

Snow Falling on Cedars

“Snow Falling on Cedars, “a novel of a 1950’s murder case in an Pacific Northwest fishing community, was a popular *and* critical smash. Its evocation of a slightly exotic hamlet where Anglo and Japanese heritages both co-existed and clashed was commingled with a passionate, cross cultural love story as well as the unraveling of a murder mystery. All these varied elements, repeated in the film, were cast in a spare and poetic prose that satisfied many readers.

The film version highlights the wintry elements, not only plenty of snow on cedars--and other firs--but the coldness of unrequited love and unfulfilled promise, of prejudice and harsh racial policies (Japanese internment is featured in flashbacks). The story is told through the mechanism of a courtroom drama and the recalled memories of the protagonists. While the whole enterprise, mounted by Australian director Scott Hicks (*Shine*), is sober and heartfelt--and beautifully shot--it somehow, to this moviegoer, never quite touches the heart.

Perhaps it is just *too* cold. The omnipresent snow, in tones of blue-gray and slate, is too much, ludicrously too much in an area (in Washington’s Puget Sound) where snow accumulation is a rarity. The music is steadfastly funereal, adding a sense of doom to scenes that don’t need them. The lead, Ethan Hawke, who plays Ishmael Chambers, the journalist who covers the trial for the local newspaper, seems a callow and brooding youth, rather than an intriguing presence. The whole mood of the film, written by Hicks and veteran Ron Bass, is morose, not touching.

If I would recommend *Snow Falling on Cedars* to filmgoers, it is for one scene, which may be worth the price of admission. Max Von Sydow, playing ancient defense attorney Nels Gudmundsson, summarizes his defense of a Japanese fisherman against a murder charge in one extended sequence in tight close up. Combining a captivating folksiness with an ardent appeal against bigotry, he is mesmerizing. It’s lovely to see the old pro pull it off.

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