

Once Upon a River: A Native American girl wanders the waterways

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Written and directed by Haroula Rose, based on the novel by Bonnie Jo Campbell

Once Upon a River (2019), directed by Haroula Rose, is a film adaptation of Bonnie Jo Campbell's 2011 novel of the same title. The movie, Rose's debut feature, follows a Native American teenage girl through various trials and tribulations. Set in western Michigan in the 1970s, *Once Upon a River* recounts the adolescent's supposed emotional education.

There are genuine opportunities here, in terms of both drama and social insight. The filmmakers are working with potentially explosive material: a girl from the most oppressed portion of the US population, at a time when economic life was being turned upside down in an industrial state like Michigan. What do the artists make of their possibilities?

It is 1977. Fifteen-year-old Margo Crane (Kenadi DelaCerna) lives with her father Bernard (Tatanka Means) in the fictional town of Murrayville. Bernard stopped drinking when he became a single parent after Margo's mother Luanne (Lindsay Pulsipher) abandoned the family, believing that rural river life would be her undoing. Bernard has taught his daughter the survival skills of their Native ancestry. With Annie Oakley as her fantasy inspiration, Margo hones her shooting and hunting skills.

After her half-uncle Cal (Coburn Goss) sexually preys upon her, Margo takes her revenge, setting off tragic events that lead to her father's death. Fleeing the community, she takes off on the river in an attempt to locate her estranged mother.

When her boat is taken from her, she hitches a ride with an indigenous young school teacher Will (Ajuawak Kapashesit). The short-lived, tender encounter leaves Margo pregnant. As she continues her odyssey, she bonds with the emphysema-afflicted

Smoke (John Ashton), who may well be on his last legs, and his African-American friend Fishbone (Kenn E. Head) in a trailer park.

Margo eventually finds Luanne, but it proves cold comfort for both the now well-to-do mother and her wild-child daughter. In the end, the river is Margo's lifeblood and only spiritual companion.

Certain likeable, moving moments brighten up this largely unsatisfactory film. When Smoke serenades Margo in his raspy tenor voice, for example, it provides an authenticity unusual for *Once Upon a River*.

Means' Bernard is an endearing contrast to his affluent, white half-brother Cal and the latter's nasty, condescending and racist brood. Given the state of tension between the relations, it is hard to see how they have co-existed—presumably for years—as virtual next-door neighbors. Cal's decision to initiate a sexual relationship with his 15-year-old niece is a rather brutal and convenient plot mechanism, which propels Margo into wandering the waterways.

Additionally, Luanne and Margo seem a highly unlikely mother-daughter pair. When the two meet, after years of separation, there is little psychological or physical indication that Margo is Luanne's offspring, or that Luanne ever lived in circumstances dissimilar to her present upscale residence. She offers her daughter a cup of tea and a chance to nap and makes arrangements for an abortion without any of it apparently registering a blip on the emotional Richter scale. The sequence simply doesn't hold water.

Once Upon a River is not blessed with a cohesive narrative. To a certain extent it is a series of vignettes, some convincing and others not, interspersed with picture-postcard images of the Michigan countryside. Most disturbingly, the filmmakers are not driven by indignation at the conditions with which Margo is

forced to contend, conditions that no 15-year-old should have to face. The lack of overall purposiveness helps explain the implausibilities, the occasionally stilted and forced acting and dialogue and the hit-and-miss character of the whole story.

It is unfortunate that Rose does not care to touch upon the life prospects for her barely educated, moneyless heroine beyond the ability of the protagonist to rely on a river, and a polluted one at that.

The filmmaker asserts in her director's statement that while on the water, "Margo encounters friends, foes, wonders, and dangers; navigating life on her own, she comes to understand her potential, all while healing the wounds of her past..." Why would that necessarily be the case? It is not enough to go through painful personal and social experiences, one has to make sense of them. Through no fault of her own, Margo has been given very little with which to accomplish that.

The girl is an unreal composite of self-reliance and abnormal, mythical isolation. For all her feral-like independence, she appears largely passive in relation to her various "wounds" (her sexual encounter with her half-uncle, her father's death, her lack of connection with her mother). Not enough is worked through, leaving the viewer unfulfilled.

After all, human life is not like a river, something that simply flows on "spontaneously." Otherwise people would go around without any clothes on, live out in the open and never visit a doctor. Life consists of something more than mere physiology. Human beings, including in art, expend consciously directed energy on specific aims. Apart from important goals, a Marxist once pointed out, art "degenerates into mere rattle."

In this regard, despite the fact that the film is set during the period of Michigan's de-industrialization, nothing is made of this reality nor the attendant attacks on the working class and its Native component.

The 2012 WSWS review of the Campbell novel described the river in question as a body "that has been ravaged by some of the highest rates of industrial pollution in the US. The Kalamazoo River, which runs through the area depicted by Campbell, is a Superfund site and last year was the location of a massive oil spill that poured more than 80,000 barrels into the river."

In sum, the filmmaker has chosen a Native American girl to be her central character living at a complex, tumultuous moment—and then recoils at the notion of a

socially critical work. Rose, like too many of her counterparts at present, appears determined not to be labeled an opponent of the existing social order. Her approach is largely devoid of historical or social concreteness. The result is something half- or quarter-cooked.

The deplorable state of Native American life is the direct product of US capitalism's brutal history. The enduring consequences of its crimes for the indigenous population include severe poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, life expectancy well below the national average and an appalling neglect, or worse, by government agencies of the social needs of Native American reservations and communities.

Very little of this actuality makes its way into *Once Upon a River*. Such auspiciously fertile subject matter deserves a more full-blooded treatment.



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