

Short films considered for Academy Award nominations: Emmett Till, a Jack London story and an isolated child

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In December, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Short Films and Animation branch selected its shortlist of 10 live-action short films (out of 165 submissions) to contend for Oscar nominations.

After January screenings, branch members will narrow this down to the final five nominees. Nominations for the 90th Academy Awards will be announced January 23. The ceremony will be held March 4 this year.

In the age of the \$200 million blockbuster, short fiction films hold no interest for the box-office-obsessed media. However, such works may demonstrate considerable artistry and insight. Like the short story, the short film is capable of isolating and treating a dramatic moment with great intensity and resonance.

This is a brief comment on three of the ten finalists, all of which were worth taking notice of.

My Nephew Emmett

The brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till on August 28, 1955, in Mississippi, horrified millions and helped ignite the Civil Rights movement. At the time, Till, an African American boy from Chicago, was visiting family in Money, Mississippi. Four days before his murder, Till stopped at Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, encountering Carolyn Bryant, a white woman. At the time Bryant claimed Till flirted with her. Years later she admitted this was a lie.

Based on Bryant's mere accusation, her husband Roy and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, seized Till from his great-uncle's house, forced the young boy to carry a 75-pound cotton-gin fan to the bank of the Tallahatchie River and take off his clothes. They then beat him, gouged out his eye, shot him in the head, and threw his body, tied to the cotton-gin fan with barbed wire, into the river.

Till's killers were acquitted by an all-white jury, all of whose members had been visited and threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, although there was little or no question about their guilt.

Written and directed by Kevin Wilson, Jr., *My Nephew Emmett* recounts the hours leading up to the atrocity. Emmett (Joshua Wright) is visiting his great-uncle Mose Wright (L.B. Williams) and great-aunt Elizabeth (Jasmine Guy) in rural Money. Emmett returns from a Saturday night excursion in good humor, but Mose is worried that the boy is naïve about the town's racism.

Mose's most disturbing fears are realized when there is an incessant pounding on his door at 2:30 a.m. Sunday morning. Three men, two white and one black, force their way into Mose's home, demanding to know "where is the nigger who whistled at my wife?"

They push Mose aside, drag Emmett out of bed, and punch him, saying, "Don't ever look a white man in the eyes again." Mose pleads for Emmett's life, begging to be taken in the boy's stead. *My Nephew Emmett*'s final scene shows a petrified Emmett being thrown into the back of a truck.

"Three days later, Mose Wright identified the body of Emmett Louis Till at the Tallahatchie River," the movie's postscript informs us. Movingly, there is a short video clip of the real Mose Wright.

The murder of Emmett Till and the freeing of his killers was a seminal event in the history of the struggle against racism, galvanizing opposition to Jim Crow segregation and racist terror. Furthermore, the decision by Mamie Till Bradley, Emmett's mother, to have an open-casket funeral so the world could witness his mutilated remains, left an indelible mark.

Lost Face

Sean Meehan's *Lost Face* is based on a Jack London short story of the same title (first published in 1910), set in the mid-1800s in the Yukon. The Polish Subienkow is one of the last survivors of a group of mostly Russian fur thieves who have been captured by Nulato Indians.

Subienkow, in London's words, "had travelled a long trail of bitterness and horror" and now faces a protracted death by torture. However, he manages to convince the tribe's chief, Makamuk, that he has a recipe for an ointment or elixir that magically protects the skin from penetration by a weapon. In effect, the thief tricks Makamuk into lopping off his head, thereby escaping a far more horrid fate.

One must read London's remarkable story, however, to grasp the full context of this grim episode. The writer details the savage treatment of the aboriginal people at the hands of the fur thieves, which evokes the bloody response from Makamuk and his tribe. Here is an excerpt from the short story:

"Came the building of the fort [by the fur-thieves.] It was enforced labor. The tiered walls of logs arose to the sighs and groans of the Nulato Indians. The lash was laid upon their backs, and it was the iron hand of the freebooters of the sea that laid on the lash. There were Indians that ran away, and when they were caught they were brought back and spread-eagled before the fort, where they and their tribe learned the efficacy of the knout. Two died under it; others were injured for life; and the rest took the lesson to heart and ran away no more. The snow was flying ere the fort was finished, and then it was the time for furs. A heavy tribute was laid upon the tribe. Blows and lashings continued, and that the tribute should be paid, the women and children were held as hostages and treated with the barbarity that only the fur-thieves knew. Well, it had been a sowing of blood, and now was come the harvest."

Regarding Subienkow's beheading: "There was a great bewilderment and silence, while slowly it began to dawn in their minds that there had been no medicine. The fur-thief had outwitted them. Alone, of all their prisoners, he had escaped the torture. That had been the stake for which he played. A great roar of laughter went up. Makamuk bowed his head in shame. The fur-thief had fooled him. He had lost face before all his people."

Meehan told an interviewer from *Filminquiry.com*: "My primary motivation was to keep everything real and that in turn was born of a desire to respect Jack London's writing, and even more importantly, to respect the indigenous elements of the film. I didn't want to make a film that felt derivative, dismissive or cheap (which is a little tricky when money is so tight), so I worked hard with my heads of department, going through historical photos and drawings from the mid 1800s and leaning on their collective

experience of shooting period work."

The Silent Child

Set in rural England, Chris Overton's *The Silent Child* is the story of a deaf child, Libby (Maisie Sly), and her middle-class parents. Despite their "low expectations" of Libby, they hire a caregiver, Joanne (Rachel Shenton), to try and "normalize" Libby before she enters schools.

"My ears are broken," the exceedingly bright Libby explains to Joanne, after the latter teaches her sign language. As Libby's isolation and relationship to the world alter, her parents become more resistant to helping their daughter communicate, and discharge the caregiver. *The Silent Child*'s final moments are heartbreaking as Libby, who stands ignored in the schoolyard, sees Joanne beyond its enclosures. They sign "I love to" to one another.

The movie's postscript reveals that "90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Over 78% attend mainstream schools with no specialist support in place."

Scriptwriter Shenton—who plays Joanne in the film—discloses in the movie's promotional material that her "brilliant father lost his hearing very suddenly when I was 12 and lived the last two years of his life profoundly deaf. I witnessed first hand the huge effects deafness has on a family. I also saw him for the first time seem vulnerable and I noticed how easy it was for people to leave him out. I've been raising deaf awareness for over a decade."

She adds, "This project is inspired by real life events that are sadly not uncommon and this is a story that has to be told."



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