

INDIAN HORSE FILM REVIEW

Rings it off the crossbar and out

Dominic

English 2300, Kwantlen Polytechnic University

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation commission and in an age where the unmarked graves of Indigenous children are being exhumed on the grounds of former residential schools every day, the story of *Indian Horse*, based on Richard Wagamese's 2011 novel of the same name, is more relevant than ever. However, where the novel succeeded in both underscoring the grim reality of residential schools as well as legitimizing Ojibwe culture and the way the protagonist heals as a result of embracing his heritage, the film falls somewhat flat. In being transposed to the big screen, the story—though undoubtedly important—loses crucial details, causing the antagonists to feel two-dimensional and presenting an ambiguous picture of Indigenous peoples.

Indian Horse tells the story of a young Indigenous boy named Saul who is torn from his family and thrust into the abusive, alien world of the residential school system, eventually escaping through his love and talent for hockey before succumbing to PTSD, alcoholism, and the racial hostility he faces as he climbs the ranks of the minor-league. The

film is grim and uncompromising, and the issues with this tonal choice become immediately apparent when compared to the book it is based on. Specifically, where in the book Saul's hockey talent is derived from his Ojibwe heritage and special status as a 'seer', a gift that manifests first as an ancestral connection to his people and later morphs into a prescient hockey vision, the film avoids this detail entirely. Crucially, this power is canonical in the book and is never reduced to hokey mysticism. We share Saul's perspective, we see his visions, and it serves to legitimize Ojibwe culture and establish Saul's connection to his people in the face of the Catholic church's hostility.

Conversely, the movie abandons this narrative thread and instead chalks Saul's prodigious skill up to a 'gift from God' as his coach puts it (an assertion that is never challenged), or else the simple product of practice. In any case, the language of the film directs us to believe that either the Catholic God is literal and powerful in the world of *Indian Horse* and supports the actions of the church, or that Saul can only find escape in white culture and white

institutions, and his own culture is detrimental—or at best irrelevant—to his success.

This theme of narrative and textual hostility towards Indigeneity is further echoed throughout *Indian Horse* across several different characters, notably Lonnie, who is repeatedly punished for speaking his native language, defying the church, and attempting to escape. There are merits to this hostility—painting a raw picture of the residential schools creates a strong emotional resonance and can serve to enlighten uneducated viewers to the brutal conditions that Indigenous children were subjected to. However, it also plays into the underlying narrative that their assimilation was ultimately just. This can be observed in the fates of Indigenous characters in the film, particularly Saul's grandmother, who is a symbol of traditional Ojibwe beliefs and institutions untainted by the white settlers. Early on, her faith clashes with the Christian beliefs of her daughter, and this eventually leads to her frigid death by the side of a highway after she attempts to take Saul downriver. In the end she is unable to save Saul, his brother, or herself in spite of her wisdom, and this serves to further the idea that Indigenous knowledge is nothing but superstition—an implication that could have been avoided had the filmmakers not omitted Saul's seer gift. As the camera pans out to show her body by the roadside, she transforms contextually from an Elder living off the land

into a crazed lady endangering her grandson. As critical viewers we cannot help but compare her crude, seemingly senseless death to the implied death of Saul's Christian parents, who are allowed to float off into the setting sun and symbolically ascend to heaven in the process.

Accompanying the thematic and emotional benefits, the dark, unvarnished narrative of *Indian Horse* has the adverse effect of reducing its villains to stock characters, thus cementing the false notion that the residential school system was an evil, isolated chapter in Canadian history brought about by monsters, and not a systematic cruelty fueled by ignorance, dogma, and all the best of intentions that could easily occur again today. This oversimplification is best represented in the character of Father Leboutilier. Initially he is framed as a sympathetic character who symbolizes the nuance and 'positive' aspects of residential schooling, but is then subverted at the end of the film without any foreshadowing and revealed as a paedophile. While it is true that sexual abuse ran rampant at residential schools, the twist eliminates all the complexity of Leboutilier's character. Both cinematically and realistically, it is far more haunting and relevant to portray the way a 'good', 'moral' person can still participate in an evil system. Furthermore, given that Leboutilier represents the origin and organization of hockey in the film, the reveal undercuts Saul's already complex—albeit

largely positive—relationship with the sport and overshadows more interesting discussions around identity, hybridity, and systematic racism.

Unquestionably, *Indian Horse* is an important film. The cast is comprised of countless talented Indigenous actors, its themes of assimilation and abuse are addressed unflinchingly in a way rarely seen in mainstream cinema, and it honors the legacy of the source novel's author, Richard

Wagamese, who passed away shortly before the film was first screened. Though its narrative may lack nuance, and its characters even more so, its success has undoubtedly awoken some audiences to the reality of the residential school system and the lasting damage they have perpetuated to this day. One should remain hopeful that *Indian Horse* will be the first of many mainstream Canadian films centered around Indigenous stories—with many more complex tales to come.

REFERENCES

Campanelli, Stephen, *Indian Horse*, (Elevation Pictures, 2017)

Wagamese, Richard, *Indian Horse: A Novel*. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012)