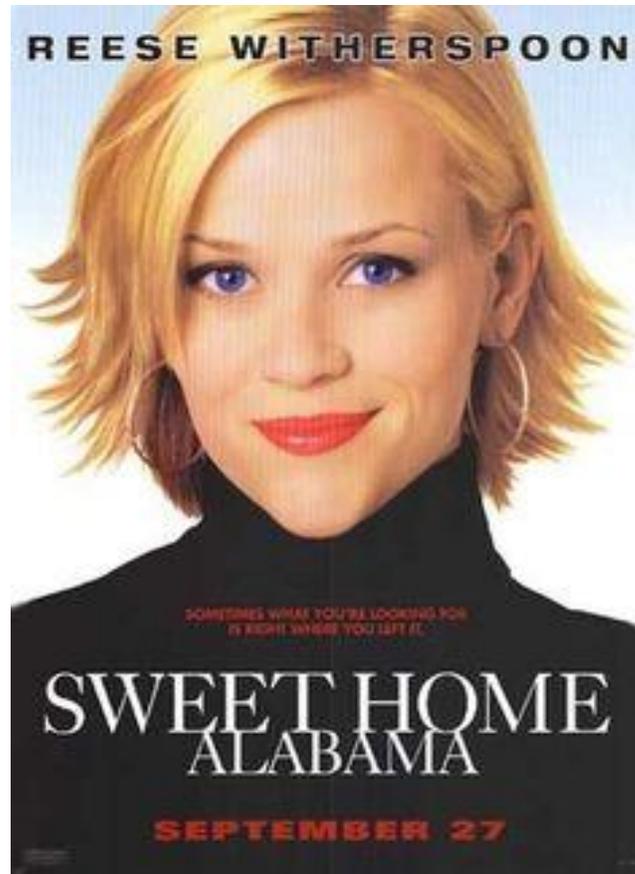


## *Sweet Home Alabama*



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Produced by Neal H. Moritz and Stokely Chaffin. Directed by Andy Tennant. Screenplay by C. Jay Cox. Based on a story by Douglas J. Eboch. Production Design by Clay A. Griffith. Cinematography by Andrew Dunn. Original Music by George Fenton. Featuring Lynard Skynyrd with the title song. Edited by Troy Takaki & Tracey Wadmore-Smith. Key Costumer: Sophie De Rakoff

Cinematic length: 109 minutes. Distributed by Buena Vista Pictures. A Touchstone Picture. Cinematic release: 2002. DVD release 2003. Rated PG. Rating 90%.

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## Cast

- *Reese Witherspoon as Melanie Carmichael.*
- *Josh Lucas as Jake Perry.*
- *Patrick Dempsey as Andrew Hennings.*
- *Candice Bergen as Mayor Kate Hennings.*
- *Mary Kay Place as Pearl Smooter, mother of Melanie.*
- *Fred Ward as Earl Smooter, Melanie's father.*
- *Jean Smart as Stella Kay Perry, the mother of Jake.*
- *Ethan Embry as Bobby Ray Bailey.*
- *Nathan Lee Graham as Frederick Montana.*
- *Melanie Lynskey as Lurlynn,*
- *Courtney Gains as Sheriff Wade,*
- *Mary Lynn Rajskub as Dorothea, Wade's wife.*
- *Kevin Sussman as Barry Lowenstein, assistant to Mayor Kate Hennings.*
- *Rhona Mitra as Tabatha Wadmore-Smith.*
- *Dakota Fanning as Young Melanie*
- *Thomas Curtis as Young Jake*

*New York haute culture dresses are not suitable for Alabama honky tonk bars*



## Review

*Sweet Home Alabama* starts at a New York City fashion show where everything blasts along frenetically behind the scenes so that elegant scenarios will flow along in an orderly fashion for both audiences – the audience within the film and us watching the film. Melanie Carmichael (Reese Witherspoon) is the designer of the moment and after her triumph she finds herself whisked away to be with her boyfriend Andrew Hennings (Patrick Dempsey). He is as rich and handsome as they come. Add courteous, adoring and from a famous family and all this adds up to him being New York City's most eligible bachelor, especially as his mother (Candice Bergen) rules the city, being the mayor. Unlike most rich boys with poor rivals in romantic comedies his virtues are real and he has integrity and no arrogance. His offer of the engagement ring comes at Tiffany's – at midnight where staff members wait behind each counter. That scene makes for more than money being the ultimate in power: controlling Tiffany's like that must be the ultimate power trip. It must also be the ultimate vicarious romantic trip for American women. Nothing is wrong in that. For a hundred years Hollywood has catered to male fantasies: time for a change.

Then the surprises start: nothing can be wrong with that either: repeat formula films are boring.

Surprise Number 1: Melanie hesitates with the marriage proposal and something seems wrong, then she accepts, but her pensive expression shows something must be wrong somewhere.

Surprise Number 2: That something wrong somewhere turns out to be not the future husband, but the past one. The somewhere is back home in Alabama. Unknown and unloved, Jake Perry (Josh Lucas) exists tucked away in rural Alabama where he sits on the porch, hounddog at his feet, beer in hand with a frigid more waiting, unshaven, unwashed, uncombed, unbuttoned, with his checkered shirt out of his trousers to show his singlet. There he sits keeping an eye on the battered pickup truck and his seaplane. Now that you have the

description do you need an analysis of his worldview, cultural tastes and his character?

Unlike adoring Andrew, Hubbie shows open contempt when with Melanie and she cannot even get him to sign the divorce papers. High school sweethearts, they married because she was pregnant, then a miscarriage apparently wrecked the marriage and Melanie went north to reinvent herself.



*The former husband*



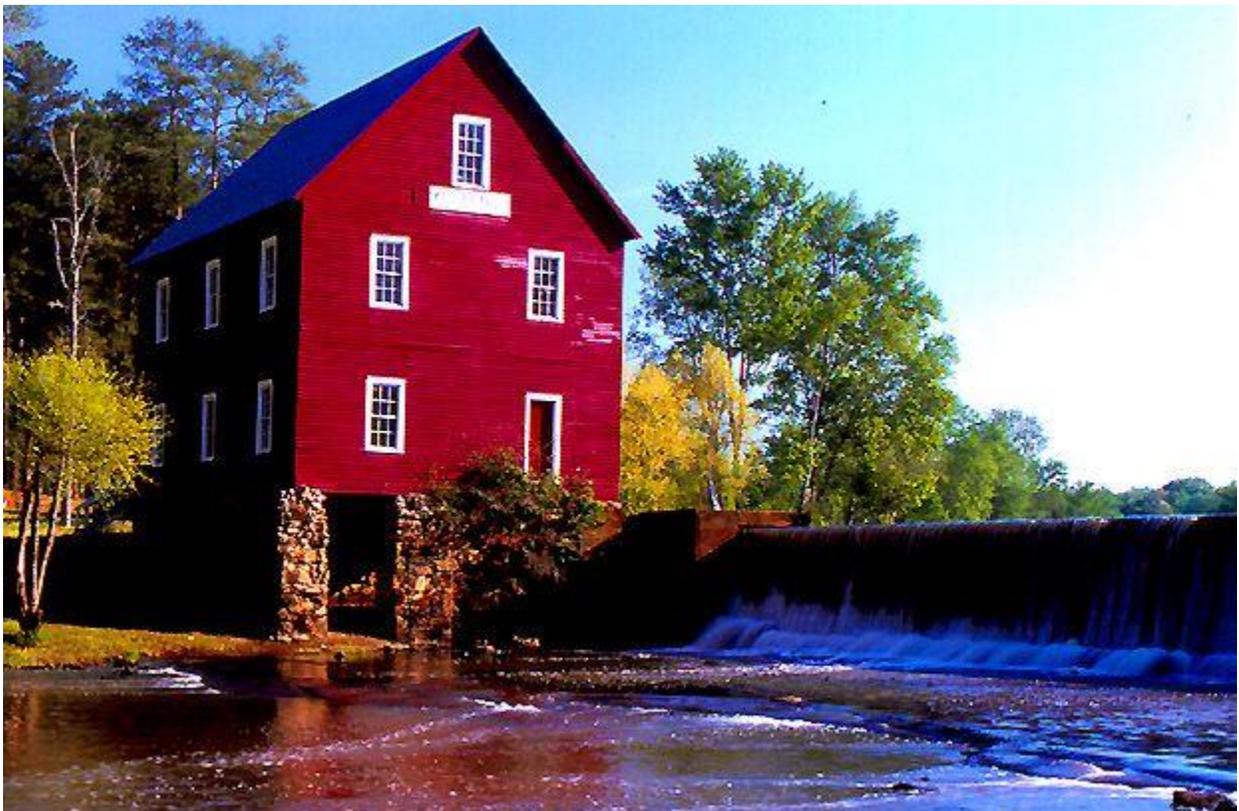
*The husband to be*

*Melanie has these two men for a choice*

Now she must wait in her hometown while persuading a reluctant Jake to sign the papers and we see Melanie against her background and that ‘against’ is meant to be ambiguous. She turns up at the local honky tonk which Jake’s mother runs. The entertainment comes from the all too appropriately named ‘The Redneck Dance Company’ while Melanie arrives there dressed in one of her Manhattan cocktail hour creations. That adumbrates the culture clash when cranky, sophisticated intiguer, control freak and millionaire at least Mayor Hennings and her New York entourage arrive in town – with their convoy for the catering. Politically correct Mayor Hennings finds her future in laws in Confederate uniform, living a down home lifestyle in a modest house, where new technology consists of an adjustable lounge chair.



*Jake turns out to operate a glass factory. Ironically like so many of the film's settings, the reality is in Georgia*



The culture clash emerges as only one source of humour. As the title suggests, the film works as an affectionate and humorous look at life in rural Alabama and it charms. The homecoming white southerner returning from the north and finding their roots has almost become a genre in itself. William Faulner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Lisa Alther's novels *Kinflicks* (1976) and *Family Ties* (1981) Hamilton Basso's *Pompey's Head* (1956) and the film version *The View From Pompey's Head, In the Heat of the Night* (1967) Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) and now Harper Lee's *Go Set A Watchman* (2015) are all like this - and all of them in some way, create images of the fictional dark south, showing combinations of racism, bigotry or paranoid, neurotic and claustrophobic behaviour. Edgar Allan Poe, Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote have also done much to foster this image, but how much of it remains true? There has always been another south, hospitable, good humoured, relaxed, beautiful, laid back and this film makes a welcome change: it works as a successful celebration of all those virtues, good.

