

SOME OF THE YEAR'S BEST STORIES LEFT US IN SUSPENSE. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Role Model

*Julia Roberts played her in a hit movie,
but this crusader hasn't gone Hollywood*

Soon after this spring's premiere of *Erin Brockovich*—the story of a salty, cleavage-flashing legal researcher who in 1996 helped residents of Hinkley, Calif., win a \$333 million settlement against Pacific Gas & Electric for allegedly contaminating their water supply—the real-life model for the Julia Roberts role became embroiled in a more personal drama (PEOPLE, May 15). In April 40-year-old Erin Brockovich-Ellis (as she has been known since marrying actor Eric Ellis, 35, last year) joined forces with Ventura County authorities to nab a trio of accused blackmailers: her ex-husband Shawn Brown, 38, father of her two oldest children; her former boyfriend Jorg Halaby, 47; and their lawyer John Reiner, 53. The men had allegedly threatened to go public with stories that she was an unfit mother and had had an affair with boss Ed Masry, 68, unless she forked over \$310,000—and with her aid, cops filmed them collecting the payoff. But while Reiner still faces counts of attempted extortion and conspiracy, charges against Brown and Halaby were dropped in October. Brockovich-Ellis admits to no disappointment with the results of her sting operation; in fact, she says, she's "relieved" not to have to testify against her exes. "The real issue is corporations poisoning people," she insists. "I stay focused on that and nothing else." Her job certainly requires focus: As research director for L.A.'s Masry & Vititoe law firm, she oversees a staff of six that probes contamination cases across the country. Between 15-hour workdays and stints on the lecture circuit, she also tries to make up for lost time with her children—Matthew, 17, Katie, 15, and Elizabeth, 9 (with second husband Steven Brockovich). Brockovich-Ellis blames her divorce from Brown and her demanding schedule in part for the teenagers' bouts with drug use and truancy, which led her to send them to boarding schools last year. She speaks proudly of their progress, boasting that newly graduated Matthew hopes to become an emergency medical technician, while Katie is keeping up a 4.0 grade average. "My kids are honestly the neatest human beings," she says. "They're going to have something to offer the world." So is their mom, adds Masry: "I think the momentum is just now building for Erin. She has a lot more to do."

Photograph by Ann Summa/Liaison Agency





2000

STREET QUEENS

BEST OF SCREEN

Almost Famous Director-writer Cameron Crowe's compassionate coming-of-age story about a teenage reporter covering a rock band viewed the early '70s through radiantly rose-colored granny glasses.

Chicken Run Eggceptional! This animated family film had everything: adventure, romance and potent puns, not to mention a henhouse full of impossibly cute chickens.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon Movies are supposed to take you someplace else; this epic set in ancient China did exactly that. Its magical martial arts battles and powerful love stories hooked us from the start.

Dancer in the Dark Icelandic singer Björk played a blind woman whose life goes from bad to worse to dire in a musical that turned the genre on its head while still paying homage to *The Sound of Music*. Art should provoke and *Dancer* did.

Erin Brockovich Between its inspiring true-life story and a knockout



Maximus cool: Russell Crowe was the big winner in the stirring *Gladiator*.

performance by Julia Roberts in the title role, this entertaining legal thriller was the one film unhesitatingly recommended to everyone.

Gladiator A big thumbs-up for a rousing swords-and-sandals epic set in the Roman Empire, when men were men, even if they wore skirts.

The House of Mirth Great books rarely make great movies, but thanks to director Terence Davies's loving adaptation and Gillian Anderson's (yes, of television's *The X-Files*) lucid performance as doomed Lily Bart, Edith Wharton's best novel arrived on the screen with all its tragic impact intact.

Nurse Betty This dark romantic comedy with Renée Zellweger kept us guessing about just where it was headed, which is all too rare.

Traffic The unwinnable war against drugs provided the backdrop for a vivid, almost documentary-like ensemble drama by virtuoso director Steven Soderbergh (who also made *Erin Brockovich* this year).

You Can Count on Me In a small but beautifully written and acted story, adult siblings (Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo) both chafed at and pulled tighter the ties that bind.

REEL GOLD

■ *Croupier*, an ingenious British thriller starring angular Clive Owen, deservedly beat the odds by turning into an art-house hit.

■ Given the 2000 election mess, why not install Jeff Bridges as President? He made a great one in *The Contender*.



In *Tiger*, a martial arts epic, Zhang Ziyi (left) and Chang Chen make love—and war.