

SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS

Directed by Scott Hicks

Produced by Ron Bass, Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall, and Harry J. Ufland

Distributed by Universal Pictures

Released in 1999

Growing up in a community split between European and Japanese descendants, two children, a girl and a boy, cross the forbidden divide, growing into lovers. Nobody knows of their hideaway beneath the giant cedar, there in the Pacific mist. Joy and passion envelop them.

Soon Pearl Harbor is attacked, Hatsue is sent to an internment camp and Ishmael does nothing. He loses an arm in the war, she marries and returns to her old home. Her husband is accused of murdering a fellow fisherman and Ishmael takes a professional interest as the local reporter, but he is full of confusion and latent anger. During the war Hatsue wrote him and said after their one occasion of intercourse she knew their relationship would go nowhere; she did not love him.

Their story together, overcoming the frenetic editing imposed on it, is far more important than the trial. Some real attention to detail went into the issues of the case—the cause of death, the role of prejudice in an ideally impartial system, the designs of the prosecution, the possible motive of long-standing family grievance, the atmosphere of momentous occasion muffled by heavy snow, dimly lit by oil lamp.

But the love story is not conveyed with equal persuasiveness. Its mysteries are left unexplained. Hatsue does not seem to have any problem with Ishmael until she is forcibly removed with her family. Hoping to relieve his obsessions, Ishmael seeks out Hatsue during the trial, amidst the same terrain they frequented as children. gingerly traversing a stretch of fallen timber, Hatsue stops. Ishmael reaches for her but she pulls away. Trying to regain balance, his attempts frustrated by a missing arm lost to the war, Ishmael succumbs, sinking down pitifully. She tells him she has done a terrible thing. What that could be remains unknown. But it's a great moment.

Ishmael had been collecting evidence to free the accused. But he kept it to himself. Now, finding new resolve from his brief conversation with Hatsue, he decides to share it with her family. Ishmael may have been, heretofore, allowing his anger against the girl to consume him. She severed all ties with him during the war and he never got over it. He may want to punish the husband, to punish her. But a sense of imminent self-destruction, a desire to live up to the ideals of his departed father—something sways him, something ambiguous. For all the extraneous detail peppering the film, a few minutes of clarification could have been devoted to rounding out the complicated relationship between Ishmael and Hatsue. Style stymies substance throughout.

The film looks exquisite and boasts some compelling performances, but the promise of the film's beginning is not met by its deflating denouement. The trial serves as a structure for

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

the film, but the trial only matters as an occasion to bring Ishmael and Hatsue back together, for Ishmael to decide which course he will take. Will his bitterness rule, or will his 'gentle nature' win out? That's the story, and everything else is scenery.