

Smoke and fire

by [Christopher E. Bush](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

*Holy Smoke!* (1999), directed by Jane Campion

Returning to Australia from India, where she has experienced a religious epiphany, Ruth Barron (Kate Winslet) dances across the dusty red earth that separates her vehicle from an Outback ranch. She's filled with both religious ecstasy and youthful exuberance. It is telling, however, that the song that catapults her into her whirling dance—Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know"—is a pop anthem to feminine rage and power. Ruth has huge reserves of both—and she'll need them. Waiting for Ruth at the ranch are members of her extended family who, concerned about her devotion to an Indian guru, have hired a well-known American cult exiter named P. J. (played by Harvey Keitel). They plan to whisk her into the desert for three days of deprogramming, to be followed by a tearful reunion. But from the moment P. J. sees Ruth, things begin to go wrong.

*Holy Smoke!*, Jane Campion's fourth feature film, is uneven but compelling. The movie is a visual delight, contrasting the teeming streets of India with the Barron family's tacky suburban house and the empty, majestic Australian Outback. It is also funnier than Campion's previous efforts—in fact, the ludicrous moments sometimes threaten to send the film over the top and into a campy descent. But terrific acting—including an especially brilliant performance by Winslet—and a daring willingness to tackle difficult issues of spirituality and sexual power save the film.

P. J., portrayed as the archetypal macho, insecure aging American man, has developed a three-step, three-day system for deprogramming his subjects. On day one, he gets the person's attention; on day two, he aims to provoke; by day three, overcome by their own unreason, his subjects break down and are ready to be reassimilated into their families.

His methods have been effective in nearly 200 cases. He arrives in Australia overconfident and bored, almost begging for failure. His dyed, slicked-back hair, cowboy boots and all-black outfit only accentuate his age. He looks almost a parody of the Hollywood western villain, or the '70s lounge lizard. In Ruth, however, he

meets his match. She is young, beautiful, intelligent and as egotistical as he is. From the moment their eyes lock they're engaged in a power struggle.

To Campion's credit, Ruth's mystical experience—the catalyst that leads her into the desert—is portrayed with complexity. In a flashback she meets her guru and is enlightened when he touches her forehead and opens her inner third eye (believed by many Hindus to be either a metaphorical or an actual physical organ for seeing the divine). What happens to Ruth truly does change her and may be a genuine mystical experience. But it also causes her to withdraw from the world and to ignore her personal demon, her fear of her own nature.

At first, Ruth is on the defensive, as P. J. exposes her religious naïveté and ignorance. But, drawn out of her spiritual bliss and feeling trapped, she quickly turns the tables. She uses her youth, vigor and sexuality to seduce the deprogrammer, then vengefully breaks down his ego. Faced with his own ridiculousness as a man who has lost his attractiveness but continues to chase young women, he stumbles powerless and emasculated through the desert—where he has a vision that brings peace.

Ruth, too, finds a new spiritual awakening and a truer redemption. In breaking P. J., she has plumbed the depths of her own cruelty and worst instincts. Yet she has been unable to destroy his love for her, and she has found winning the power game unsatisfying. She discovers compassion for the man she's beaten, and can then extend this feeling to others and find ways to do good in the world. For both characters, spiritual peace comes only with the destruction—or at least reduction—of their egos. This film takes an exceptionally frank and gritty look at spiritual issues.