

Not quite a serious work

By David Walsh
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Cold Mountain, written and directed Anthony Minghella, based on the novel by Charles Frazier

Cold Mountain, the new film by British director Anthony Minghella (best known for *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), is an adaptation of the best-selling novel by Charles Frazier, published in 1997. The story follows the efforts of Inman, a wounded and disillusioned Confederate soldier, to return in 1864 to his home in North Carolina and the woman, Ada Monroe, who awaits him there. Both the film and the novel alternate between scenes of Inman's arduous and hazardous odyssey (the parallel to Homer's work is made explicit) and Ada's struggles to survive on her farm in the mountains.

In the course of his travels Inman (Jude Law) encounters a low-life preacher who has impregnated a black woman and intends to drown her to conceal his sins, a household of seductresses presided over by a Judas who turns in deserters to the home guard (in charge of security behind Southern lines) for reward money, an old woman with witch-like healing powers who has lived on her own in the mountains for decades and a young woman, who lost her husband at the battle of Gettysburg, in need of elemental warmth and companionship.

Ada (Nicole Kidman), the daughter of a preacher (now dead) and originally a city girl, faces her own challenges. She discovers that she has never been taught anything useful and faces a desperate future until a young woman, Ruby Thewes (Renée Zellweger), shows up and teaches her the ropes. Ada and Ruby, who has led a harsh existence, form a partnership. The local leader of the home guard, Teague (Ray Winstone), a murderous villain, lays claim both to Ada's farm and to the woman herself. Inman's eventual return triggers a bloody climax.

Cold Mountain has certain strengths. Humaneness for one, conveyed in particular by Jude Law's intelligent and sensitive lead performance. His eyes and face express a depth of genuine and often painful emotion. The anti-war and anti-authoritarian themes should not be dismissed either. This is not a film that will appeal to the patriotic or trigger-happy. And that is not a bad thing at this moment in history. Better this than *The Last Samurai*.

There are a number of genuinely affecting moments in the film. Nicole Kidman tries hard and occasionally brings certain emotional states to life. The plebeian Ruby (Zellweger) is

perhaps too easily and too condescendingly a source of humor.

Notwithstanding the film's more positive and attractive features, in the end, it fails to satisfy. It bears some resemblance to a serious work, but it is not quite one. In that, one might say, it is being true to the novel itself.

Frazier's work belongs to a trend in fiction-writing quite widespread at present, in the English-speaking world at least. The book is intelligently composed and organized, with a great wealth of concrete detail, quasi-poetically presented. *Cold Mountain* is something of a *tour de force* in its recreation of the speech and ways of Civil War-era mountain folk. On the formal side of their works, many contemporary novelists go to great lengths, often with remarkable results.

However, in regard to social and historical currents, novels (and films) such as *Cold Mountain* tend to be far less forthcoming or insightful. Their emotional weight is also limited as a result.

Of course no work is required to deal directly with the great issues of the Civil War. To put it another way, the desertion of a Confederate soldier from North Carolina (which had one of the highest desertion rates among Southern states) might itself prove an historical question of great interest.

The author chooses to make Inman's opinions about the war, slavery, and the republic remain more or less a mystery. This too need not detract from the overall artistic effect. No doubt many soldiers even in the highly ideological Civil War were indifferent to the causes and aims of the conflicts in which they were willing or unwilling participants.

Frazier reproduces Inman's thought process: "He [Inman is speaking to the old mountain woman] said he had not seen much other than change for four years, and he guessed the promise of it was part of what made up the war frenzy in the early days. The powerful draw of new faces, new places, new lives. And new laws whereunder you might kill all you wanted and not be jailed, but rather be decorated. Men talked of war as if they committed it to preserve what they had and what they believed. But Inman now guessed it was boredom with the repetition of the daily rounds that had made them take up weapons. The endless arc of the sun, wheel of seasons. War took a man out of that circle of regular life and made a season of its own, not much dependent on anything else. He had not been immune to its pull. But sooner or later you get awful tired and just plain sick of watching people killing one another for

every kind of reason at all, using whatever implements fall to hand.”

An individual human being will perhaps feel this way, but the artist might have the responsibility to explore deeper motives for a conflict that lasted four years, cost more than 600,000 lives and changed US and world history irrevocably. There is a common belief among writers and filmmakers that it is impermissible to go beyond the immediate thoughts and actions of one’s protagonists, that it is somehow “elitist” and insulting to probe people’s behavior for causation perhaps imperceptible at the level of everyday human intercourse.

The choice of a central character almost entirely unencumbered by views on the war or the world (apparently based on one of Frazier’s ancestors) is not a more or less accidental or organic one, “made up for” by the author’s own assessments of events and people (for example, see Celine’s *Journey to the End of the Night*, for better or worse). It is rather a defining artistic and intellectual decision, which largely shapes the book and the way it operates on the reader.

A work that seems dedicated, as so many are today, to expunging the specifically socio-historical from its narrative, begins to take on a different and, so to speak, more questionable coloring. One may be permitted to entertain the suspicion that the novelist is evading certain thorny problems.

Contemporary novelists and filmmakers tend to view history and individual historical events, even the most traumatic, as merely the passive backdrop for supposedly “eternal” dramas. They have been cut off in the main from the notion that particular psychological and sexual conditions are determined by and reflect various stages in the evolution of class society. And this has aesthetic implications.

If everything is reduced to a series of timeless psychological dilemmas, then the question arises: why choose the Civil War as opposed to any other specific moment as one’s setting? Because, naturally, the narrative cannot be set outside time and place. A choice has to be made, even an arbitrary one. The result, however, is often a quite tentative and uneasy relationship between the history and the human drama. On the one hand, the novelist offers an abundance of detail, an over-abundance in many instances, which serves (unconsciously) to obscure the lack of historical insight; on the other, absent a mental or sexual life derived sensuously and concretely from a study of the specific era’s social reality, the writer is inevitably reduced to the lowest common denominator of emotional life, i.e., clichés.

And indeed when one peels away the layers of detail, much of it fascinating and no doubt accurate, the core of *Cold Mountain*, like that of many other contemporary works, proves to consist of rather predictable and time-honored considerations of love, desire and human nature. In regard to the latter we learn that the same man can be good and bad, kind and cruel, energetic and indifferent, laconic and eloquent. This is no doubt true, but not earthshaking. The contours of the book (and

film), notwithstanding their bright and sometimes lustrous patterns, are essentially smooth and well-worn.

That Inman finally makes his way back to Ada, that they spend a short time together (eventually producing a child), that he dies with his head in her lap while he dreams “a bright dream of home” will not astonish or challenge the reader or viewer to any meaningful degree.

Filmmaker Anthony Minghella has even less interest in the dynamics of the Civil War, as he takes pains to explain. He told an interviewer for the *Guardian*: “To be honest, I could care less about Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers. I kept thinking about the Cultural Revolution in China. What was interesting to me about this material was the war away from the battlefield, and the abuses that accrue when there’s chaos in the land and people are empowered to police when the men are gone. The home guard interested me as much as the armies.”

Minghella told another British reporter, “It appears to be a story about the American Civil War, and I don’t necessarily have an interest in war stories. But then I realized that war was not the issue. It’s more about a man’s return from war, the after effects of war, and the effects of war on the world away from the battlefield.”

Again, Minghella is not obliged to be interested in Union soldiers, Confederate soldiers or anything else, but it seems an odd fashion of going about artistic work, to profess a lack of concern for one’s concrete subject matter or at least critical aspects thereof.

Midway through the film an unhappy thought suddenly strikes one: despite the talent at work, and the scrupulousness with which any number of details have been approached, these performers are *pretending* terribly hard to be something that neither they nor anyone else involved in this production have really grasped. *Pretending, only playing at*. And that fatal idea never leaves one.

Minghella’s Inman (perhaps: what’s “*in man*”) is an Everyman. He could be returning home after the Hundred Years War, Napoleon’s disastrous invasion of Russia or the slaughterhouse of World War One. This unconvincing “timelessness” is the film’s weakest aspect. The work takes the form of a series of disconnected and discrete episodes, without essential inner connection, and becomes somewhat tedious as a result. And the denouement fails to have the desired impact. One doesn’t quite care passionately about these people. They are half human and half ghostly, lifeless abstraction.

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