

## SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS \_\_\_ (10/10)

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*Awesome testament of an American holocaust  
combined with deep truths of human nature*

*Novel by David Guterson  
Screenplay by Ronald Bass  
Screenplay by Scott Hicks  
Directed by Scott Hicks*

Ethan Hawke ... Ishmael Chambers  
Youki Kudoh ... Hatsue Miyamoto  
Rick Yune ... Kazuo Miyamoto  
Max von Sydow ... Nels Gudmundsson  
James Rebhorn ... Alvin Hooks  
James Cromwell ... Judge Fielding  
Richard Jenkins ... Sheriff Art Moran  
Sam Shepard ... Arthur Chambers

*Nels Gudmundsson: It takes a rare thing, a turning point, to free oneself from any obsession. Be it prejudice, or hate, or even love.*

*Arthur Chambers (dictating a news story): These people are our neighbors, they've sent their sons into the United States Army. They're no more an enemy than our fellow islanders of German descent or Italian descent. Let us live so that when this is over we can look each other in the eye and know that we have acted honorably.*

### **"Hey, we're American citizens!"**

Midpoint in the movie, the Japanese-American Internment is underway in a small Northwestern farming and fishing island in the Seattle, Washington, area. The Miyamoto family is visited by officials enforcing the expropriation and relocation of American citizens of Japanese ancestry. The officials rummage through the family's entire home and grounds, turning up every manner of personal items, especially anything of sentimental value such as personal letters or keepsakes (which supposedly suggest Japanese-cultural sympathies)—all boxed and taken away before their tearful eyes.

The policemen find a container of dynamite, used by the Miyamoto men to clear the land, blow tree stumps. Turns out the law makes it a crime for people of Japanese ancestry to own explosives—a felony. "Aha!" the cops say, "we have a serious criminal." With the sensitivity of a dirty toilet seat, the goon squad handcuffs the father and takes him into immediate custody. Sound familiar? It does if you've been on the receiving end of any sort of act of state aggression... from busting kids for drugs to fabricating wars for the benefit of the Carlyle Group.

The plainclothes badged mediocrities assigned to the job comment condescendingly throughout the taking process. Especially after finding the 'dangerous explosives' and slapping on the handcuffs to a man whose crime is that he wants to work his farm and provide for his family: "Now we know what a class act you're going to be, Mr. Miyamoto, and how you'll come along peacefully," leaving unspoken... "like the submissive types of people we blindly obedient ignorant rednecks have been told all the good Japs are."

This scene is a classic illustration of one of the major evils of government tyranny: the elevation of morally small, unconscious people to positions of authority. Adolph Eichmann (or George Bush) doesn't have anything on these two bozos acting in the usurped name of the American people at the onset of WWII.

Sorry to be dwelling so on this particular scene, but it's an incisive illustration of the creativity of the movie itself. And as if to provide a flourish to the exhibit of monstrous wrongdoing, the taller of the two cops as he exits the home—accidentally seeing an ornate oriental wind chime suspended above the front porch—reaches up, "Whoops, give me a minute, okay, there, I've got it." The feds also oblige the handcuffed Mr. Miyamoto to help them cart off his family's stuff. Nice touch.

### **One of the most moving segments in movie history**

But I'm not finished! The above scene and the one that I'm about to describe, while they occupy perhaps eight minutes (~4%) of the film footage, cement *Snow Falling on Cedars* as the preeminent cinematic achievement for revealing the essence of tyranny in an industrial-age democracy. One might argue *Schindler's List* or some of the other movies about the Holocaust, or perhaps modern films like *Dances with Wolves* that show mistreatment of American Indians, or even brilliant movies about the American slave trade like *Amistad* represent tyranny better—from the perspective of the tyrannized racial group, anyway.

But we're not talking about extermination here, rather expropriation and (temporary) displacement/confinement. Prejudice is a large factor, but the key rationalizations made by the ruling elites in America—unhinged from the Constitution—had to do with expediency... and the probable greed of the state and its lackeys to take the wealth of the Japanese victims. [A friend of mine who was born in Canada tells me that in that country, the same relocation of Japanese occurred, and the state would take their fishing boats, not to mention their farms, and sell them, keeping the proceeds.]

The "relocation of persons" sequence begins shortly after the above action removing the personal possessions of the Miyamotos. At daylight the military personnel carriers pick up the relocatees (relos) from their homes. It's a crisp clear day in winter. Under the lazy gazes of the sentries, the adults walk briskly from the trucks and along the main street of town to be tagged and marched toward the ferry.

Starting the scene is a low bass drum beat: brrummm, brrummm. Everything on the street is deathly quiet: all one hears is the shuffling of the relos' feet and the hushed banter of the white children playing on the sidewalks lined with their parents. The camera pans to the expressions of the Japanese, especially the older men and women struggling to maintain a desperate dignity. The silence, in both groups, screams at the viewer. The unrelenting sadness is overwhelming—from most of the whites, the eternal regret that they never, ever lifted the slightest finger to stop it; from the victims, the gnawing desolation that the US collective to which they had happily, nearly universally bowed their allegiance had decided to crush them in return... and without reason. With the music building and the sea gulls calling faintly in flight, the former neighbors proceed down the pier to the ship. An American flag flutters horizontally overhead as if to announce its betrayal, in sight of those whom it's trampling, of every good thing Old Glory ever meant to any one of us. Finally, looking out on the bay, we see, down the dock where the people have stepped off, the sideways' wake of the ferry between two large clusters of mooring-pylons.

You will never see a film sequence like this. To say it moves me is the most inadequate of understatements; I get chills, and tears well up. I find it increasingly difficult to endure. My mind fills with images of other peoples—from time immemorial—cast aside and denied their humanity so the engine of the state can grind senselessly away toward insane ends that have no grounding in 'the human.' In particular, I consider those peoples for whom no one speaks, the invisible people... like the millions of ethnic-German civilians, post WWII, butchered or shipped off to the labor camps of the Soviet Union or to Tito's killing fields, with the knowing acquiescence of the West.

And so many others. This is the banality of tyranny, the routineness of it, where the state systematically rapes and pillages ordinary people and other ordinary people turn away in fear and (self-)loathing. It's the kind of despotism enabled by good people acting as cowards... and it can happen here. [No rant, I'm only commenting from a deep well of compassion for tyranny's billions of victims throughout history and sincerely wishing it to end. These scenes from *Snow Falling on Cedars* are the most touching visual imaginable for unloading the yoke.]

### ***The Rest of the Movie***

Of course there's more: *SFOC* is an interracial love story, a 1949 murder trial that evokes all the prejudices lying so close to the surface, an examination of journalistic integrity, an (anti-)war story, and a depiction of the "way we were" for a small American island off the Pacific. The photography is stunning, and the music haunting... both so richly enveloping the narrative, as in the movie I reviewed last week, *Love Song for Bobby Long*. *SFOC* was nominated for an Oscar for cinematography. Inset on the right is a snapshot from a lovemaking scene shot through the rumpled glass of a shower stall. Beautifully executed. The actors are first rate, the story is authentic, and the appeal to every sense is extraordinary. It deserves many more awards and much more attention than its theatrical release received.

And of course it has the special anti-tyranny kicker for those who care.

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*Snow Falling on Cedars | Ethan Hawke | Relocation | Japanese Internment*