



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

WINTER'S BONE

2010 USA 100 mins

Director: Debra Granik

Starring: Jennifer Lawrence, Jon Hawkes

Even before the real trouble starts — with suspicious lawmen on one side and a clan of violent drug dealers on the other — Ree Dolly faces more than the usual litany of adolescent worries. Her father, locally renowned for his skill at cooking methamphetamine, has vanished, and her emotionally hollowed-out mother has long since abandoned basic parental duties, leaving Ree (Jennifer Lawrence) to run the household and care for her two younger siblings. The family lives in southwestern Missouri, a stretch of the Ozarks that is both desolate and picturesque, words that might also suit “Winter’s Bone,” Debra Granik’s tender and flinty adaptation of a novel of the same title by Daniel Woodrell.

The faces in “Winter’s Bone” are certainly mirthless — not only Ree’s, but also those of the relatives she turns to for advice and protection when her predicament becomes desperate. The topography of chilly hollows and ragged forests is filmed in a way that emphasizes its bleakness. There are banjos and fiddles, as well as guitars, and some beautiful old mountain ballads are performed on camera. Some of the cast members are nonprofessional actors, and nearly all are wary, watchful and taciturn, speaking their few words in faultless accents.

This is not a story about drugs and family life in a particular region of the United States, even though it displays some impressive local knowledge (much of it derived from Mr. Woodrell’s book). It is more deeply about tribal ties and individual choices, about a stubborn girl’s sense of justice coming into sharp and dangerous conflict with deep and intractable customs.

In Ms. Lawrence’s watchful, precise and quietly heroic performance, Ree is like a modern-day Antigone, making ethical demands that are at once entirely coherent and potentially fatal. After his last arrest, her father, Jessup, put up the family property — including the house where his wife and children live — as bond, and if he does not surrender soon, it will all be taken away.

Jessup, however, is nowhere to be found, and Ree’s efforts to locate him leave her in a terrible dilemma. She must either betray the code of silence that keeps her extended family

firmly and proudly on the wrong side of the law, or else face destitution.

“Aren’t we all supposed to be kin?” she asks, more than once, as she tramps through the backwoods from house to house, demanding information, help or just a scrap of elementary kindness. The kinfolk next door grudgingly offer food and monitor Ree’s encounters with the nervous deputies from the sheriff’s office who stop by from time to time. Jessup’s brother, Teardrop (John Hawkes), greets her with silent menace that erupts into violence, though he turns out to harbor more compassion than most.

Anxious sympathy for this young woman in peril — at 17, barely more than a child herself and forced to respond to challenges that would terrify most adults — is the prevailing emotion you are likely to feel when watching “Winter’s Bone.” It is straightforward and suspenseful but also surprising and subtle. Ree is torn between loyalty to her brother and sister and a desire to escape her ancestral home, to join the Army and make a new life for herself. But an interview with a military recruiter reveals just how deeply she is embedded in a way of life that has defined her family for generations.

The soldier, who patiently and kindly demolishes Ree’s dream of running away, belongs to a world governed by reasonable options and practical considerations. Ree lives somewhere else, in a universe ruled by ancient grudges and elaborate, inflexible notions of obligation, honor and shame. “Winter’s Bone” is about her discovery of how cruel her native habitat can be and also about her initiation into its ways — a coming-of-age story that is not entirely about breaking free.

Whether Ree’s world exists in quite the way Ms. Granik and Mr. Woodrell depict it is not really the issue; the film’s realism is a point of entry rather than the whole point of the exercise. Its setting is finally subordinate to the main character, as memorable and vivid a heroine as you are likely to see on screen this season.

AO Scott, New York Times



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