
Milestones and Touchstones in Kansas and Western Cinema

Film Reviews

edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch

Although Hollywood's feature filmmakers have largely neglected the history of Kansas and the Great Plains in the last couple years, that history has been kept before the public eye in a series of landmark anniversaries. From the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the sesquicentennials of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, the founding of Topeka, and the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v Board*, historic milestones have been celebrated during the past two years. These landmark anniversaries have been marked by a range of commemorative activities and events, from new national park sites (a Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail with facilities in eleven different states; a *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site in Topeka) to historical reenactments, local celebrations, and museum shows. And film has played a key part in these celebrations, from the biggest screens (the National Geographic-produced *Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West*, presented in IMAX theaters) to the smallest (the Topeka Public Schools producing a series of brief *Brown v. Board Reflections* for local broadcast on educational access television during the week of the fiftieth anniversary).

In this year of significant anniversaries, it is fitting to choose for our film classic a movie that has reached its own landmark status: *Picnic*, the motion picture of William Inge's Kansas-set play, whose filming occupied the attention of Kansans fifty years ago. Looking back at the film and its impact on Kansas is Ralph F. Voss, author of the standard biography of Inge, *A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph*, and a professor in the Department of English at the University of Alabama. His graceful review places *Picnic* in context while at the same time suggesting why it should still matter to us today.¹

Thomas Prasch is associate professor and chair of the Department of History at Washburn University. He earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1995 and served as contributing editor responsible for film reviews for the *American Historical Review* from 1995 to 2004. His previous Kansas History film review collections appear in the summer 2001 and 2003 issues.

1. Ralph F. Voss, *A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989). The Kansas-born author regularly returns to the state for the annual William Inge Theatre Festival in Independence, Kansas, and I would like to thank Peter Ellenstein, artistic director of the William Inge Center for the Arts in Independence, for facilitating my connection with Professor Voss.

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The coverage of milestones in Kansas history continues with the review of a documentary released under the aegis of the *Topeka Capital-Journal* in celebration of the capital city's 150th birthday. The documentary draws on both historians' work on early city history and on oral histories collected from contemporary residents to flesh out the Topeka story. Reviewing it is Bruce Mactavish, the member of Washburn University's Department of History who is responsible for teaching Kansas history.

The fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v Board* we mark here with two pieces. The first is a review of one of the documentaries that the commemoration of the event occasioned: *Black, White and Brown*, produced by Topeka's Washburn-based public television station, KTWU. Reviewing it is Gerald R. Butters Jr. of the Department of History at Aurora University, a film historian with a particular interest in the African American presence in American film. He plans to follow up his *Black Manhood on the Silver Screen* with a new work on blaxploitation films.² In addition, we offer a less conventional review designed to highlight the growing role of film in museum exhibits. The *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site, opened this past May 17 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision, is a striking example: a museum installation more focused on site than on artifacts that makes extensive use of film and video to track the histories constellated around the decision. Dale E. Nimz, a public historian and historic preservationist, takes on the task of reviewing video installations *in situ* at the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site.

Beyond the milestones, there are the touchstones: the generic structures that continue to fix popular perceptions of Kansas and western history. No genre has a deeper or richer history in this respect than the Western film, and if the past few years have not seen major new Westerns in theatrical release, they have been marked by one significant reassertion of the Western's generic primacy in HBO's series *Deadwood*, now nearing completion of its second season. University of Kansas film historian John Tibbetts reviews the first season of this series, placing the new work in the context of film Westerns of the past and illuminating how *Deadwood* seeks to limn the Western experience.³

2. Gerald R. Butters Jr., *Black Manhood on the Silver Screen* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

3. Tibbetts's most recent work, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biographies*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

The other great touchstone of Kansas identity is, of course, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). For better or worse, no single film more defines Kansas to a broad American and international public, and proliferating references to it continue to percolate through popular culture. No doubt we can all provide a few instances of Oz-ian quotation. My own favorite recent Oz reference appeared in *Smallville*, the WB series that anachronistically tracks the youth of Superman in contemporary small-town "Kansas" (made identifiable by its bucolic farmlands and sinister meteor showers, although the scale of the schools and the industrial plants may seem disproportionate). In the recent episode "Legacy," one of the characters, wandering the streets of Shanghai, cannot resist an in-joke bit of quotation, declaring: "We're not in Kansas anymore" (leaving viewers here to wonder when they ever had been).⁴ The popular culture prompted by Oz has long fascinated Washburn University's writer-in-residence and English professor Thomas Fox Averill, as readers of *Kansas History* doubtless will remember. This year he takes a time out from touring with his new collection of short-stories, *Ordinary Genius*, to update us on recent Oz-ian sightings and to lead us through Wamego's new Oz Museum.⁵

Finally, however, Kansas and western history is a continuously shifting terrain, and our attention to more distant landmarks and touchstones should not blind us to those shifts in the more recent past. From new industries taking root to new immigrants finding a place in Kansas, the forces that shape Kansans' identity are in the process of change. One example is the relocation of refugees from the Sudanese civil wars to the American Midwest. *Lost Boys of Sudan* documents the struggle such recent immigrants have had placing new roots in places such as Kansas. Khalid M. El-Hassan, assistant research professor and program coordinator at the African Studies Resource Center at the University of Kansas, provides a nuanced view of this transition in his review of the documentary.

4. In the same episode, Christopher Reeve, in one of the series' "in-jokes" for Superman fans, puts in a posthumous vocal guest appearance.

5. Thomas Fox Averill, *Ordinary Genius* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). See Averill, "Oz and Kansas Culture," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 2–12; Averill, *Nurse Betty* review in "The Continuing Cinematic Presence of Kansas and the West. Film Reviews," ed. Thomas Prasch, *ibid.* 26 (Summer 2003): 122–23; see also James H. Nottage and Floyd R. Thomas Jr., "'There's No Place Like Home': Symbols and Images of Kansas," *ibid.* 8 (Autumn 1985): 138–61.

PICNIC. Written by William Inge; screenplay by Daniel Taradash; directed by Joshua Logan. 1956 (general release); color; Columbia Pictures.



William Inge's second Broadway play, *Picnic*, won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1953, and the native of Independence, Kansas, sold the film rights to Columbia Pictures for what was then the handsome fee of \$350,000. Although it was not (and is not) uncommon for playwrights and novelists to sell film rights to their work, thereby relinquishing control over how the story line might fare on the screen, the sale of *Picnic* carried more than ordinary significance because Inge had battled the play's Broadway director, Joshua Logan, over the ending of the play. Inge finally surrendered, allowing the love of the central young couple to triumph over what he saw as common sense: the beautiful young heroine Madge Owens follows the handsome drifter-hero Hal Carter out of town after their stolen night of love, implying that the couple will be together, marry, and live, as the 1950s formula would have it, happily ever after. Inge thought that ending improbable, even foolish, but Logan correctly sensed that audiences in 1953 would not flock to see such a disappointing conclusion, however realistic it might be.

The matter might have ended with Inge salving his artistic impulses with a big bank deposit and the prestige

of the Pulitzer, but both Inge and Logan were stubborn men. When Columbia Pictures announced that Logan would also direct the film version, Inge's pique was renewed, then exacerbated when Logan announced he would film in Kansas—but not in Inge's hometown. The hard feelings never really subsided; in fact, Inge later wrote and published *Summer Brave*, which is essentially *Picnic* with Inge's original ending restored. The title page of the Random House publication states that *Summer Brave* is "the rewritten and final version of the romantic comedy, *Picnic*." None of this background was known, of course, to Kansans in the spring of 1955, when famed cinematographer James Wong Howe's cameras began to roll at central Kansas locations in and near Hutchinson, Nickerson, Sterling, Halstead, and Salina. It was the first major film ever made in Kansas, and a good deal of excitement filled the air.

Kansans who knew little about Broadway nonetheless knew about the film actors Logan had cast, and they were treated to daily news stories about and photos of William Holden, Kim Novak, and Rosalind Russell, who starred respectively as Hal Carter, the drifter; Madge Owens, the town beauty and "Queen of Neewollah" (Halloween spelled backwards); and Rosemary Sydney, the lonely schoolteacher who boards at the Owens's home. Holden and Novak, in particular, were well known to moviegoers, and when Logan advertised for local people to participate in crowd scenes (at the roped-off swimming section of Sterling Lake and in the park by the Smoky Hill River in Salina), many central Kansans of all ages responded in hopes not only of being in the movie itself but also of catching glimpses of the stars.

Picnic is the story of lonely, frustrated women in a small Kansas town that closely resembles Inge's Independence, where he was born in 1913 and lived until leaving for the University of Kansas after graduating from high school in 1930. The storyline features a main plot (the whirlwind affair between Hal and Madge) and a strong subplot (the culmination of a long, chaste courtship between Rosemary and Howard, a local businessman,

played by Arthur O'Connell). Hal, once a football hero and fraternity brother of Madge's college boyfriend Alan Benson (played by Cliff Robertson), has fallen on rough times and comes to Kansas to find his old friend in hopes that Alan can offer him a decent job. Alan practically worships Hal and is initially glad to see him. However, Alan does not truly appreciate Madge for who she is; rather, he is awed by her beauty and treats her as a fragile work of art.

The powerful mutual attraction between Hal and Madge is apparent early in the story, and Madge sees the vulnerability beneath Hal's outwardly boastful personality. Hal and Madge are at pains not to act on their attraction, but it comes to a climax after the two dance at the picnic, where Madge has just been crowned Queen of Neewollah, and Rosemary has bitterly accused Hal of giving liquor to Millie, Madge's younger sister (played by Susan Strasberg), although he has not done so. Rosemary's accusation springs from her anger that Hal does not want to dance with her, and she calls him a worthless bum. Madge rushes to console Hal, and her sympathy soon turns into passion that Hal does not resist; they flee to a night of love rather than return to the picnic. Appalled at her own behavior, Rosemary asks Howard to take her away, where they consummate their courtship, causing Rosemary, in a shattering scene played brilliantly by Russell, to beg Howard to marry her.

In his play, Inge wove these plot strands together brilliantly, and Logan and his screenwriter, Daniel Taradash, adapted the plot to the screen with great integrity. Howard reluctantly agrees to marry Rosemary and, although Hal is run out of town by the police at Alan's urging, Madge decides she will follow him rather than stay behind with her crestfallen mother Flo (played by Betty Field), who for obvious reasons had hoped Madge would marry Alan. Flo herself had married young for love, and her husband had long ago abandoned her to raise her daughters by herself. It is left to Flo's good neighbor, Mrs. Potts, to remind her that she had made the same kind of decision as Madge years earlier. (Central Kansans, who were just getting used to having television, liked Verna Felten, the actress who played Mrs. Potts, because they saw her weekly on the series *December Bride*.)

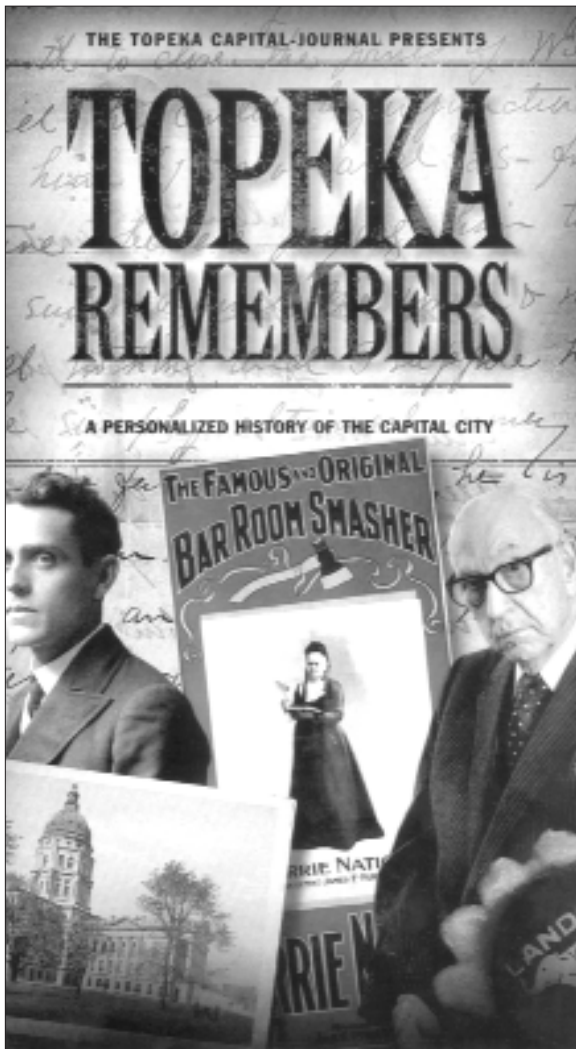
The resulting film won several Academy Award nominations, including for best picture and for Logan as best director; although it won only two (for color art direction and set decoration, and for film editing), it proved to be the

Technicolor cinemascope blockbuster that the Columbia studio hoped for. The dance scene between Hal and Madge in particular enchanted audiences, who made the song to which the couple dances, "Moonglow," conducted by Morris Stoloff, a top-40 hit. Howe's photography captured spectacular Kansas sunsets and serendipitous moments in which, for example, twin infants, seated together in a large basket, simultaneously break out crying. When Hal arrives and departs the little town, he travels by train, and Howe's camera swoops down from above the train at the film's beginning, then pans away at the film's end, with Kansas's signature fields and grain elevators evoking the sense of place that marks all of Inge's finest work (which includes not only *Picnic* but also *Come Back, Little Sheba*; *Bus Stop*; *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*; and his Academy Award-winning original screenplay, *Splendor in the Grass*).

It has been fifty years since *Picnic* was filmed in central Kansas, and Logan had to contend with a spring of extraordinarily volatile weather (the worst killer tornado in state history struck the village of Udall the night of May 25, 1955, and Logan told an interviewer about filming during a tornado warning that same spring). The film may strike today's viewers as a bit overdramatic, especially in the way the musical scoring complements the onscreen action. But the story remains gently affecting, even though it indisputably has the corny ending Inge never really wanted. An austere closeted homosexual who never became comfortable with his sexuality and who sought to conceal it from the public all his life, Inge produced a body of popular work that often questions whether romantic love could ever be more than fleetingly illusory corn. But as Joshua Logan knew, corn was big box office in 1955, and the taste for it in this country has not really slackened over the past half century. And anyone who sees *Picnic* on the big screen, projected in the sweep of cinemascope, is in for a visual delight. Critics may have thought Holden too old to play Hal, but his rugged good looks and performing skills win audiences anyway. Kim Novak remains luminous as the village queen no one believes to be quite real. The Kansas small-town ambiance that Inge knew so well is evident in every frame. On film both at its release (limited release in 1955 and general release in 1956) and today, *Picnic* does William Inge and the state of Kansas proud.

Ralph F. Voss
University of Alabama

TOPEKA REMEMBERS. Produced by Mark Albertin; written by Betty Sosnin for the *Topeka Capital-Journal*. 2005; color and black-and-white;



He remembered with appreciation the school principal whose stern corporal punishment was balanced by compassion and concern for his students. They remembered with laughter and glee the comical transition from horse and buggy to automobile transportation. He remembered the sharp pain and anger of the wounded World War II and Korean War veteran who was refused service at a local establishment because of his Mexican heritage. She remembered the impossible task of keeping dust and sand out of the sugar bowl during the Dust Bowl summer. He recalled the excitement and adventure of exploring the whole of

Topeka aboard a streetcar on free fare days. These and dozens of other memories are woven together in the first-rate documentary *Topeka Remembers*. The rich texture of life for the white, black, and Mexican residents comes to life in the powerful voices and marvelous images of this film. Those interested in the story of Topeka, the history of Kansas, and this important chapter of American history will be educated and entertained.

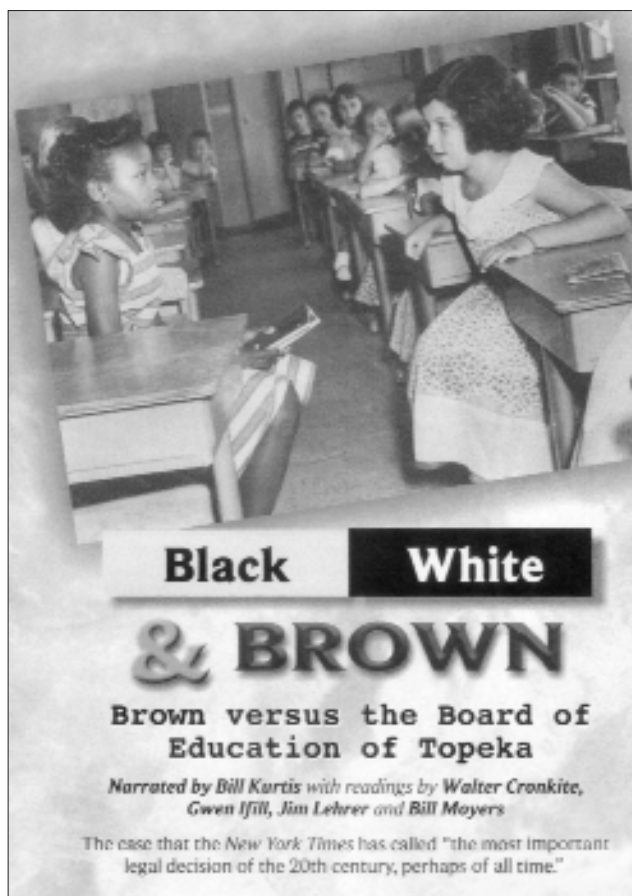
Topeka Remembers follows a traditional chronological framework that links the history of Topeka's first 150 years with that of the United States. Narration is kept to a minimum as the often-stirring black-and-white photos and outstanding interviews take center stage. Thoughtful musical selections and segment titles effectively frame the story.

The strengths of this documentary are numerous. The significant stories of nineteenth-century reformer John Ritchie and twentieth-century reformer Charles Sheldon link the activities of each well-known Topekan to the larger challenges facing America. The history of Topeka's connection to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad and the Union Pacific Railway is well done. In addition, the romance, glamour, and excitement of railroad travel shines in several interviews. The documentary also deserves praise for the nuanced portrait of the complexities of race and ethnicity in twentieth-century Topeka.

While *Topeka Remembers* deserves a wide audience, it also leaves some unanswered questions and fails to address key issues. We learn that the city's economy is dominated by the railroad industry in the late nineteenth century, but the film never returns to the topic of economic development, growth, or stagnation in the twentieth century. Absent is discussion of the significance of Forbes Field. Many informants refer to neighborhoods, yet the film fails to provide map illustrations. Most conspicuous of the shortcomings is that the film ends with the tornado of 1966. What has happened to the central themes identified in the film—"independence, social action and pioneer spirit"—in the past four decades?

Bruce Mactavish
Washburn University

BLACK, WHITE AND BROWN: BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION. Produced, directed, and written by Dave Kendall. 2004; color documentary; KTWU-Channel 11 (Topeka).



Americans tend to prefer their tales of history short, simple, and sweet. There usually is an obstacle to overcome, easily identifiable good and bad guys, and victory or the promise of a better day at the conclusion of the narrative. Historians know that events are usually much more complicated and messy than these simple stories. *Black, White and Brown* is an excellent overview of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision and was produced by Topeka's Public Broadcast Station KTWU to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark case. This fifty-six-minute documentary describes the complexities behind the case and introduces the viewer to the main personalities who were involved in the groundbreaking challenge to the segregation of the public school system.

The simplistic narrative that unfortunately appears in many school textbooks is that Oliver Brown, a Topeka resi-

dent, wanted to enroll his daughter in a white school but was denied by the school board. Thurgood Marshall swooped into town to save the day, and the Supreme Court saw the errors of *Plessy v Ferguson*, the 1896 decision that established "separate but equal" schooling. In reality, *Brown* was a composite case based on challenges to school segregation and inequality in four states and the District of Columbia. Oliver Brown was one of thirteen plaintiffs in the Topeka case and played a relatively minor role in the legal proceedings.

The documentary begins with a concise snapshot of the racial and social patterns in Topeka in the 1940s and 1950s. The context that this segment provides demonstrates the balance and nuance of the filmmakers. Rather than depict Topeka as either a hell or a heaven for African American residents, the filmmakers interviewed a number of longtime black residents about their experiences growing up in the state capital. Almost all of the citizens agree that Topeka had an excellent school system for black children in the 1940s, largely due to the hard work and dedication of African American educators. Black Topeka residents did not face the substandard facilities, lack of equipment or poorly trained teachers that African Americans in the South faced. Joe Douglas, former Topeka fire chief, explains that children received "nurturing" and "individual attention" and that African American students were "learning and progressing." Yet black Topekans faced segregation and discrimination at restaurants, motels, and theaters.

While the filmmakers demonstrated the role that Superintendent of Schools Kenneth McFarland played in the maintenance of the racial status quo in education in the state, they failed to provide the context in which white Topekans and Kansans in general attempted to maintain this system of segregation. While elementary schools in cities of populations greater than fifteen thousand were segregated in the state, junior high and high schools were integrated. Thus, small-town residents went to integrated schools at all levels of education. Black Topekans in the documentary explained that within the social world of secondary segregation there still was de-facto segregation; Topeka high schools had separate homecoming royalty for black and white students and different sports teams. Who was maintaining this system of segregation? Who were the personalities and pressure groups that attempted to main-

tain racial separation within the public school system? Unfortunately, this critical issue is ignored.

Black, White and Brown does a much better job discussing the key Topeka personalities behind the case. McKinley Burnett led a movement in the state capital to challenge school segregation, literally planning his life around overcoming the wrong. Elijah Scott and his family members at the Scott law firm consistently explored ways to mount legal challenges to the system of segregation and discrimination in Topeka. Lucinda Todd, a passionate and dedicated educator in the Topeka school system, was the first plaintiff in the case and did much of the organizing within the city. The Menningers gave both monetary help and support to the cause. What *Black, White and Brown* does that many other documentaries about the issue fail to do is demonstrate that this was a local case. Many brave black Topekans and their white supporters literally spent years organizing their efforts. Like recent scholarship on the Civil

Rights Movement, the documentary also illustrates the pivotal role of African American women; all of the plaintiffs, with the exception of Oliver Brown, were black women.

The documentary succeeds when key personalities in the case or their family members talk about how they were involved. Talking-head documentaries often can be boring, but this approach works in *Black, White and Brown*. Robert Carter and Linda Brown add valuable insight into the workings of the case. The film also manages to position former Kansas governor Walter A. Huxman (the presiding judge on the three-judge panel at the federal district court level) as a critical figure in giving the Supreme Court the justification they needed to overcome *Plessy*. This documentary is recommended for the general audience and for students at the junior high level or higher.

Gerald R. Butters Jr.
Aurora University

RACE AND THE AMERICAN CREED; HALL OF COURAGE; PASS IT ON. Video. All viewed at the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site. Audiovisual displays designed by Hillman and Carr, Inc., for the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.



The challenge for the shapers of the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site in Topeka is to explain with clarity and accuracy one of the most complex and troubling issues in American history. The site's designers

have chosen multifaceted visual techniques to dramatize the long-term African American struggle for justice in the United States of America. In particular, the main exhibit features an introductory film, *Race and the American Creed*, that integrates black-and-white and color, moving and still images—images of people, action, newspaper stories, documents, woodcuts, and engravings—to present effectively and evocatively the significance of the *Brown v Board of Education* case in civil rights history.

From 1926 to 1954 Monroe Elementary School, now the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site's visitor center, was one of four segregated elementary schools for African Americans in Topeka. To attend the segregated schools, many African American students faced long bus rides even though white-only schools were located near their homes. With NAACP support, thirteen parents vol-

unteered to try to enroll their children in white schools and file complaints when they were refused. After the district court ruled against them, the Topeka plaintiffs appealed their case to the U.S. Supreme Court, where it was consolidated with four others from different areas of the country. *Brown v Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* was chosen as the lead case, and the Supreme Court declared on May 17, 1954, that segregated education was inherently unequal and thus a denial of "equal protection of the laws" under the Fourteenth Amendment. That decision promised the fulfillment of ideals set forth in the earlier Bill of Rights as well as in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the U. S. Constitution. Monroe School continued in service until 1975; it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Race and the American Creed is shown in the school's former gymnasium, the largest space in the building. The African American struggle for justice is described in five five-minute episodes: "How Segregation Came To Be," "Resistance," "War and National Service," "Education," and "Civil Rights." The main story is shown on two parallel screens oriented north and south, with an additional screen between them to the south displaying supporting images and texts. The film honors the oral tradition in African American culture by presenting a story narrated by a vigorous African American elder to a younger female student.

As expressed by the narrator in the first episode, the goal "to really know our story" is presented in the context of civil rights history from the African American point of view. Sensitive to the contradictions in American history and society, the student asks why Americans were not faithful to the ideal of equality. In the second episode, "Resistance," the narrator points out how, besides open armed rebellion, blacks resisted enslavement. In liberating their imagination, African Americans insisted, "we were people too." "War and National Service" dramatizes African Americans who served as soldiers in war but then were denied the right to vote freely. Still, their valor and sacrifice changed Americans' understanding of race and its meaning. "Education" documents how schools provided an essential tool to challenge oppression. While this episode acknowledges the struggle of Asian and Hispanic Americans for justice, it focuses on African Americans as the largest group with the longest struggle of almost four hundred years to overcome oppression. "Civil Rights," a summary of the civil rights protest movement, notes that the *Brown* decision began the successful challenge to unequal education.

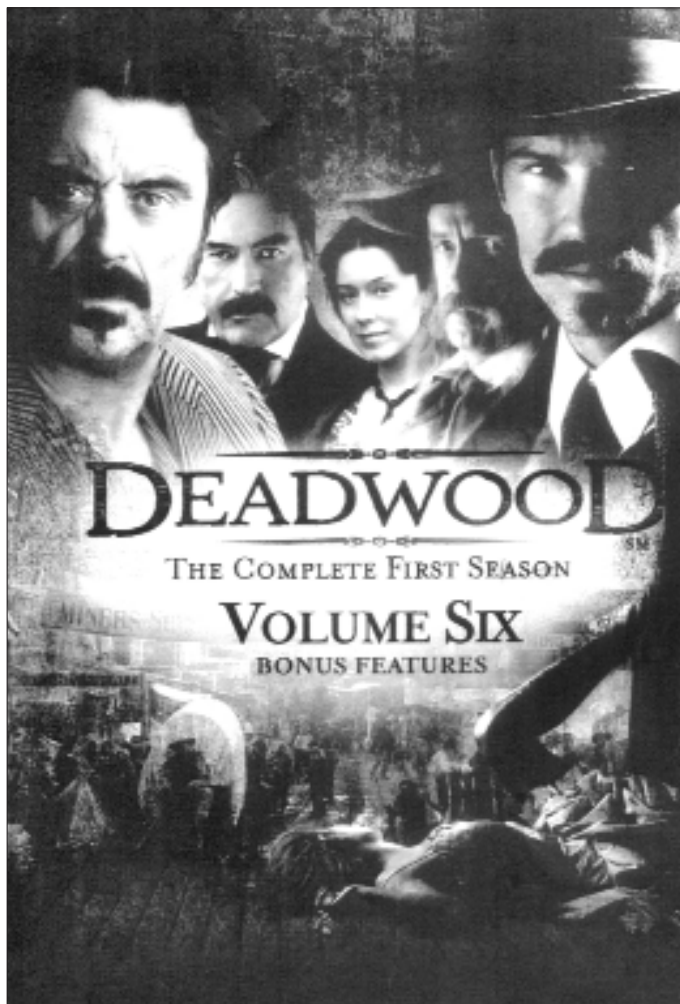
"Race and the American Creed" closes with the admonition that "democracy takes work."

Three other galleries in former classrooms of the rehabilitated Monroe School cover the topics "Education and Justice," "The Legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*," and "Expressions and Reflections." Perhaps the most notable exhibits are the *Hall of Courage* visual installation in the "Education and Justice" gallery and the video *Pass It On* in the "Legacy of Brown" gallery. Walking through the *Hall of Courage*, visitors experience the hostility that had to be overcome in critical confrontations of the Civil Rights Movement. The corridor is flanked with film loops of marchers hit with water from high pressure hoses and attacked by dogs, dummies swinging from ropes, and whites jeering and shouting at young African American students walking to school. These images and noises are unsettling in the darkened, confined space. Another installation designed to make the civil rights story relevant to the present in the "The Legacy of Brown" gallery is an impressionistic music video, *Pass It On*. Staging the civil rights struggle as a symbolic relay passing on the promises of democracy, the video presents young people commenting on the meaning of race in their lives. Suggesting a new dream of a society in which no one thought twice about race in America, the video ends the interpretive experience on an optimistic note. The dramatic sense of struggle in earlier images is deemphasized, but the audience is left with unanswered questions about race and equality in the United States.

Finally, the "Expressions and Reflections" gallery is an essential component of the overall experience. This open, comfortable space has stations where visitors can express the thoughts and feelings aroused in them by the exhibition. The opportunity to assimilate ideas, to notice the emotional effects of the story, and to prepare to re-enter the contemporary world is a thoughtful, and appreciated, design choice. Overall, the film and visual images presented in the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site educate by providing basic information and a complex interpretation of the people, events, causes and effects, and issues in civil rights history. Even more important, the exhibits stimulate empathy for injustice and the indomitable human aspiration for justice and equality.

Dale E. Nimz
Lawrence, Kansas

DEADWOOD. Created by David Milch; episodes directed by Michael Almereyda, Edward Bianchi, Gregg Fienberg, Davis Guggenheim, Walter Hill, Steve Shill, Alan Taylor, Timothy Van Patten, and Daniel Minahan; credited writers: Regina Corrado, Sara Hess, Ricky Jay, Malcolm MacRury, Ted Mann, Bernadette McNamara, David Milch, Victoria Morrow, George Putnam, Liz Sarnoff, Steve Shill, and Jody Worth. 2004–; color; HBO Productions.



“Things get sorted out pretty quick around here,” says one of the residents of Deadwood, Dakota Territory. Indeed, over the span of the first season of twelve episodes of the popular HBO series *Deadwood*, events moved quickly. In short order, loyalties and treacheries were arranged and rearranged, and characters were placed, displaced, and frequently disposed of (the hog pen behind the Wu’s Chinese laundry being a convenient repository for lost souls). The whole town grew from a lawless shanty camp settlement, under the corrupt and ruthless regime of Gem

Saloon owner Al Swearengen, to a bustling frontier town with a newly minted civic council, where invading forces of capitalist enterprise, entrepreneurial greed, order and disorder, now contend for a place under the sun.

“HBO just might have its next great dramatic addiction,” opined Brian Lowry in *Variety*, “a vulgar, gritty, at times downright nasty take on the Old West brimming with all the dark genius that series creator and screenwriter extraordinaire David Milch has at his fingertips.” With the success of his television series *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* behind him, the multiple-Emy-winning, Yale University-trained Milch has created in *Deadwood* a popular and artistic success, whose first season in 2004 received eleven Emmy nominations. Work on the series also paired him with Walter Hill, who directed the first episode. Hill already was a veteran of this milieu and had depicted events in the life of one of Deadwood’s denizens, Wild Bill Hickok, in *Wild Bill* (1995), starring Jeff Bridges in the title role and Ellen Barkin as Calamity Jane. Whereas Hill’s earlier saga of Hickok’s adventures, ranging from Hays City to Kansas City to Cheyenne and, finally, to Deadwood, had mired its characters in a kind of rawhide psychodrama, a gratuitously pretentious and symbol-laden fable, the association with Milch stripped away such poetic pretensions and laid bare the grim and bathetic reality of the Old West.

Deadwood, Dakota Territory, 1876. Only a few months before, Custer fell at Little Big Horn, just a stone’s throw away, but not before his revelations of gold in the Black Hills had created an onrush of prospectors, opportunists, thieves, misfits, and visionaries. Stalking the rutted, muddy streets of the newly formed camp, moving inexorably on their collision course, are the two principal protagonists, saloon owner Al Swearengen (Ian McShane) and ex-Montana Territory Sheriff Seth Bullock (Timothy Olyphant). Their characters and their machinations run like a bloody trail throughout the series. McShane’s Swearengen is one of television history’s great villains, a performance fully worthy of the Golden Globe he received. Pimp, drug lord, killer, de-facto ruler, Swearengen runs the dope, the whores, and the liquor in Deadwood. Perpetual-

ly exasperated, beady eyes always seeking an angle, his torrents of expletives laced with deadly irony, Swearengen connives, conspires, and cuts his way through the camp's tangled politics and webs of chicanery. From his porch above the main street, he maintains his watch, ever ready to act in his own best interests, yet always careful to keep his own counsel and cover his tracks. "Announcing your plans is a good way to hear God laugh," he snarls. Stiff and unflinching before Swearengen's gaze is Timothy Olyphant's Bullock, whose ambitions to be a peaceful hardware storeowner must yield to the necessities of taking up again the sheriff's badge. Bullock and his partner, Sol Star (John Hawkes), who falls in love with one of Swearengen's whores—the widow Alma Garrett (Molly Parker), who sipped laudanum while her husband succumbed to one of Swearengen's land grabs—and kindly but perpetually exasperated Doc Cochran (Brad Dourif), who miraculously staves off a smallpox plague, represent the few gleams of truth, charity, and compassion to be discerned in the town.

Two other recent arrivals are firmly rooted in historical truth. The tall and laconic Wild Bill Hickok (Keith Carradine), accompanied by the violently profane and impossibly scruffy Calamity Jane (Robin Weigert), amble into town just in time to thwart one of Swearengen's schemes. While Calamity goes to help Doc Cochran with his rounds ("You have the gift," mumbles Doc in amazement), Wild Bill appears to have no ambitions whatever, save to drawl his way to the poker table at Nutter's No. 10 Saloon, where he carefully sits with his back to the wall, waiting for the shot in the back of the head that will be administered by the drunken Jack McCall.

Meanwhile, the town is changing. Cy Tolliver (Powers Boothe) and his associate, Joanie Stubbs (Kim Dickens), open up the Bella Union saloon and gambling hall opposite Swearengen's place. Immediately, both Tolliver and Swearengen take each other's measure and bribe spies to monitor, corrupt, and betray. The Bella Union represents a more cosmopolitan element in Deadwood, as compared with the raw frontier Gem Saloon. What's next? "Pretty soon you'll have laws here," laments Hickok, "and every other damn thing."

Sure enough. Representatives of the territorial government appear with news that the Black Hills region (including Deadwood) is to be purchased from the Sioux. This gives the camp the opportunity to organize itself into an ad hoc government before General Crooke's cavalry troopers

arrive. In a scene wickedly hilarious enough to claim a place alongside the American chapter of Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Swearengen, Tolliver, Bullock, and the newspaper man Merrick (Jeffrey Jones) all meet at E.B. Farnum's (William Sanderson) Grand Central Hotel to appoint themselves leaders in the new town council. Except for Bullock's insistence that monies be raised to improve the camp's sanitation, they are only interested in bribing the legislators.

Good heavens, what next? The telegraph? The railroad? Be assured that one thing won't change. Surveying the camp, the character of General Crooke declares, "We all have bloody thoughts."

The violence of *Deadwood's* language deserves special mention. It has, like the characters and incidents, achieved its own notoriety. Written by a cadre of writers under David Milch's supervision, its weird blend of stilted, almost Elizabethan rhetoric with a collection of crudely scatological references—a cross between Shakespeare, Damon Runyan, and Quentin Tarantino—shapes and defines the characters with a rough and ready elegance. "I guess my bile was in its ascendant," is how one character describes an outburst of temper. "My olfactories are keen to the smell of s- - t," pronounces another citizen. "Centuries of f- - ing inbreeding attune him to the necessities of the times," is how Swearengen characterizes one of his stooges. The impact offends while it captivates. Watch all the episodes back to back, as I did recently, and you find yourself falling into the asymmetrical rhythms, the collisions between poetic diction and profane expostulation—speaking, in short, quite in the manner of these baleful effusions. . . . Swearengen, E.B. Farnum, and the gang would have approved.

As the first season neared its violently poignant finale, *Deadwood's* finest addressed their various problems. Swearengen got rid of Crooke's troopers; cut the throat of a territorial magistrate who had been blackmailing him with a pending murder warrant; suffocated the town minister, who was suffering from a terminal brain tumor; and drowned an opium runner who had been negligent in his duties (which means more fodder for Wu's hogs). Rival Cy Tolliver fomented racial hatred against the Chinese citizenry. A former associate of Tolliver, Joanie Stubbs, prepared to launch her own brothel. Bullock pinned that sheriff's badge to his vest. And a drunken Doc Cochran spun into a mad little waltz with the retarded, disabled woman who sweeps out the saloon.

As *Deadwood* enters its second season on HBO, it already is a landmark in the history of the Western, both on screen and on television. Neither the early Westerns of William S. Hart, nor the oaters of Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood, nor Ang Lee's recent *Ride with the Devil* have come within shouting distance of its grimy and strangely comic nihilism. It depicts the winning of the West as a black weed growing out of the dung. Yet, even in *Deadwood*, as Mark Singer has noted in a recent *New Yorker* article, anarchy and savagery must reluctantly yield to the rudiments of civilized society, lest its citizens "destroy themselves (or, almost as dire a prospect, be subjugated by the federal government)."

And so, week after week, we wonder if hope, faith, and charity can survive here. "What can any of us really . . . hope for," Swearingen asks, "except a moment here and there with a person who doesn't want to rob, steal, or murder us?" What would Al think about the fact that these days have overcome his *Deadwood*? Once the site of the last big gold strike in the lower United States, it is now a tourist trap.

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Oz Is (Still) Everywhere



The Wizard of Oz continues as a reliable and durable popular-cultural icon in both Kansas literature and in film. Whether outsiders or Kansans are writing literature, or whether scriptwriters and directors are referencing classic films, elements of Oz find their way into contemporary novels and movies.

Some recent sightings from literature include Wylene Dunbar's *My Life With Corpses*, set in contemporary Kansas. Dunbar's narrator, nicknamed Oz, tells about a Kansas university whose new library wing is a memorial for an "aviation manufacturer's son." There, she finds

the Emerald City, a room . . . that contained the Gottshall's collection of books, documents, and other items pertaining to *The Wizard of Oz*. . . . In the center of the room stood a polished wood replica of one of the apple-throwing trees in the magic forest, encircled by a padded bench and containing in its crotch the prize of the Gottshall collection—one of the five pairs of ruby slippers Judy Garland wore as Dorothy, the shoes safely sealed in a Plexiglass box.¹

In the novel, Oz has returned home to find home, or at least what's left of her childhood growing up among the dead. Anyone who has read the opening of Baum's novel knows the territory. Of Aunt Em: "The sun and the wind . . .

1. Wylene Dunbar, *My Life with Corpses* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), 127–28.

had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober grey; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips and they were grey also. She was thin and gaunt and never smiled now." And Uncle Henry: "stern and solemn, and rarely spoke."² Not corpses, maybe, but close.

In Richard Jennings's young adult novel, *The Great Whale of Kansas*, when a young man discovers a corpse—fossilized, in this case—he is prepared. After all, he collects odd postcards from Kansas and has become "something of an authority on the peculiarities of Kansas. What other state points with so much pride to wheat, tornadoes, and the bizarre inhabitants of Oz?"³

In Laura Moriarty's *The Center of Everything*, the narrator/protagonist, Evelyn, refuses to watch *The Wizard of Oz*.

I'm sick of it. It's on every year, and I've seen it so many times that I can say the lines right along with the movie, from "Auntie Em, Auntie Em" to "I'll get you, my little pretty," down the yellow brick road and back again to the scary flying monkeys who turn out to be people and then back off to see the Wizard who is really just an old man who is very nice but not exactly dependable to "You had the answer inside you all the time, Dorothy, just click your heels three times." My mother said, "Okay, Evelyn, you've seen it before. I get the picture."

Evelyn escapes with a friend, whose mother is also participating in the spring ritual on television. Evelyn says, "Mrs. Rowley doesn't like my mother, and my mother doesn't like her; they won't speak to each other face-to-face. But I like the idea of them watching the same movie in different houses, both of them so wrapped up in the same old story they won't even notice we're gone."⁴

Recent films tell us that *everyone* is watching the same movie and continuing to pay homage to this quintessential film. In *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, writer-director Kerry Conran draws on all kinds of film iconography, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to Flash Gordon, from Jules Verne to *King Kong*, from *Lost Horizon* to *The Wizard of Oz*, all with a good dose of Buck Rogers and Indiana Jones. *Sky Captain* even includes a scene in which characters whisper

in a darkened theater as *The Wizard of Oz* plays on the screen (the scene is set in Radio City Music Hall, where one source says the film never actually played). Most important, the movie relies on an Oz-ian plot twist at the end: the man behind the curtain is finally revealed, but it turns out he has been dead for years.⁵

The just-released *Robots* pays even more obvious tribute. A young, inventive robot, Rodney Copperbottom, with a big heart and unrestrained ambition, goes to Robot City hoping to meet and work for his hero, Big Weld. Upon his arrival, he marches up to the gates of Big Weld Industries and runs into a gatekeeper straight out of *The Wizard of Oz*. Rejected at the gates, Rodney wanders the city. He spots the Tin Man, who makes an obligatory cameo. A mechanical Toto is there as well. When Rodney finds out that Big Weld is no longer in charge, he gathers a seemingly hapless group of outmoded robots to find their hero and thwart an evil plot. They restore Big Weld to power and Robot City to order in exactly the same way Dorothy and her allies revolutionize and restore Oz from the control of the Wicked Witches.⁶ The plot, the characters, and the allusions, as in *Sky Captain*, seem perennial.

If Kansas is associated with Oz in literature and film, the state also has made itself the home of Oz in various forms. Liberal created Dorothy's House years ago, although not without some confusion. A hand-carved wooden sign says that Dorothy's House was built in 1907, and has been restored as much as possible to that year, the same year Baum wrote *The Wizard of Oz*. The book, however, was published in 1900. The sign further claims that the house is a replica of the house used in the film of *The Wizard of Oz*. A house built in 1907 would hardly seem a good candidate to be a replica of a house built for a 1939 Hollywood movie.

In 1988 Sedan began promoting itself with a yellow brick road, what they call the "Golden Sidewalk." By recent count, 10,700 golden bricks line Sedan's sidewalks, imprinted with donor names from all fifty United States and twenty-eight foreign countries. Bob Hope and Elizabeth Taylor have bricks. Liberal has a yellow brick road

2. L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* (New York: Dover, 1960), 12–13.

3. Richard W. Jennings, *The Great Whale of Kansas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 23.

4. Laura Moriarty, *The Center of Everything* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 70.

5. *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. Produced by Jon Avnet, Sadie Frost, Jude Law, and Marsha Oglesby; written and directed by Kerry Conran. 2004; color; Paramount.

6. *Robots*. Produced by Jerry Davis and John C. Denkin; directed by Chris Wedge; screenplay by David Lindsay-Abaire. 2005; color; Twentieth Century Fox.

too, and among the imprints are the names of Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

More recently, Wamego has become an Oz center. The Oz Museum, with a wide-ranging and valuable collection of Oz memorabilia, saw twelve thousand visitors between Memorial Day and Labor Day of 2004 (the museum opened its doors last spring). Many visitors approach Wamego from I-70, then north on U.S. 99, now designated the “Road to Oz.” The downtown museum was fitted to house the collection of Wamego native Tod Mauchlin. More than two thousand items are on display, dating from 1900 to the present. The Oz Museum is impressive in its depth of collection. Naturally, the majority of any Oz collection will be based on Oz-as-film rather than on the Oz books, although the fourteen Baum books and all the sequels by other authors are represented. Still, only the first two display cases (of around twelve) treat Baum and Oz before the familiar film version of 1939. The walk through the museum is Dorothy’s adventure in the film Oz (in the book she goes South, into the land of the Quadlings, the China people, and Glinda). The journey, winding through the space, makes the museum seem even bigger than it appears from the storefront.

Display signage is sometimes hard to find, and sometimes hard to read. And, although the objects are impressively displayed, they might be more impressively interpreted. For example, nowhere is there any speculation on why Baum chose Kansas—obviously a huge question given the many discussions of what Baum’s decision has meant to the image of Kansas. Oz also has been a commercial product for more than a century, and an American icon for nearly fifty years, and some discussion of its value, its many avid collectors (like Tod Mauchlin himself), and its overall worth would be worth interpretation. So would the

meaning of Oz in contemporary culture, whether the synchronicity of *The Wizard* with Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*, or the various manifestations of Oz in comic books, or Gregory Maguire’s novel *Wicked*, recently adapted as a Broadway musical. Finally, there is nothing to evidence the recent literature and film connected to Oz (as in this article), nor the fascination for Oz and Judy Garland shown by the male homosexual community (referenced by Geoff Ryman in his novel *Was*), nor the sleazy side of Oz (look for cards in any adult novelty store).⁷

Perhaps all those explorations are too much to expect from a museum that received a major grant from the State of Kansas. Although the brochure promises a dedication to “ALL things OZ,” there is room for more. One staff member said they are interested, where possible, in continuing to collect and to interpret. For now, the collection contains rare and remarkable artifacts that bear witness to the many facets of Oz, from the books to the first Broadway production to the early silent films. Kansas is lucky to be home to this kind of collection, and more analysis can be the purview of the scholars of popular culture.

Kansas is lucky, in fact, to be home to all of Oz, in all of its manifestations. *The Wizard of Oz* is about finding a home. Dorothy accomplishes that. *The Wizard of Oz* is itself finding a home in a huge range of films and literature. Now Kansas is making a home for Oz, both in exhibits and in a rich and allusive literature.

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7. Gregory Maguire, *Wicked* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); Geoffrey Ryman, *Was* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

LOST BOYS OF SUDAN. Produced and directed by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk. 2003; color; distributed by Shadow Distribution, Inc.

Africa’s longest war—the war between the North and the South—finally came to an end in January 2005, when Sudan’s government and the main rebel force, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), signed comprehensive peace accords in Kenya. In addition to the terrible death toll, refugees have become a common, tragic feature of con-

temporary conflicts. *Lost Boys of Sudan* is an intriguing documentary film that follows two Sudanese refugees, Peter Dut and Santino Chuor, on an extraordinary journey from Africa to America. They are among some twenty thousand teenagers who miraculously survived the civil war in Sudan that claimed an estimated two million lives.



Peter and Santino are first shown in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, where they have spent the past nine years. We learn in the opening montage, a narration over children’s drawings of the ordeals they have seen and suffered, that their villages were razed in lightning raids during the prolonged civil war. Both Peter and Santino, along with thousands of other fleeing children (mostly boys), were separated from their parents, who either died in the massacres, died soon afterward, or have disappeared. The children escaped south to Kenya and, having been placed in the United Nations refugee camp, became known by international refugee workers as the “lost boys” of Sudan. The United States, in its selective beneficence, agreed to resettle more than three thousand lost boys within its borders. Peter and Santino, who speak good accented English, are among those selected.

Both boys are Dinka, the largest Nilotic ethnic group in southern Sudan. They are also both Christians, and at the

first point where the thorny racial subtext of the film emerges, the pastor at the refugee camp implores the America-bound boys not to become like those youths who “wear baggy pants.” At a farewell meeting for one of the boys, a man says that the journey to America is like going to heaven. However, for Peter and Santino, it is difficult to leave behind their friends in the refuge camp. Without parents, they have bonded deeply with the other lost boys. Both make pledges to those who are left behind. Peter, who has a sister in the camp, promises to remit money to her, as many refugees did with relatives who remained behind. They also promise not to forget Dinka cultural values. Finally, they promise to return to Sudan and use the knowledge gained to help those who could not go to America, an earnest moment that becomes a reference point for the rest of the film. And then their journey to America begins.

The two youths arrive in Houston and are given instructions on how to handle the stove and garbage disposal in the apartment where they will be staying. After living in mud huts in Kenya, they experience culture shock upon discovering the building’s second floor and a grocery store packed with food. And soon Peter and Santino are forced to face the harsh realities of their situation: living in a neighborhood where black on black violence is rampant while working hard on an assembly line that pays very little.

Eventually, Peter leaves for Kansas, since he is interested in advancing himself. He enters Olathe East High School and works a night job at Wal-Mart. Santino, on the other hand, gets into trouble in Houston when he has an accident while driving without a license. In both places, evangelical Christians are involved with the boys. Peter is invited to a youth meeting, but he seems a very lonely figure in the group. In a brief exchange between them, Peter tries to convince Santino that Kansas is a better place for them to achieve their goals. The film shows Dut Mawien, now a senior at Kansas University, advising Peter and other Dinka youth on the importance of education as a tool for self-advancement.

This excellent cross-cultural documentary vividly conveys the struggles and hurdles that recent African immigrants encounter in America. At a national reunion with other “lost boys” in the United States, there is much talk about how money rules their lives and how they feel like outsiders even with black Americans. Worst of all, these young Africans miss the joys and delights of living in a community. They are used to putting their arms around

friends in Africa, but in America they are told that such body contact among men is inappropriate behavior. Although Peter excels in school and proves himself to be a super-achiever, his sister criticizes him for not sending more money for those left behind. Peter's major disappointment is not making the Olathe East basketball team because he could not compete with "the children of rich people with their parents taking care of them." These new African immigrants come to realize that there is no heaven on earth.

Lost Boys of Sudan is the story of two very specific boys, but it is also the story of their Dinka Sudanese culture. The film shows interesting segments of Dinka traditions, music, dance, and language. Interestingly, the film is also the story of America, seen from a vantage point rarely shown in American film. Looking in on this life from the outside, the way Santino and Peter do, really gives America a look at herself. This is all accomplished with simple, beautifully effective storytelling and minimal filmmaker meddling. The film is told entirely through the eyes of the subjects, which makes it truly memorable and moving.

Lost Boys of Sudan is an interestingly beautiful film. Presented in anamorphic widescreen video, it features crisp, vibrant imagery and thoughtful, lyrical cinematography. It

is one of the most impressive documentary films shot on video that I have ever seen. I noticed no evidence of compression and found the film to be as engaging visually as it is as a story. The interviews are clear and understandable. Whenever the accents become too thick or when the subjects speak in Dinka, Swahili, or Arabic languages the film includes English subtitles. No other optional subtitles are included.

Megan Mylan is a San Francisco-based documentary filmmaker. Her film *Batidania: Power in the Beat*, about an Afro-Brazilian youth percussion group from Rio de Janeiro fighting drug violence and racism through music, won the Best Documentary Award from Marin Latino Film. Jon Shenk is also an award-winning documentary filmmaker and a founder of Actual Films in San Francisco. He recently produced and directed *The Beginning*, a documentary about the making of *Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace*. His films *Dark Rooms* and *Naked to the World* have aired on PBS and have won many awards. Together they do an admirable job of telling the story of Peter and Santino, two lost boys of Sudan.

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