

Songs My Brothers Taught Me: The plight of a Lakota youth

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In her first feature film, director Chloé Zhao tells the story of a young Lakota man torn between the desire to leave his impoverished reservation and the sense of responsibility to his younger sister at home, in the remarkable *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. Zhao (who was born in Beijing, but grew up in the UK) spent years living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the South Dakota Badlands gaining the trust of the people and their way of life.

Boasting a talented cast of amateur actors, the film is a sincere portrait of despair and beauty, as economic hardship and substance abuse take their toll on one of the most oppressed social groups in America, the aboriginal population who were nearly wiped out by American capitalism and who suffer terrible hardships up to the present.

After the death of his absentee father in a house fire, 17-year-old Johnny Winters (John Reddy) is forced to care for his family, in particular his little sister, Jashaun (JaShaun St. John). Their surroundings, the Great Plains, are desolate and austere but the filmmakers have turned them into beautiful vistas. Their mobile homes seem to contain an entire universe of pain and sorrow.

Faced with a life of drugs and crime on the reservation, Johnny is grasping at straws when he hopes, as all young people do, that a change of scenery will be the answer to all his problems. The fact that this mother, Lisa (Irene Bedard), also struggles with alcohol problems, further complicates matters and makes it doubtful whether she can take care of young Jashaun.

Johnny is forced more or less into bootlegging alcohol and selling it on the reservation to care for his sister. There are also gangs who do not appreciate his business. They often confront him and at one point inflict a terrible beating.

Songs My Brothers Taught Me opens with a scene of

Johnny on horseback at dusk. He is advised not to ride the animal too hard or risk breaking its spirit completely. “Anything that runs wild got something bad in ‘em. You want to leave some of that in there ‘cause they need it to survive out here.” One sees that virtually all the hope for life have been beaten out of the older people, especially Johnny’s mother, and we watch that process threatening Johnny and Jashaun, who fight to hang on.

When a teacher asks Johnny and his classmates at Little Wound High School what they would like to be in life, and encourages them to dream big, most of them reply they want to be bull riders. There is an understandable obsession with the cowboy culture and rodeos, the one bright spot in this dreary part of the world.

In a particularly moving scene, Johnny and his friends sit in a bedroom that we learn belonged to a classmate who committed suicide. The boys reminisce about their deceased friend. Seeing the cluttered and dingy room, like so many of the film’s bleak interiors, one understands why desperate young people would seek a tragic way out. Johnny mutters, “I still can’t believe he killed himself,” but the statement is sadly ironic.

Fortunately, Zhao balances the depressing reality with the gorgeous natural world, animals, mountains and fields, and of course, the remarkable people. Shot in minimalist style, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* feels more like an interconnected, documentary-style series of scenes than an actual narrative feature. This approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Certain points and conversations could have been expanded and the editing makes the work at times feel a bit overextended and jumpy, but these are relatively small points.

Also commendable is the film's tone. Never condescending, the filmmakers took their time to humanize their subjects. What Zhao does best is present complex and contradictory characters, human beings who make mistakes despite good intentions and who maneuver as best they can within their bleak reality.

Covered in tattoos, Travis (Travis Lone Hill), for example, is a designer of his own brand of gangster-style clothing, a trade he has perfected during his time in and out of prison. His character could have easily been lampooned or demonized by another filmmaker. Instead we learn his passion is interior design! He sells his homemade clothing on the side of the road with Jashaun, the only economy in this town.

Nearly every character has a hidden artistic talent. A late-night party, eventually broken up by the police, features a band playing heavy metal, interspersed with hip hop and traditional Lakota songs. The aforementioned rodeos seem to naturally mesh with the traditional Native pow wows.

Johnny eventually meets and falls in love with Aurelia (Taysha Fuller), who is planning to study in Los Angeles after graduating from high school. Johnny is determined to follow her. Disapproving of his plans, Aurelia's family wants to know how he intends to survive in the big city. Johnny assures them he will be able to make things work there. His naïveté will crash against the reality of life in a harsh new environment.

No one can question the sincerity or humanity of the filmmakers. *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* is not explicitly political and to a certain extent its understated quality is part of its charm. However, the lack of historical and social context, a familiar trait of contemporary "independent" films, and *any* sense of an alternative to a harsh, poverty-stricken existence are shortcomings.

Native American communities have some of the highest rates of alcoholism, domestic abuse and suicide in the US. South Dakota, where the film takes place, was also the site of the infamous 1891 Wounded Knee Massacre in which the US Cavalry slaughtered hundreds of innocent men, women and children.

Some of this history of oppression finds an echo in the film, but the viewer is left with the problematic sense that the answers can be found in a turn back to tradition. Nonetheless, all in all, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* is a deeply moving film and deserves a wide

audience.



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