While this is the primary plot itself, and thus doesn't focus on any side plots, the movie is truly about the interpersonal dramas between the characters and their relationships with one another.

Despite being convoluted, it is these dramas that make *Hanging Rock* the movie it is. For example, take even a minor character such as Mlle. du Poitiers, the girls' French teacher. She starts off as a newly engaged and quite happy young teacher, then fills the role of an older sister in a much more real sense when students disappear at Hanging Rock. By the end of the movie, following the suicide of one student, she is horrified with and deeply suspicious of the college's headmistress.

My description of this movie as convoluted should not be taken as a critique. Rather, I think it cannot be analyzed merely as a film where something curious

occurs, but rather as a collection of journeys made by a group of individuals following this curiosity.

Picnic at Hanging Rock is, of course, about some weird stuff that happens with a rock, but it is very deeply about its main characters—characters who happen to share intensely queer-coded relationships.



SARA + MIRANDA

In my eyes, the most obviously queer-coded pair of characters are Sara and Miranda. As previously mentioned, Miranda is one of the girls who disappears at Hanging Rock, and, in fact, serves as the leader of the group as they venture up the mountain, demurely coaxing the other girls along to follow her. She is universally admired, both by the girls around her and by the school's teachers.

Sara, on the other hand, is more of an odd duck. She has no family of her own, being an orphan, and is exceedingly reserved, with one of the film's opening scenes featuring Miranda telling Sara—gently, carefully—that she cannot *always* speak only to Miranda. Yet when the rest of the girls set off for Hanging Rock (Sara has been forced to stay behind by the school's headmistress, Mrs. Appleyard), the two share a private smile. Despite Miranda being universally loved, despite her affable personality, there is something special that only she and Sara share. Her guard drops so much around Sara, when it can't around anyone else.

When Miranda and the rest of the Hanging Rock party disappear, Sara becomes even more withdrawn. Mrs. Appleyard, facing scores of students dropping and dramatic losses of funds, reveals that Sara's guardian has not paid the college in months and tells her that her place at the school is in jeopardy.

Forced to reckon with the loss of Miranda and the potential loss of the places they shared together, Sara becomes bedridden— constantly mourning Miranda, building her shrines, and moping around. Eventually, when Sara is told by Mrs. Appleyard that her tuition has gone on unpaid, and she must return to the orphanage, Sara commits suicide by jumping off of the main building's roof and crashing through the greenhouse's glass.

"Isn't it possible they could just be friends?"

I do think that this argument holds some weight, especially as it relates to Sara, who has obviously been through a lot, even at her young age, and therefore is more likely to strongly attach to one person. It also makes sense for that person to be someone her age—as we'll later discuss, she's in fact lost an older brother, who she seems to have been close with, and who she cries out for when in distress. A teenager struggling with mental health issues and grief committing suicide upon being told she will have to leave school, and especially after the death or disappearance of that "one person" isn't terribly out of the question either, although it is dramatic.

To all of these concerns, though, I present two thoughts:

First, there is a particular queerness to Miranda's interactions with Sara as compared to her interactions with any other characters.

Although it might be difficult to separate her interactions with other characters whilst under Hanging Rock's trance from her standard interactions with others, Miranda is a girl who seems to be loved from a distance in most cases. She has her status, and lives with it comfortably, but she only speaks in a truly fond and loving way to Sara. It is Sara and only Sara whom she lets in.

While this could be interpreted as one-sided affection on Miranda's part, the opening scene that features her coaxing Sara to socialize with the other girls—seemingly with the knowledge that she will be gone soon—has the tone of a fond lover reluctantly departing a well-loved partner. There's an easy lightness to the interaction that implies partnership, even though Miranda is warning Sara that she has another role to fulfill—*You must learn to love someone else, apart from me. I won't be here much longer.*

Additionally, as will be discussed in later sections, it is the way that both of them interface with other arguably queer characters—and what they symbolize for those characters—that is the ultimate nail in the coffin to me, one that truly sets in stone a queer interpretation of Sara and Miranda's relationship.

My second point, which I find myself making quite often while arguing for queer interpretations of characters, is simply...why not? Lesser displays of chemistry have been quickly and eagerly ascribed to

secret relationships by the captive audiences of heterosexual pairings in television shows, movies, and even real life. Why not view Miranda and Sara's relationship as a lesbian one, and interpret the rest of the story through that lens? Why not interpret the *entire story* through a queercoded lens, and view the impacts of that choice?

Hanging Rock can be interpreted as a metaphor for class, or adolescence, or even just straightforwardly, as an ineffable "weirdness" occurring at a mountain and the effects it has on the surrounding population. But to me, queering this movie enhances it so much because it is so dependent on these interpersonal relationships. And in particular, because the relationship between Miranda and Sara is the driving force behind so much of the movie, their inarguable queerness spreads to interpretations of other characters easily, clarifying confusing moments and motivations in other characters with ease.

The last thing I want to say about Sara and Miranda is that Sara's death cannot be erased from their story. In my mind, there are two ways to interpret her suicide if we take Sara and Miranda's relationship as a romantic one. The first is as a choice driven by grief and loneliness. The second is as a continuation of what Miranda sets out to do at *Hanging Rock*—an attempt to enlighten the movie's other characters to their own queerness through the symbolism of her death.

Maybe it's both.



ALBERT + MICHAEL

The first thing you need to know about Albert and Michael is that they watch the girls climb Hanging Rock together. The second thing you need to know about Albert and Michael is that they are horrifically, obscenely gay. This goes beyond Spock and Kirk levels of gay. Maybe. Actually, let me get back to you on that one.

But seriously, watch the movie and you'll see it. Of all the queer pairings, they get the most onscreen together time, and are obviously enamored with each other. It's a little nauseating.

Anyway, we're first introduced to Albert—who is working as a servant for Michael's British family, and is Sara's long-lost older brother, by the way, surprise—and Michael—who is a rich little twink with delicate sensibilities—because they happen to be at Hanging Rock on the same day the girls are. They watch the girls as they ascend the mountain. Besides Edith, they're the last ones to see the Hanging Rock party alive.

After the girls go missing, Michael begins to be haunted incessantly by nightmares about the girls' disappearances. At a party shortly after the events at Hanging Rock, he walks calmly past every member of his family and rows of women in fancy dress who seem to be wanting to make his acquaintance, instead electing to sit in a shack with Albert and drink with him.

While Albert is relatively unbothered by the disappearances, Michael insists that they begin their own search for the Hanging Rock party after the police's have been unsuccessful.

Albert, bless his soul, goes along with the whole thing. When Michael passes out from heat exhaustion, Albert braves the mountain to find him, alerts the police so they can take him back to town, and

then goes back up the fucking mountain-that-kills-people to find Irma, who Michael located.

This is the first thing that signifies their queerness to me. Sure, Albert is Michael's servant, and bound to him by duty. But he's quick to voice opposition to potential plans, suggesting their relationship is relatively informal. Besides that implied freedom, he risks his life to ease Michael's mind—to make him happy—and is visibly relaxed around him. The part that really cements it for me is, on the other hand, internal. It's how *haunted* Michael is by the thought of Miranda. Besides his nightmares about all three missing girls, he begins to see her everywhere in the form of a swan. The movie tries to convince its audience that this obsession is



related to her looks, and that Michael is infatuated with her. To me, it makes little sense for him to be obsessed with Miranda specifically after seeing her once for a mere moment at Hanging Rock if this obsession is related to romantic or sexual interest, even if she died right afterwards.

In my mind, this obsession is given far more credence if it relates to queerness.

I don't remember the first time I saw a queer person; I grew up around a lot of them. But I do remember the first time I saw a trans man in person after realizing I was trans myself, before I had really told anyone but my bio on a site I used anonymously. I can picture his face perfectly, six years later. I can remember a couple of the patches he had on his jacket. I can remember the way he smiled at me.

Of course, there are a lot more context clues we can give one another today to signify that we are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. You can find countless memes about identity-specific fashion on any social media platform today, and queer signaling through accessories and presentation choices has a long and rich history.

But imagine that you are a young British man in the early 20th century, who has no interest in women, who does not look at them with a lustful eye—and actively refuses conversation about such topics in the movie—who is starting to wonder if he feels an abnormal amount of affection for one of the men who serves his family. Imagine that feeling of

doubt.

Imagine seeing another queer person for the first time, and not knowing why you feel connected to them, but knowing that there is some unspeakable thing that the two of you—and maybe even others—share.

Michael *himself* might even view his feelings about Miranda as romance. But her haunting of him feels far less related to any feelings of lust or aesthetic appreciation he could have developed in the short time he saw Miranda at Hanging Rock. He might be attached to her innocence and beauty—which swans have historically represented. But he doesn't see two or three swans, representing how young all three girls were, how fleeting their beauty was. It's only Miranda that haunts him. There's just...something about her.

Albert, for his part, is visited by a vision of Sara on the night that she commits suicide. Surrounded by pansies, her favorite flower, she bids him goodbye. It's a stretch, I admit, to suggest that Sara is surrounded by pansies—a longterm symbol of queer men—in an attempt to impart the knowledge of her own queerness, which she explored herself in life, to her brother. They're her favorite flower, after all. But “pansy” had entered the vernacular as a term for a gay man by at least 1929, long before the movie was made. And there is a certain sweetness to imagining Sara's soul there, nothing to give but a goodbye and the knowledge of how to love like she

does.

It's sad to think of Albert and Michael as a queer couple who haven't quite figured out their shit yet, who probably will not be *able* to figure out their shit and have the same type of secluded space that Miranda and Sara had at the girls' college.

It's even sadder to think that, through this interpretation, both girls had to die for the seeds of understanding of their own queerness to germinate inside the boys' minds. Even beyond a queer reading of all four characters, Sara had to die to reunite with her brother, despite them being so physically near each other in life.

Sara's death, through this interpretation, is not wholly reserved for her own feelings of grief over the loss of Miranda, just as Miranda's choice to disappear is a choice she makes to enlighten Michael, and perhaps even the girls she brings with her. The girls' deaths, like their love, do not truly belong to them. They are not agents in their own story.

In some terrible way, though, the girls' choices to die as means of sending a message to others is a final display of choice in a world where they have been granted none at all. It's a way of sharing their emotions with others in the only way available to them in the hopes that they, too, can find the type of happiness they had in life—the type of happiness destined to be fleeting by the world they found themselves in, [a world in which they graduate, a

world in which Sara must leave their school for financial reasons, a world in which they are young sapphic girls at the turn of the 20th century,] but the type of happiness that is worth it nonetheless, and the sort that carries love on with it to its recipients.

Maybe Albert and Mike—as Albert calls him—have more of a chance than Sara and Miranda ever had. Maybe in the bushlands, sheltered from the rigid structures of English society that Michael has grown up in, they can find a part of themselves in one another.

And maybe they can pass it on to others in the process.



THE TEACHERS

On the other hand, there's those who feel negatively impacted by Sara and Miranda's closeness with one another. There's Mrs. Appleyard, the headmistress, who I genuinely believe is queercoded, not in spite of driving Sara to misery but because this is the choice she makes when faced with the truth of the girl.

I also genuinely believe that she had found a romantic interest of her own in Miss McCraw, the teacher who Edith saw sprinting up towards Hanging Rock in nothing but her undergarments. Throughout the movie, we never see Mrs. Appleyard mourn the deaths or disappearances of any students. She so clearly views them as a means to keep the school afloat, finding self-confidence in the idea of following in her ancestors' footsteps and maintaining their legacy rather than in the successes of any individual girl under her direction.

Mrs. Appleyard is cold and cutting, and, most of all, closed off emotionally and personally. She speaks of a husband in attempts to deflect from questions about the missing girls, but maintains the last name of the women who seem to have come before her, who the college is named after. Her husband is never seen, even in old pictures—is he deceased? Did he exist at all? And when the gardener runs to Mrs. Appleyard's office to inform her of Sara's suicide, she is sitting there with her bags packed, dressed in black, expressionless, as if she regrets

nothing.

But despite this outward appearance, Appleyard shows emotions of her own privately, gasping at her choices, desperately wondering if she's doing the right thing, begging some God to forgive her.

And above all, the character she punishes most is Sara.

What Sara and Miranda share is special. It is not spoken aloud, not even really between them, at any point. But it does not go unnoticed. And it certainly does not go unpunished.

Miranda's status as an intensely popular student, and one who likely comes from a wealthier background, safeguards her from Mrs. Appleyard's cruelty. But Sara's status makes her an easy target, even before the disappearances. Her unpaid tuition—as yet unknown to her—might be what sets Mrs. Appleyard off, or not having completed the memorization of a poem. Neither of these seem to be affecting Mrs. Appleyard much at that point, though. Instead, it's Sara's...well...something.

The thing about Hanging Rock is that it takes place on Valentine's Day. The thing about Valentine's Day is that someone has taken it upon themselves to send Miss McCraw a card covered in math equations that morning, mocking her devotion to her chosen subject in place of devotion to any man. The thing about Sara is that she is an easy scapegoat, and, in Mrs. Appleyard's eyes, uniquely evil. The thing about the poem she recites instead of

the one she's supposed to have been learning is that it's an ode to St. Valentine, in further mockery of the morning's events. The thing about Miss McCraw, whose honor Mrs. Appleyard seems to be defending, is that she never comes back. And though most of the others never do, either, it is only Miss McCraw that Mrs. Appleyard ever bemoans the loss of—repeatedly, even. As if she can't help it.

In Mrs. Appleyard's eyes, Sara, for all her lack of money and for all of her troubles—for all of her unknown lineage and lack of discipline—has found a form of happiness that Mrs. Appleyard cannot dare seek out. Sara is a neat foil to Mrs. Appleyard in practically every way, except for their mutual queerness. Yet though they share this trait, Sara expresses her queerness openly, without any shame, and attaches herself to Miranda in front of everyone else. Mrs. Appleyard is used to clinging to lineage and money, but they cannot replace the feelings she has for another woman.

Sara couldn't stand to live without Miranda, and in the environment of a school that was no longer a safe haven for her, emotionally or financially, and was driven to suicide. And at the very end of the movie, via voiceover, we learn that Mrs. Appleyard could no longer live among the remnants of her now-failing school, and without Miss McCraw in tow. Instead, she has seemingly tried to follow her up Hanging Rock, but, having fallen, lies dead below it.

Mrs. Appleyard is not as different from Sara as she

would like to pretend she is, not in the ways that matter.

And frankly, that scares her like hell.



THE PLACES (and the others)

What about the rock, tall and silent? What about the surrounding community, who begin to rally against the college in honor of the missing girls?

Besides the short mention of Miss McCraw having seemingly been gifted a prank valentine towards the start of the movie, the significance of the girls' disappearances taking place on Valentine's Day is scarcely brought up in any meaningful way. This careful avoidance of the topic of romance and teenage sexuality—except for by the girls themselves, who make prank valentines and even write poems about the day—could be written off to merely be a result of the period in which the film takes place. But the lack of even such an innocuous remark as pointing out what day it was that the girls went missing is almost suspicious, and reveals just how willing others are to ignore any revelations that have come to light on such a day.

If we read the girls' ascent of Hanging Rock is a metaphor for sexual awakening—guided by Miranda, a character who has already found security in her own sexual identity, held back by Edith, who is more childish and unsure than the rest of the group, and chased by Miss McCraw in only her underwear—then to point out the significance of the holiday itself, and what feelings it might have stirred in a group of teenage girls, would be utterly unthinkable. And when the mention of an incident is deemed unthinkable, eventually the incident itself

develops an unspeakable, horrifying quality.

Searching for someone to blame, it is the college itself, and the woman at its head, who ultimately take the fall. Suddenly faced not just with the disappearance of the woman who loves, not even just with the deaths of her students and loss of finances, but with the possibility of the sudden exposure of her true self to the world, Mrs.

Appleyard lashes out at the only scapegoat she can find—the only obviously queer girl.

In examining the development of female sexuality over the years, queer activism movements, particularly those of queer women and lesbians, have been instrumental in helping women, transgender individuals, and intersex people in developing their own sexuality, and feeling less shame around their own bodies. By the time teenagers of this demographic have space to explore their sexuality and begin to understand themselves—if they have this space at all—they have likely already experienced sexual harassment at the *very least*. Even this is depicted in the movie, through Albert's open leering at the girls as they begin to ascend the mountain.

Stripped out of much of their formal wear and alone with trusted friends, the rock serves as a place to explore new, confusing feelings. But if it is an older or at the very least more mature queer girl or woman—Miranda, or McCraw, or even Appleyard—helping teenagers through this complex journey or even just perceived to be

helping teenagers through this journey, they are instantly demonized. In fact, if teenagers, particularly those who are not cisgender boys, express their sexuality at all, especially in any way that deviates from the norm, they are deemed corrupt.

Miranda may not have gone up to the rock in order to show her friends about lesbianism specifically. She might have gone up to the rock in order to show her friends about freedom, about trusting what you feel and how you feel it. It's a lesson so many of us have to learn.

But the assumption, and of course the fear, is that someone, whether or not it was Miranda, was acting as a predator towards the girls who went up on the rock. Maybe others assume it was Miranda, or Miss McCraw. In the absence of these individuals, though, Mrs. Appleyard makes for an easy target. And then comes the fear she holds, and the hate, and the crying fits, knowing that Sara will die, knowing that she will die with her, knowing that she will eradicate the stain of queerness from this school, God help her.

And of the rock itself...well, to be honest, in my mind, it is just a rock.

It is an eerie setting, to be sure. But its true value comes from the openness it affords in its seclusion, in the birds' eye view it offers. It comes in the memories shared there.

I still remember the set of lockers where my first queer partner kissed me for the very first time, on

Valentine's Day in sixth grade. I remember my middle school's gender-neutral bathroom, the one I used when I was brave enough. I remember, with utter clarity, what my childhood bedroom looked like on the day I put on my first chest binder.

In all, these are just rooms, or parts of rooms. It's not really the sink or the lockers or the stupid posters I had on my wall when I was fourteen that I remember, though, even if they're what comes to mind first. It's how I felt, inside and out.

The rock is a setting. In another movie, it is the dark forest behind the school. In another, it is the girls' bathroom. In another, the school attic. The rock itself only matters because we think of it as strange—because we assume that it has the capacity to hurt people. And hurt people it does, because while we grant it power over us, we assume its evil at the same time. We both assume *that* it is evil and assume—as in take on—the power of its evil to justify our own cruelties.

Hanging Rock is a place about being too ashamed to speak. Hanging Rock is a place about starting to realize there is something that crawls inside your chest. Hanging Rock is a place about the dull thud that sounds in your gut on the day you realize that this thing in your heart just might kill you. Hanging Rock is a place of tragedy. Of great joy.

But above it all, Hanging Rock is a place about queer people. A place where teenage girls and young men could find freedom. And a place where the world punished itself for that freedom.

To me, Hanging Rock is a film that reflects queer pain in so many ways, and the standards of the period in which it's set. It's also a

film that oozes queer magic and energy. It reminds us of the foolish and illogical ways in which queer joy can disrupt “good society” when judged harshly, and of how important it is to seek out and normalize this joy.

Climb Hanging Rock. Wear the women’s underwear. Put on the binder. Grow your hair long. Cut it off. Have a nap in the sun. Live.



ENDINGS

This zine was made between 24 July and 23 August 2024, using Scrivener, PowerPoint, Procreate, and, fruitlessly, an AX-28 Brother word processor. It is my first longform zine!

I send out my thanks to Jay Nagle for reading over the first draft of this beast, and to Emily @ Mycelium for cheerleading me throughout this process :) If you're ever in the Elkins area, make sure to check their shop out.

For more of my work, check out my Neocities at mordecaialba.com.

Thanks as always for reading!

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