

Jeff Nichols' *The Bikeriders*: A road out of history

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The Bikeriders is a new film from US writer-director Jeff Nichols (*Loving*, *Midnight Special*, *Mud*, *Take Shelter*). It is a fictionalized adaptation of a 1968 photo-book of the same title by veteran photographer and filmmaker Danny Lyon.

Between 1963 and 1967, Lyon (who also worked as a photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] during the height of the civil rights movement) traveled with the Chicago Outlaws Motorcycle Club, taking photographs and conducting interviews with the “bikeriders” (the term “biker” was apparently not widely used among Midwestern motorcycle clubs at the time). The resulting collection was, in Lyon’s words, “an attempt to record and glorify the life of the American bikerider.” Nichols’ film takes its inspiration from Lyon’s work, but ultimately relates a fictionalized version of events.

While out at a rowdy bar in 1965, Kathy (Jodie Comer) meets Benny (Austin Butler), a young, violent member of the Vandals Motorcycle Club. Kathy is initially repelled by the rough, foul-mouthed gang of bikeriders, but she becomes fascinated by Benny’s mysterious, dangerous allure. They go for a ride, which enrages Kathy’s boyfriend. Within five weeks, Kathy and Benny are married.

In interviews with Lyon (played in the film by Mike Faist), Kathy recounts the history of the club and its founder and leader, Johnny (Tom Hardy). Johnny is inspired to start the club when he sees Marlon Brando’s performance in *The Wild One* (1953), especially this iconic exchange:

Mildred: Hey, Johnny, what are you rebelling against?
Johnny (Brando’s character): What have you

got?

The club grows, and growth brings problems. Another member challenges Johnny for leadership of the club, but Johnny keeps his position after beating him in a brutal fistfight. Benny is attacked in a bar for wearing his “colors” (club affiliation patches) and nearly loses his foot. In retaliation, Johnny orders the bar burned to the ground, as local authorities look on in fear.

An influx of young, unstable Vietnam War veterans join the club, creating conflict with the old guard. At a party, one older member is beaten savagely when he reveals his desire to become a motorcycle police officer, while Kathy is nearly a victim of violent sexual assault. She demands that Benny leave the club. Meanwhile, Johnny asks Benny to assume leadership of the club, lamenting that the young members are increasingly resistant to his authority. Benny, insisting on his own personal freedom, leaves town, forsaking them both.

A violent young thug, known only as “The Kid” (Toby Wallace) challenges Johnny’s leadership. On the way to the confrontation, Johnny visits Kathy. They reflect that neither of them got to “keep” Benny for themselves in the end. “You can give everything you got to a thing,” Johnny says. “You can give it all you got. And it’s still just going to do what it’s going to do.” The ending brings tragedy, but with a note of hope.

The Bikeriders is an unsatisfying film. A number of performances stand out (Comer in particular) at certain moments. The film is visually appealing. Great care has clearly gone into recreating the look and feel of the time period.

And yet, too much here is amorphous, tired, clichéd. The characters, and the film itself, drift languidly from one episode to the next. Little that happens, even outbursts of violence, do not seem to make much of an impact on the characters, or the viewer.

The Liverpool-born Comer puts in an effort. Her performance has received some criticism, particularly her use of a strong regional Midwestern American accent. The accent is, at times, distracting. But she attempts to infuse Kathy with a vibrant and contradictory inner life. Her performance is the film's most amusing and engaging. The Benny-Butler character, on the other hand, remains so thoroughly closed-off and emotionally remote for most of the film that it becomes difficult to see why either Kathy or Johnny take such an interest in him.

The treatment (or lack thereof) of the time period is notable. The mid-1960s to mid-1970s were a period of enormous global social upheaval. Lyon himself documented a number of civil rights demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, and anti-Vietnam War protests in his time as a SNCC photographer. The upheavals of the time, the violence and uncertainty, above all, the spirit of rebellion against authority, doubtless would have had an impact even on those who would have had trouble making sense of events, or who attempted to hold themselves apart from politics. That non-conformist spirit, however limited, was a significant contributor to the success of Dennis Hopper's 1969 motorcycle film *Easy Rider*.

Almost none of this history and turmoil emerges, directly or indirectly, in the film (apart from one right-wing Vandal who rails against "pinkos" and proclaims his desire to fight in Vietnam). For the most part, the characters seem to exist in a bubble outside of society, having found their "freedom" in the motorcycle gang and its violent escapades.

In romanticizing motorcycle culture like this, which both Nichols and Lyon have said was their aim, perhaps the filmmakers imagine that the "open road" offers an escape from the difficulties of social and political life, which are even more acute today than in 1968. A road out of history, as it were. In any case, the socially noncommittal approach weakens and dulls the film.

Nichols is a capable filmmaker. His *Loving*, about the efforts to strike down racist laws against interracial

marriage, was a moving and intelligent work. One is glad to see he hasn't yet become part of the comic book blockbuster machinery, like many of his contemporaries. Still, his body of work would benefit from a deeper engagement with the social world, an attention to historical specificity that goes beyond costume and set designs.



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