

Document Citation

Title	Film : Between a pint & a grin ; raise the red sorghum
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Source	<i>New York Press</i>
Date	1995 Feb 07
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The secret of Roan Inish, Sayles, John, 1994

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FILM



Between a Pint & a Grin; Raise the Red Sorghum

SURELY THE MOST STRIKING BIT OF LORE you can pick up in John Sayles' *The Secret of Roan Inish*, a very lore-minded fable set in 1940s Ireland, concerns the Selkies. They are creatures of Celtic myth, half human, half seal. When we first meet a female Selkie in the film, she's captured by a man who snatches her sealskin and makes her his wife. She remains in human form, and land-bound, long enough to start a family. But as soon as she discovers that purloined skin, she's gone—back under the waves, without apology or fare-thee-well.

You might take that as a pre-feminist allegory of some sort, but what struck me is how readily the creatures serve as an analogue for the film, and not entirely comfortably. *The Secret of Roan Inish* is itself something of a Selkie: an old-fashioned kids' movie wearing the skin of an art film. Will it easily combine two potential audiences, or make like that mythic amphibian and quickly disappear beneath the commercial brine?

My guess would be the latter, because the movie is rather too gee-whiz and storybook for grownups—it reminded me of some nameless Hayley Mills vehicle from my childhood—and far too textured and idiomatic for most kids. It's somewhere between Nancy Drew and Bill Forsyth, which leaves a crack big enough for even the noblest ambitions to fall through.

But I suppose we must salute Sayles for those ambitions, and for a determined idiosyncrasy that never says die. He continues to be the most unpredictable American independent, a director of diverse enthusiasms rather than persistent themes ("community," sure, but only in the vaguest sense) and little that identifies him stylistically. The result has been an uneven body of work which, nonetheless, is more than justified by occasional masterstrokes like *Matewan* and his last, *Passion Fish*.

His undeniable adventurousness this time leads him to challenges that include a foreign culture, a child's viewpoint, and an approach that is necessarily magic-realist. Why bother? Maybe the difficulties involved, combined with the appeal of Ireland, were the lure; but you can also sense that Sayles fell under the spell of Rosalie K. Fry's "Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry," a 1957 novella on which his screenplay is based.

The movie opens after WWII. Ten-year-old Fiona (Jeni Courtney) is sent by her father, an embittered widower, to live with her grandparents on Ireland's rugged west coast. There



SEAL WITH A KISS.

she learns of the lingering power of Roan Inish, a nearby island that her family abandoned a few years before at a decided cost: just before the move, her little brother Jamie was swept out to sea in his cradle, never to be seen again.

Seems the island and its seals coveted their human company, and this was their way of showing how pissed they were at being left behind. At least that's the construction Fiona gradually puts on things; the movie spends much of its first hour chronicling these past events, including the legend of the Selkies, via flashbacks. Though her grandfolks remain skeptical, a friendly seal plays guide to Fiona, who has her suspicions confirmed, one day on desolate Roan Inish, when she spies Jamie picking flowers, naked and robust as a three-year-old Cupid.

I perhaps needn't detail the episodes of Jamie paddling around in his cradle, or having tea with a seal, to suggest what we're dealing with here: a world of miracles and resurrections but, most of all, blarney. Alas, not the kind of pub-stool nonsense that makes an able bridge between a pint and a grin. This is, instead, the airy-fairy variety of wise children, wiser animals and happy endings as inevitable as Tax Day.

Sayles' approach goes with the material, but I was just sitting here trying to think if any American director of the past two or three decades actually has brought off an example of magic realism, a literary form indigenous to (and perhaps only truly successful in) cultures beset with a high instance of chronic civic chaos. One cinematic exception that comes to mind is *E.T.*, which also centers on kids yet manages to convince viewers of all ages of its leap over the moon.

But Spielberg models weren't literary, and he stays rooted in the dreamscape of suburban America, with its durable faith in flying machines and errant immigrants. Sayles starts off at a much greater cultural remove, and at a time when few general audiences can be assumed to care about European folklore; that's one reason his cognizant seals seem far more alien than *E.T.*'s alien. But perhaps the most crucial difference is that Spielberg addresses kids first and foremost, where Sayles seems to think he's making a film for the

audience of *Passion Fish*. The result is that the "magic" in *Roan Inish* remains more stated than conjured. The story is full of it, sure, but the film itself is too literal-minded and tasteful either to overleap or fully transform the conceit Sayles has inherited. What kid will sit still for these heavy Irish accents and lingo, no matter how authentic the dialogue or skilled the actors? Or give a fig about cinematography (by Haskell Wexler) that's

carefully muted instead of grab-you-by-the-corneas?

And if kids don't jump for it, what chance does that leave the kid-in-us-all? Though not without ambient charms, *Roan Inish* suffers from the vague earnestness that has left Sayles with some great films to his credit but no unmistakable artistic identity, a dilemma oddly echoed in the film's advertised identity. The movie's main character is a little girl, but presumably you can't tell that to the adults who are its only likely audience, so the ads show a beautiful woman. She is, appropriately if misleadingly, that elusive Selkie.