



NEW RELEASES

# First Cow

There have been many genteel scenes in westerns in the past but none so winningly genteel as the whole of *First Cow*. Kelly Reichardt and Jonathan Raymond's screenplay is based on Raymond's novel *The Half-Life*. It has the flavour of a much-embellished yarn, yet is told so gently and seemingly simply that you take it in like a deep breath on a summer's night in the woods. We're in the 1820s (except for a brief present-day prologue), in Reichardt's beloved Oregon – the locale of her *Old Joy*, *Wendy and Lucy*, *Meek's Cutoff* and *Night Moves*. Cookie Figowitz (John Magaro) is collecting yellow mushrooms to feed the irascible fur trappers whose 'cookie' he is, when he comes across the naked figure of King Lu (Orion Lee), an ethnically Chinese man, hiding in the bushes. King Lu explains he's on the run from some Russians who mean to kill him. Cookie hides him until he makes his own escape.

They meet again in the environs of a trading-post settlement after Cookie has been paid off, and King Lu invites him to his shack in the woods for a drink. In the most touching of many touching scenes, while King Lu goes to chop wood for the fire, Cookie sweeps out the hut and gathers a simple bunch of flowers and puts them in a jug. For this is a film about two great themes of the old west: homesteading and rustling.

What gets rustled here, however, is not cattle – the first cow ever to reach Oregon has only just made its way to the Chief Factor (Toby Jones) – but the cow's milk. This is our odd couple's great scheme: Cookie is an expert baker and yearns to make some cakes with real milk, so, with King Lu's encouragement, he secretly milks the Chief Factor's cow at night, while King Lu keeps watch. Soon Cookie's delicious cakes, made with a honey drizzle, are making them a fortune. So, obviously, trouble is brewing on the horizon, of a kind you can easily imagine.

Shot to be projected in academy ratio, *First Cow* has the down-at-heel period authenticity of, say, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* married to the poignancy of Sam Peckinpah's westerns, and it's couched in an always playful anti-macho mood of laconic going-with-the-flow while subverting the clichés of westerns. Its use of detail – the paraphernalia of pioneer existence – is exquisite. Its visual approach emphasises warm colours amidst organic mulch. It knows how to amuse with empathy, even throwing in a couple of really dumb children's jokes of a kind I'm fond of, but which I won't spoil by telling here. Nothing is made too great a fuss of except by belligerent and vengeful souls in a place where the law is really the Chief Factor, the Factor's men and the odd military officer.

What's really impressive is its use of a prelapsarian mood to portray an America built on racial and social diversity. Cookie and King Lu live together but the film and we never care to know on what basis; the English Factor seems to be married to a Native American, and when they're visited by a military man, they want to impress him with their sophistication. That melting-pot idea of the States is presented as everyday reality and the dialogue is riddled with language in-jokes. These are particularly relished by Toby Jones as the Chief Factor, but the cast as a whole are at ease in having fun with a world rich in now-disused expressions and a huge variety of accents. John Magaro does quietly cute and dreamy like he was born to it; Orion Lee,

playing someone who's had to grow up too fast to be wise, gives the right note of mystery to his ethereal thinker. In a much smaller role, Ewan Bremner's cocky highlander is a treat, but everyone in this film comes across like they always belonged there.

**Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021**

### **Kelly Reichardt on 'First Cow'**

As Reichardt says, *First Cow* is about 'the very beginning of the story of commerce, before America is really even America'. Any film that deals on a grassroots level with that subject is following in the muddy footprints of Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971). 'That's a film I love,' she says. 'I knew when I was building the town that it was all very McCabe, almost a miniature version of that film, so I was, like, "Oh well, let's just own that I'm influenced by this, and bring in René".'

That's René Auberjonois, the beaky character actor who played the innkeeper in Altman's film. Reichardt cast him as a curmudgeon in *Certain Women*, then gave him a one-line cameo in *First Cow* as 'Man with Raven' – an inadvertent homage to another Altman picture, *Brewster McCloud* (1970), in which Auberjonois was an ornithologist who gradually turns into a bird. His presence in *First Cow* feels talismanic and, in the wake of his death in 2019, inescapably poignant. 'I wrote the part for him,' she recalls. 'I said, "OK, you're gonna have a bird and live in a shack, and you're feeling annoyed by the fourth house that's being built in the town. It's like gentrification is already bumming you out." He really went a long way with the scraps he was given.'

Then again, every crumb in Reichardt's world represents a banquet of detail. A depth of research and experience is packed tightly into each corner of the *mise en scène*, each actor's movements and mannerisms. She favours chores over rehearsal; if her cast are performing the tasks and routines of their characters for real, then she has succeeded in manufacturing what *The New York Times* described as 'conditions in which actors cannot act'.

That immersive approach extended to *First Cow*. 'The actors were building fires and learning how to set traps and all those things. They have to concentrate on what they're doing, and then they don't have to perform.' The film's amiable partners-in-crime are Cookie (John Magaro), a trappers' cook, and the Chinese immigrant King Lu (Orion Lee), who whip up batches of misshapen doughnuts, which they then take to market. The treats sell like, well, hot cakes. Among the salivating customers queuing each day for them is the wealthy, melancholy Englishman (Toby Jones) whose imported cow is – unbeknown to him – the source of the recipe's creaminess.

In the manner of those actors who brag about performing their own stunts, Magaro can boast of doing all his own milking and baking. 'He really got into it,' says Reichardt. 'And Toby loved the cakes. It's fried bread. What's not to love?'

Friendship in the movie provides Cookie and King Lu with wealth beyond money, sweetness beyond doughnuts. Reichardt calls the central dynamic 'the opposite of *Old Joy*, where the two friends realise they don't have much in common any more. Here you get this friendship growing from the beginning.' The two leads met for the first time shortly before shooting began. 'They went off for a little survivalist weekend in the woods in their costumes, and got to know one another. Just by happenstance, Orion does have a lot of

King Lu in him and Magaro has a lot of Cookie. Orion is a lover of big films. He's actually in a *Star Wars* movie! [*Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi*, 2017]. So he was always, like, “Is this even coming across?” He had the film in mind, not just the scene. Whereas Magaro likes to work in his own head. His questions were more like: “This paper I’m rolling this cigarette with, is it the right kind of...?” It was so much fun looking through the camera and seeing this friendship unfolding in front of me.’

Reichardt and her regular co-writer Jon Raymond adapted the screenplay from the latter’s 2004 novel *The Half-Life*, pruning and reshaping it radically along the way. They had to: with its two-pronged narrative alternating between the 1820s and the 1980s, and spanning several continents, a strictly faithful screen version would have run to tens of millions of dollars at least. (That said, it wasn’t all cutbacks: there is no cow in the book.)

Reichardt has an amused, affable disposition, but she appreciates the pitfalls of discussing in any detail the elusive movies she makes. Ask her about the ways in which *First Cow* intersects with our times, and she winces. ‘I don’t want to sum it up,’ she says. ‘But the big topic when we were making the film was immigration. It’s always interesting to me thinking about who has the power and who doesn’t. I think that’s there throughout all the films – the question of society, and who we are to each other, and what our obligations are. It’s that idea in the American outlook: “We’re all in it together” versus “each man for himself”. Those are constant themes for me. At some point after those early conversations, you want all that shit to go away so you can just look at your characters and go, “This is the story I’m telling”.’

She seems concerned that she has said too much. ‘You make a film where you’re trying carefully not to say something, and then you spend the next year or so saying it.’ But she needn’t worry: her movies have mystery enough. No amount of conversation will milk them dry.

**Ryan Gilbey, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021**

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## FIRST COW

*Directed by:* Kelly Reichardt

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*A Filmscience production*

*Presented by:* A24, IAC Films

*Executive Producers:* Scott Rudin, Eli Bush,

Louise Lovegrove, Christopher Carroll

*Produced by:* Neil Kopp, Vincent Savino, Anish Savjani

*Screenplay by:* Jon Raymond, Kelly Reichardt

*Based upon the novel/The Half-life by:* Jon Raymond

*Director of Photography:* Christopher Blauvelt

*Editor:* Kelly Reichardt

*Production Designer:* Anthony Gasparro

*Costume Designer:* April Napier

*Music:* William Tyler

*Production Sound Mixer:* Christian Dolan

## Cast

John Magaro (*Cookie*)

Orion Lee (*King-Lu*)

Toby Jones (*Chief Factor*)

Ewen Bremner (*Lloyd*)

Scott Shepherd (*captain*)

Gary Farmer (*Totillicum*)

Lily Gladstone (*Chief Factor's wife*)

René Auberjonois (*man with raven*)

USA 2019

122 mins

A MUBI release

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## EVENTS & STRANDS

### Member Exclusives: Booksmart

Thu 20 May 18:10

**The Human Voice** + pre-recorded intro and Q&A with

Pedro Almodóvar and Tilda Swinton

Sat 22 May 15:00; Tue 1 Jun 18:20

**Woman with a Movie Camera: Rare Beasts**

+ Q&A with writer-director Billie Piper

Sat 22 May 17:15

**Sheffield Doc/Fest**

Fri 4 Jun 20:15

**Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire**

Sat 12 Jun 12:00

**Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump**

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

**Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire**

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

## BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

**LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)**

+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith

Thu 17 Jun 17:20

**My Beautiful Laundrette**

Fri 18 Jun 20:20

**The Warrior** + on-stage career interview with

writer-director Asif Kapadia

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

**Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless**

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

**Searching for Happiness...**

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

**Nazarband Captive**

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

**A'hr Kayattam**

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

**The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo**

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

## LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

**UK Competition 1: I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know**

Sat 26 Jun 21:00

**UK Competition 3: Close Quarters**

Fri 26 Jun 21:10

**UK Competition 2: The Double Life Of...**

Mon 28 Jun 17:45

**UK Competition 4: Lessons in Survival**

Tue 29 Jun 21:10

**UK Competition 5: The Devil's in the Details**

Wed 30 Jun 17:50

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## NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

### Ammonite

From Mon 17 May

### Sound of Metal

From Mon 17 May

### Nomadland

From Mon 17 May

### County Lines

From Fri 21 May

### First Cow

From Fri 28 May

### After Love

From Fri 4 Jun

### Fargo

From Fri 11 Jun

### The Reason I Jump

From Fri 18 Jun

### Nashville

From Fri 25 Jun

### Ultraviolence

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

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