

THROUGH BLACK SPRUCE

(dir. Don McKellar, 2018 – 111 mins)

Joseph Boyden is an author who is shrouded in controversy. In 2008, his novel *Through Black Spruce* won the Scotiabank Giller Prize. But since then, Boyden's Indigenous identity has been questioned: though he claims Indigenous heritage, the veracity of Boyden's ethnicity has been challenged, positioning him as a Canadian Rachel Dolezal-type figure. As such, it is hard to think of Don McKellar's 2018 adaptation of *Through Black Spruce* without considering questions of authorship and authority. But through the powerful performances of the Indigenous actors in the film, *Through Black Spruce* transcends its source material's exploitation of Indigenous content.

Tanaya Beatty stars as Annie Bird, a young Cree woman from Moosonee in Northern Ontario. Her twin sister Suzanne, who had moved to Toronto and begun a modelling career, has been missing for months, and Annie reluctantly ventures to the city to find her – a set up seemingly steeped in genre tropes. But Annie soon gets caught up in her sister's life, moving into her old apartment, socializing with her friends, and taking up modelling herself.

Through the combined conceits of Annie's double life and ethnic heritage, *Through Black Spruce* unfolds as a meditation on identity. Beatty as Annie questions the authenticity of her sister's Cree-ness before immersing herself in her urban existence. Contrasting the culture of rural Ontario, where family ties and tradition remain strong, with that of the big city, where a super-urban party lifestyle takes over, Annie is still able to find elements of Indigenous culture, whereas in Moosonee its presence is more obvious; families speak to each other in Cree, and they hunt and trap to sustain themselves. But in cosmopolitan, white-washed Toronto, Annie still is able to find cultural ties: a feast of Canadian goose meat is held under a highway; a photographer makes art which focuses on the place of Indigenous women in society. Through Annie's exploration of the two locales, the character gains depth, and Beatty successfully emotes a multitude of identities.

The central mystery of the film is one of brutality – an unexpected tone for comedic director McKellar. *Through Black Spruce* begins with Annie's uncle Will (Brandon Oakes) being viciously beaten while he's interrogated over the location of his daughter. The loss of Annie as a sister, daughter, niece and friend is an open wound without closure, and this wound is bloody. We are reminded that this isn't a singular event: when Annie goes to report her sister as missing, she is shown to a board full of missing notices for other Indigenous women. But Beatty and Oakes' performances elevate these narrative elements beyond a mass statistic, political grandstanding or gory shock. Annie and Will's manner of dealing with the Canadian epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women is brought to life by Beatty and Oakes, whose sensitive, detailed acting gives life to the missing Suzanne, while also illuminating their characters' own complex traumas. While it would be impossible to separate *Through Black Spruce* from the controversy that surrounds it, one can appreciate the nuance and force that come to the forefront in the film's electric lead performances.

— **Chelsea Phillips-Carr**