Through the Window

THE TRAP OF CURIOSITY IN RACHEL PERKINS' JASPER JONES

THE SCREEN ADAPTATION OF CRAIG SILVEY'S BELOVED NOVEL — HELMED BY PROLIFIC FILMMAKER RACHEL PERKINS — PORTRAYS THE PAROCHIALISM AND RACIAL DIVISIONS OF A SMALL WESTERN AUSTRALIAN TOWN DURING THE SOCIETALLY HEATED PERIOD THAT WAS THE LATE 1940S, BY TELLING ITS STORY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS ADOLESCENT WHITE PROTAGONIST, JASPER JONES CHANNELS THE INNOCENCE AND OPENNESS OF YOUTH. IN DOING SO, HOWEVER, IT ALSO INEVITABLY OMISSION OVER HARSH SOCIOCULTURAL REALITIES, WATERING DOWN THE POLITICAL COMMENTARY LATENT IN ITS NARRATIVE, WRITES ELLEN VAN NEERVEEN.
There is plenty to say about Award-winning director Rachel Perkins’ ‘Jasper Jones’ (2017), an adaptation of Craig Silvey’s acclaimed 2009 novel of the same name. In 2014, the book was adapted for the stage by Kato Muharay, playing to sold-out audiences in Perth that year and in both Sydney and Melbourne in 2016. This year, the popular tale has been given the big-screen treatment.

The story is narrated by thirteen-year-old Charlie Bucktin – played by Levi Miller – whose small Western Australian town ponders over the mysterious disappearance of Laura Wishart (Nandini Campbell K Hick), the daughter of a shire president Pat (Mylias Pollock), during the summer of 1959. Fearful of another incident, Charlie’s parents, Ruth (Toni Collette) and Wes (Dan Wyllie), insist that he stay home, and the town enforces a curfew after sundown for children. This narrative element is reminiscent of segregation in Australia – bringing to mind Western Australia’s Aboriginal Act 1906, which, among other things, prohibited Noongar people from being in Perth’s city centre after 6pm. These are the historical realities glanced at when a stay told from a white viewpoint is translated for the screen by a black director.

Charlie first learns about Laura’s disappearance through a late-night tap on the window by her boyfriend, Jasper (Aaron McGrath), an older Aboriginal boy he has never, until now, met. Jasper implores him to come outside, where they soon enter a cloaked forest. I was not familiar with the forests of south-west Western Australia until I saw Jasper Jones, and neither was Perkins; she explains that they chose to shoot in the mill town of Pemberton, as Perth was too expensive. These scenes are charged with an uneasiness that diminishes when we leave the forest, suggesting that ‘place as a character’ cannot be elevated within the context of settler Australia’s disconnection with country.

Jasper then leads Charlie to a clearing, where Laura is hanging from a tree. He claims he has been set up for murder, and together they hide her body in a nearby pond.

Despite the film’s title, this story is not about Jasper – even though, during his moments on screen, newcomer actor McGrath, whom Perkins worked with before on ‘Redfern Now,’ shines. His story is Charlie’s, and we witness a very assured performance by young lead Miller, whose exciting upcoming appearances include the forthcoming ‘A Winkie in Time’ (Ava DuVernay) alongside Oyinbo Westey, and Reese Witherspoon. We are in Charlie’s world – his scholarly bedroom, the local library – and we follow his interactions with his parents and best friend, Vietnamese-Australian Jeffrey Lu (first-time actor Kevin Long), whose efforts in the cricket set go unnoticed by the all-white team.

The young cast is bolstered by the experienced Collette, Wyllie and Hugo Weaving, whose collective brilliance brings the drama to a new level. In comparison to her counterpart in the novel, Collette’s Ruth is given more attention in the film script, co-written by Silvey and Sharon Grant, to explore the complexity under the surface of her marriage with Wes. Charlie’s father is more like him – an aspiring novelist, he often locks himself away in his room, working on his manuscript. He is also sympathetic towards Jasper, which may give us some hints as to Charlie’s emerging social consciousness. Weaving plays the crazed Mad Jack Lionel, whom Charlie – following Jasper’s suggestion – begins to believe is the real culprit behind Laura’s death.

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Black and white stories

In Jasper Jones, the ‘crime mystery’alion is somewhat fuzzy but, arguably, we don’t watch the film for that. The social commentary is more interesting – the film sets out ‘not to assert that racism is bad and bigotry is wrong, but to investigate why and how such toxic principals [sic] persist within a culture’ – yet this does not go very far, either. Even the dramatising of the race-hate directed at Jeffrey’s family, apart from one memorable moment, feels perfunctory. With Jasper, we are given only vague details about his life that make the plot tick, but we know nothing of his heart. Jasper tells Charlie his mum passed away when he was very young; she was ‘not from here’. It is not known where the rest of his family is, his white father is an alcoholic, and Jasper is described as a ‘fringe-child’. What we do get is a homo-plot: Why does Charlie help Jasper, whom he has never met? Why does Jasper come to his window? The connection between the boys is never explained – and we are left feeling as though narrative convenience has gotten in the way of plausibility.

The type of ‘outside’ story laid out in Jasper Jones lends itself to old-fashioned storytelling; the nostalgic appeal pleases older audiences, who assure me that the era is well captured. A similar film set in 1960s Western Australia about the intra-racial friendship between a white boy and a black boy is the excellent September (2007), directed by White Australian Peter Garstas. It centres on the changes to legislation in 1968 that saw Indigenous pastoral workers legally entitled to equal wages. This impacts the relationship between the boys’ fathers: Paddy (Clarence John Ryan) and his dad have been working for Ed’s (Kai Saxby) family. The boys’ families spend time together, along with Paddy’s mum and younger siblings, living on the lattaka’s Wheatbelt property. Every day, Paddy’s and Ed’s mothers see each other from across their respective clothing huts. Later, Paddy and Ed’s family is invited to a formal dinner, where they are free of their differences and similarities. Both fathers are teaching the boys to drive. There is a structural power in place and this, too, starts to play out in Ed and Paddy’s relationship, which is thus also a training, the making of a bonding with the boys rigging the boys rig on the property using fancy scissors. September engagingly and emotively illustrates the social conditions for black/white racial mixing in the 1960s, including segregation in town. We also see the guilt that afflicts Ed’s parents, who care about but do not act to change the set-up.

The mood of September is one of growing up together, the sharing of space, the ability of both boys to honestly state their intentions and acknowledge their differences. Ed’s family, housed hopelessly down the hill at a new school, and asks Paddy to venture out with him. It is a lovely moment that could be a much more important scene as a director’s cut.

Perkins and the power of perspective

In 1980, Perkins founded Blackfella Films, and since then has been at the forefront of Indigenous representation. Her successes include the acclaimed television dramas Redfern Now; the ABC telemovie Mabo (2012), about the life of land rights activist Eddie Mabo, and the important documentary Black Panther Woman (2014), about Marlene Cummings, his life of addiction and her role in the Australian Black Panther party. Perkins was drawn to Jasper Jones project because of his love for the novel, a Screen-Smile interview, Perkins describes her focus when making films:

Having some underlying meaning or providing some comment on how we can improve the world has always been a part of my work. It might sound a bit naive, but I think films can change hearts and minds. This film is about a young girl who, when exposed to the world that the character Jasper Jones inhabits, displays a lovely compassion.19

Understanding who connects with a story is important when translating a book for the screen. The filmmakers recognised that the book was very popular with young readers; it resonated with them, as well as with a senior audience.18 Perkins trusted first-time screenwriter Silvey to co-write the script with Grant, and she worked closely with Silvey on set as well; his discussions with the cast proved helpful in gaining insights into their characters. In particular, of Charlie’s coming-of-age journey, Silvey has previously said:

If one of my primary areas of consideration was the suffocating sense that is growing up, that moment where the bubble is burst and you’re suddenly exposed to the real truth of things and the blind trust of childhood dissolves.16

We are encouraged to believe that it is curiosity that drives Charlie out of his bedroom and on the hunt to help clear Jasper’s name. But how does Charlie see Jasper? We don’t see. Curiosity can be a trap, Charlie’s wide open eyes are also blind. His limited view of Jasper is consistent with the film’s lack of political rigour as a whole.

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