The New York Times

NYT CRITIC'S PICK

'First Cow' Review: The Milk of Human Kindness

Set in the mid-19th-century Oregon Territory, Kelly Reichardt's latest film is a fable, a western, a buddy picture and a masterpiece.

By A.O. Scott

Behind every great fortune, someone once said — not quite Balzac, though he often gets the credit — lies a great crime. The fortune amassed by Cookie (John Magaro) and King-Lu (Orion Lee), partners in a mid-19th-century artisanal snack-food start-up in a rough section of the Oregon Territory, is a modest one: a cloth sack filled with shells, cutup coins and company scrip. The crime that brings them that bounty is correspondingly small-scale. Under cover of night, the two men sneak over to a pasture near the cabin they share and milk someone else's cow. (King-Lu takes lookout duty in a tree, while Cookie fills the pail.)

That patient, inscrutable animal is the title character, and in effect the female lead, of “First Cow,” Kelly Reichardt’s deceptively simple and wondrously subtle new film. A parable of economics and politics, with shrewd insights into the workings of supply and demand, scarcity and scale and other puzzles of the marketplace, the movie is also keenly attuned to details of history, both human and natural.

Even the mud looks like preindustrial, frontier mud, and the motley, multicultural assortment of traders, trappers and prospectors who find themselves spattered by it seem equally untouched by modernity. “History hasn’t gotten here yet,” King-Lu remarks. And yet at the same time, the citizens of this semi-wilderness are perfectly recognizable: creatures of will and whim from every corner of the world, driven by ambition and desire, capable of savage cruelty and angelic tenderness, with history clinging like a burr to their clothes.

But that’s just us. The cow (identified in the end credits as Evie) may be the only bovine in the territory, but she is part of a nonhuman cast that includes at least one owl, an assortment of very good dogs, an apparently tame crow and a typically amoral cat whose mischief kicks the plot toward its climax. The people believe they have dominion over the animals, the land and its products, but their sovereignty is an illusion. We are, for the most part, big talkers with meager destinies, at the mercy of luck, global capitalism (which was a thing even then) and one another.

Though it surveys a grim, Hobbesian struggle for survival, “First Cow” has more on its mind and in its viewfinder than the nasty, brutish war of each against all, or the systems of domination intended to keep that war in check. Even in the harshest circumstances, there is still room — still a primal need — for sweetness, for companionship, for art.

Reichardt, who wrote the script with Jon Raymond, her frequent collaborator (his novel “The Half-Life” provides the source material), introduces the story with one of William Blake’s Proverbs of Hell: “The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.” We build our homes out of fellow feeling, in other words. King-Lu and Cookie, roommates as well as business partners, illustrate this wisdom. They meet in the wilderness, while Cookie is miserably employed as the cook and chief forager in a gang of trappers on their way to Fort Tillicum. (His real name is Otis Figowitz). King-Lu is hiding out in the woods, running for his life after a murderous bit of trouble with some Russians. They strike up a conversation that carries an unspoken current of curiosity and budding affection.

The possibility of violence hovers in the air around them like a damp chill. Cookie’s companions can barely exchange words without coming to blows, and the same ethos seems to govern Fort Tillicum. (The actual governor, owner of the titular cow, is a noble rotter known as the Chief Factor, played with suitably repellent panache by Toby Jones.) But what develops between Cookie and King-Lu is an exception to this rule of universal antagonism, an instant bond that 19th-century American writers might have described as natural sympathy. It can also be called love.

Their temperaments are distinct and complementary. Both have traveled far, but King-Lu's journeys have an air of cosmopolitan adventure: Born in China, he made his way to Oregon by way of London and other world capitals, and dreams of opening a hotel in San Francisco. Cookie, by contrast, was orphaned early and has endured a life of indentured labor and hard traveling. He is quiet and sensitive, a game if occasionally skeptical audience for his friend's flights of speculation, worldly learning and homespun philosophy.

Cookie is also a gifted baker, and this skill, combined with King-Lu's entrepreneurial gumption and that pilfered milk, brings about a fateful change of circumstance. Their "oily cakes" — nuggets of fried dough garnished with honey and a bit of cinnamon — become the Cronuts of Fort Tillicum, drawing lines of eager patrons willing to spend hard-won wealth on a morsel of fried dough. The cakes remind one customer of something his mother used to make. For the Chief Factor, they are a taste of England. They are, for the audience, a reminder that luxury can be a necessity, that pleasure is an elemental requirement of the species, as necessary as shelter or bread.

And the pleasures of "First Cow" are deep and substantial. Reichardt's style is direct and restrained, sometimes to the point of austerity, but at her best — in "Old Joy," "Wendy and Lucy" and in this, perhaps her finest feature so far — she finds a rich poetic resonance in plain, unshowy images and words. (The rough, painterly cinematography is by Christopher Blauvelt). And also a flinty vein of humor. The pomposity of the Chief Factor and his circle, who talk of Paris fashions and military discipline, is ridiculous (if also potentially lethal). The occasional mild quarrels that bubble up between Cookie and King-Lu have their own charming absurdity, as if Robert Altman were directing an episode of "The Odd Couple" written by Samuel Beckett.

Lee and Magaro are easygoing, appealing performers, and they work in relaxed, natural counterpoint. King-Lu draws Cookie out of his melancholy diffidence, while Cookie calms some of his friend's restlessness. Because of an introductory scene set many years in their future — an implicit link between this movie and "Wendy and Lucy," featuring Alia Shawkat — we suspect something terrible will befall them, but this foreboding sharpens both the comedy and the tenderness of the time we spend in their company.

It also crystallizes Reichardt and Raymond's ideas about history and politics — about how the simplest undertakings ensnare people in complicated relations of power and competition. "First Cow" is fundamentally a western: It takes up questions of civilization, solidarity and barbarism on the American frontier. And like many great westerns it critiques some of the genre's foundational myths with bracing, beautiful rigor, including the myth of heroic individualism.

The quote from Blake might be bookended by one from Walt Whitman, who wrote that "whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud."