



## **DISAPPEARANCES DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

### **"I Didn't Know It Had a Point"**

*Director's statement and reflections by Jay Craven*

I sat through the first-ever screening of *Disappearances* in mid-March 2006 at a painfully late 10:30pm show for the South By Southwest Film Festival (SXSW) at the Alamo Draft House Theater in Austin, Texas. The audience felt on edge, the late hour kept reviewers away, and the film print arrived at the last possible minute—late to the point that the SXSW programmers had threatened to play a funky old DVD version off our computer.

Fortunately, that did not happen—and the *Disappearances* film print was striking on the big screen. But that night, after the first screening, I didn't sleep much. Maybe it was the effect of the 32 oz. Coca Cola I drank to stay awake. But the audience questions and my own ongoing search for the film's inner meanings kept my mind churning all night.

### **Teasing Out the Story's Elements and Themes.**

I'd initially been attracted to Howard Mosher's tall tale for its mix of hair-raising adventure, laugh-out-loud humor, compelling emotional drama, and whimsy. Even the story's several enigmatic touches appealed to me. I loved what I saw as the populist appeal of Mosher's novel, given its whiskey-running narrative. The history and imagination of this outlaw legacy is deeply rooted in the North Country—as much as any enterprise in the old west that triggered literally hundreds of westerns about outlaws and the fading frontier. Like John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*, Mosher's *Disappearances* shows Quebec Bill facing the disappearance of a frontier way of life, albeit in New England. QB's desire to take his son on the whiskey smuggling trip shows his desire to impart the sense of "wild" adventure that marked his own life. He wants to retain and transmit these frontier values to Wild Bill, against an inevitable modernizing tide of history. Indeed, Prohibition will be repealed within a year of the time the story takes place.

I was also intrigued by the story's suggestions of magical realism – and have always loved pictures like Fellini's *8 1/2*, which was inspired by psychologist Carl Jung's teachings about the personal relevance, mystery, and power of dreams, mythology, and the unconscious. As a college student I was knocked out by the first film I saw by the great Spanish surrealist director Luis Bunuel who articulated his view of film's unique capacities:

"The essential in any work of art is mystery, and generally this is lacking in films... a film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream... On the screen, as within the human being, the nocturnal voyage into the unconscious begins... The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply. Yet it is almost never used to do this."

So, this kind of filmmaking has always fascinated me. Indeed, the very first super-8 and 16mm shorts I made as a teen conjured a variety of dream images. I've always marveled at the range of filmmakers who work with these elements—directors like Carlos Saura and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani (*Padre Padrone*, *Night of the Shooting Stars*) whom the Portland Museum recently cele-



brated for their “idiosyncratic mix of expressionism, theatricality, irony, poetics, allegory, folk myth, and utopianism which, melded with neo-realism,” combined with their “love of landscape—and a keen interest in the primary relationship between people and the land they inhabit.”

Over the years, I’ve also discovered other magical realist films: pictures like *The Fable of the Beautiful Pigeon Fancier*, based on the novella by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alfonso Arau’s award-winning *Like Water for Chocolate*. Also movies like Spike Jonz’s *Being John Malkovich*, Antonioni’s *Blow Up*, David Lynch’s *Mullholland Drive*, Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko*, Tim Burton’s *Big Fish*, Michel Gondry’s *Science of Sleep*, Victor Fleming’s *Wizard of Oz*, and Joan Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast*. In our overly literal world, it’s refreshing to consider what Cocteau believed—that every film should aspire to a dream state, as his frequently did. Along with his notion of how “One of the characteristics of a dream is that nothing surprises us in it.” I was thrilled to take up this challenge—and to envision *Disappearances* as a poetic, populist, magical realist North Country western. On an indie low budget and impossibly tight schedule.

Before I shot *Disappearances*, I wrote a “director’s statement” for grant proposals and our business plan. In it, I said, “Beyond its many surface pleasures, I also feel that *Disappearances* suggests a magnificent visual world and expresses potent metaphors and timely themes about a disappearing way of life on the rugged frontier, where the spectacular natural environment refuses to be tamed and an outlaw culture thrives in the margins. The story also explores a complex and powerful father-son relationship at the moment of profound emotional change. It’s a high-energy joyride through drought-stricken fields, glacial lakes, dense forests, and bootlegger digs, transporting a father and son on the adventure of their lives.”

During the Austin Q & A session, I said that I saw Wild Bill’s coming-of-age journey at the center of the film—and that his father, Quebec Bill, and Aunt Cordelia each gave him what they felt he needed to complete this rite of passage. For Quebec Bill, who lives so much in the physical world and acts so instinctively, often without considering potential consequences, his own personal qualities formed the basis of his gift to Wild Bill. Indeed, Quebec Bill’s eternal optimism is rare—likewise, his sense of joy, wonder, possibility, and complete abandon, regardless of the odds.

Quebec Bill imparts to his son the full-blooded experience of the vanishing frontier and the spectacular natural world “that no one can ever take away from you.” Quebec Bill introduces his son to that world, as he marvels at its splendor and asks Wild Bill to retrieve and help revive the frozen trout. Anyone who has interacted with this natural world, as Quebec Bill has, on the farms or in the wilds of northern New England, understands its power, its unforgiving persistence—and its enchantment. It’s different from Cordelia’s magic—but it surely endures in Wild Bill’s memory of his father.

In Quebec Bill’s physical world, the needs for risk-taking and the uncompromising demands for survival prevail. Indeed, his name for his son—Wild Bill—is not an accurate description of the boy. It’s more Quebec Bill’s willful evocation of what he wants for his son—to take after his own qualities of boundless action and imagination for what’s physically possible. Quebec Bill’s ethos is born of American individualism and the impulse for adventure. As we see when he levels his shotgun at the machine gun-toting outlaw tracking the stolen whiskey, Quebec Bill also embraces the American frontier ethos of “shoot now, ask questions later.” That’s why *Disappearances* feels



to me like a Western—albeit one that is steeped in distinctly New England idioms of culture, values, community, history, and generational passage—elements that are largely lacking in traditional westerns that render frontier narratives lacking any sense of white settlers’ history or even law, where tentative settlements are taking root for the first time. *Disappearances* may also be a “western” that critically examines some of its own tenets. Because in Quebec Bill’s strengths lie his weaknesses. Like John Wayne’s fading gunslinger in *Liberty Valance*, Quebec Bill also witnesses inevitable change and a hint of the modern future. The expression on QB’s face, after he tucks the frozen trout into his jacket, suggests realization and sadness combined with the sense that his son will be what he is—just as Quebec Bill has been—but it will be different and for a different time.

In contrast to what he gets from his father, Wild Bill receives something quite different from Cordelia. She is steeped in the metaphysical—the spiritual, magical, and mystical; the rich and often mysterious worlds articulated by Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, and the Greek poets; and the historical links to both family and calamitous world and local events. Living isolated in rural northern Vermont during the turn of the Century, she inhabits an historical and intensely cultural universe. It’s from here that she affects Wild Bill.

Quebec Bill’s unconventional impulse for dominance in the physical world is counterbalanced by Cordelia’s equally irregular instincts for intuition, imagination, recitation, and vision. She accesses insight into an unseen world, including the natural world where magic also resides, as we see in her woods scene and through her mystical connection to the snow owl.

Quebec Bill acts. Cordelia looks and sees. Indeed, as one Vermont high school student and film critic Nancy Keefe Rhodes both recently observed, Quebec Bill’s actions beg us to consider our “illusions about the frozen present moment in the vast flow of time.” I’m glad she saw this because part of my intention was to show Wild Bill simultaneously and alternately experiencing the past, present, and future, especially when Cordelia shares her prophecies with him.

When I consider all this, I’m drawn to how New Yorker writer Henrik Hertzberg recently described the present as “simply the past’s ever-moving outer edge.” Despite this, Quebec Bill only occasionally looks back—but he does, as we all do, because it’s ebbing and flowing tide is inescapable.

Cordelia envisions a past and present that are inextricably linked. She channels the past and looks into the unknowable future. But to what end does Cordelia’s magic perform? For one, she’s able to finally name and dispatch Carcajou as a result of her conjuring, her link to French Canadian myths, and her instinct to see beyond what is visible. This is something Quebec Bill does not accomplish, steeped in his raw, tangible world.

The film shows that both Quebec Bill and Cordelia have experienced loss, especially through the disappearance of their father, William Shakespeare Goodman. Cordelia reflects on Goodman’s disappearance through her ruminations and extrasensory perceptions that bubble up to the surface. Quebec Bill presents his son with an idealized image of QB’s father, early in the film when he and Wild Bill pause at the lakeside campfire. Later, almost delusional, he expresses a sense of betrayal and recalls the thirty-year search across the entire continent for his runaway father. And when he looks straight at his now-presumed father facing him at the film’s climax in the woods,



Quebec Bill has the almost uncomprehending look of a child.

Doesn't Quebec Bill's lifelong search for his father parallel our own (often impossible) quests that occupy our imaginations, unsettled emotions, or subconscious lives? Again, I think of the almost childlike expression on Quebec Bill's face after Cordelia finally confronts Carcajou. It suggests to me that his quest is resolved. It's finally all right. A spell is lifted.

Perhaps Cordelia senses Carcajou/William Goodman's presence early in the film when she stares straight at the snow owl and declares, "You're back." Or when, later, she expresses to Wild Bill a premonition of death and, shortly after, urges the boy to accompany his father. What is she thinking when, in the meadow, she tells Wild Bill about his runaway grandfather and suggests that, "maybe at last, you'll learn your birthright." When she raises this specter of Wild Bill's grandfather, William Shakespeare Goodman, doesn't she sense Goodman's imminent return?

Does Quebec Bill ever suspect it? He might. If he does, he chooses to deal with the old outlaw differently than Cordelia, for sure. Bill seeks to settle the score through physical confrontation, whereas Cordelia works to conjure and dispatch William Goodman through mystical means.

During *Disappearances'* whiskey running adventure, Wild Bill ultimately rejects both Quebec Bill's best-laid plans and Cordelia's counsel. He insists on a course of his own. He also experiences loss—during the trip, through his killing of a man and the disappearance of his beloved father and aunt. These experiences seem somehow necessary to the catharsis that accompanies the culmination of his journey of growth. Wild Bill earns what he finally achieves. He faces a formidable challenge, turns directly into it, and works it through, finally making sense of his own experience. He acts, like his father does. And he looks and sees, like Cordelia. Indeed, the film climactic scene suggests either Wild Bill's own flashback, perceived through the unreliable lens of his young age and spotty memory. Or perhaps it's his own conjuring, combining the memory of those last physically wrenching moments with his dad—enhanced by his imagination and instinct rooted in what Cordelia proffered.

At the end of the story Wild Bill is profoundly changed. He stands at the edge of the world, looking off into the spectacular hills and valleys, simultaneously possessing substantially more—and less—than he did when he started. Wild Bill carries with him enduring legacies from the eccentric Cordelia and his flawed but vital father. Again, this is foreshadowed early in the film when Cordelia proposes that, "maybe at last you'll learn your birthright." He does.

Wild Bill will not likely choose their paths but his experience of life will be enlarged by them. At the end of the picture, he walks into a future and into a changed world that may not have much room for people like Quebec Bill and Cordelia (again, I'm reminded of how John Ford treated a similar theme in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*). Or for a family's peculiar history and the ancient French Canadian myths like the mysterious and frightful tale of the loup garou that Cordelia mentions in the woods, when discussing Carcajou's "curse." But at least Wild Bill gets to fully experience all of these—and to keep them alive through his own existence and experience of them. I'm reminded of Evangeline's comment to her son before the start of his journey—that without Cordelia Wild Bill would be a boy "without a past." Cordelia tells of this past and Quebec Bill



provides the opportunity to create one that's Wild Bill's own. I'm drawn to an idea that I chose to open the film. It's William Faulkner's comment, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." And T.S. Eliot's notion, expressed in his poem, *Burnt Norton* that "all time is eternally present." When I conjure a moment from my past, think of loved (and even unloved) ones who have moved on, or look over these hills and discover ancient stone foundations abandoned in the forests, this continuum of time seems present. In our imaginations and unconscious, doesn't this "eternally present" past always lurk?

### **Carcajou's Curse**

As Cordelia explains in the woods, Carcajou is "cursed." Perhaps all of this is lost on him, unable to experience a past. Because, as Cordelia also says, Carcajou "doesn't know who he is." But Carcajou also transmits to Wild Bill a part of his birthright, combined with a realization of a past still present. Unlike Cordelia and Quebec Bill, the cursed and predatory Carcajou shows little generosity toward his abandoned family, although he sheds a tear upon seeing "Bonhomme" written in Wild Bill's book—then demands the stolen whiskey and threatens the kid that he will "go to hell" if it's not returned. And what is Carcajou's (or any abandoning parent's) legacy to his next generations, having "run away over whiskey" and orphaned Quebec Bill and Cordelia nearly fifty years back? I grew up with a father "who ran away over whiskey" when I was six. Like Carcajou, my father disappeared and I never saw him again. That's all another story but it certainly took on magical, mysterious, painful, and even hallucinatory dimensions as I sought to invoke some notion of his existence. I found resonance in *Disappearances'* notion of the father who could have been anyone and anywhere; in Quebec Bill's quest to find him; and in the blessings and curses fathers bestow on their sons, even from afar. What, after all, are the obligations of heredity—beyond the mere physical transmission of lineage? Can an abandoning father ever truly "know who he is?" And what do their offspring do to reckon with this loss, seeking wholeness? And how does all of this inhabit the unconscious?

Again, I was struck by the absence of an emotional connection for Quebec Bill, even when Carcajou is revealed. There's nothing Quebec Bill can say to William Shakespeare Goodman, the callous stranger. When Quebec Bill disappears the opposite is true for Wild Bill—he experiences profound loss.

Cordelia mentions Carcajou's curse to Wild Bill when she appears holding an empty bird cage in the woods. She warns Wild Bill that "hell is empty, all the demons are here," providing an ironic riposte while suggesting Carcajou's return to life from death. And Cordelia goes a step further, letting Wild Bill in on part of an essential secret—that Carcajou won't die and "doesn't know who he is," adding that he's "part skunk, part wolf." Cordelia then crucially tells her nephew that she "knows how to break his curse" and she offers to tell the boy.

Wild Bill doesn't want to know all this. "I don't want to hear any more of your secrets," he says. "Don't tell me another word." He doesn't want the knowledge of whatever Cordelia's offering and he doesn't want the responsibility for getting rid of Carcajou, whom he believes is already dead by Rat's shotgun on the lake. Wild Bill has killed one man and that was enough. Too much is happening and he's not ready for this information—until the end of the journey. Then, he's ready.

Indeed, as the snow owl appears on the branch, after Cordelia has disappeared and Quebec Bill is



also gone, Wild Bill's voice can be heard over the owl, as it looks down at him. "Tell me," says the boy. Now he's ready to know—or at least conjure the necessary resolution that plays out during the final scene—a showdown with Carcajou where Wild Bill acts to dispatch him; where Carcajou persists; where Cordelia intervenes and breaks the villain's curse; and where Wild Bill struggles to carry his father home to safety. Again, is this scene simply a flashback – or Wild Bill's conjuring, having pieced together what he remembers from the delirious physical ordeal with his father and what he's learned from his aunt Cordelia—to rely on instinct, imagination, the unconscious, Cordelia's earlier hints, and his newly acquired knowledge of the worlds seen and unseen? It's your choice—but one thing is clear. Wild Bill wants to know. He needs to form a picture of what happened.

Cordelia hints that Carcajou's curse can be understood through the myth of the "loup garou," a fixture of various descriptions in French Canadian folklore that she mentions to Wild Bill in the woods—and which Wild Bill would understand, at least vaguely, through his upbringing where hair-raising tales of the loup garou were routinely told to kids at bedtime. The mythical and ill-fated loup garou does indeed share characteristics we see in Carcajou. Like the mythic creature, Carcajou is a vicious predator who can't die and doesn't age (as we see when he's finally released from the curse). The loup garou is not especially happy but he can't tell anyone of his curse, lest even worse befall him. Likewise, anyone else who reveals the curse will take it on themselves. Carcajou and any loup garou persists in his destructive course until the day or night when someone "looks him in the eye, calls him by his name, and spills his blood." Then he finally knows who he is. He's released from the spell and, at last, he can age and die. But even his rescuer/killer can never tell the details of the curse, lest she or he also fall victim to it. In keeping with its rules, we don't "explain" the curse and how it is broken—but we do show every detail of it.

Cordelia finally unlocks this curse. She confronts Carcajou by name, looks him in the eye, and spills his blood. Carcajou denies that he is William Shakespeare Goodman, Quebec Bill and Cordelia's lost father. "I ain't Goodman," he says to Cordelia after she confronts him. "He's dead. I killed him myself." But of course the cursed Carcajou must lie, even if Cordelia is right. He doesn't know who he is—not yet—and he can't reveal the curse.

Cordelia doesn't buy Carcajou's denial. And maybe it doesn't even matter if Carcajou is telling the truth or not. Either way, she finds justification and articulates a final judgment on her abandoning, deceitful, and predatory father that can't die (or who endures as "the dead who never die"). "You haven't changed a bit," she says. And she shoots him. By doing so, she saves Wild Bill, releases Carcajou from his curse, and puts to rest the uncertainty and torment that she and Quebec Bill have endured in their separate ways. And, in his last anguished look at Quebec Bill, finally released from the curse, Carcajou does know who he is.

By drawing on myth and instinct and looking into the unseen world, Cordelia accomplishes what Quebec Bill could not achieve in his navigation of the physical world. In doing so, she, like Carcajou, also becomes free. And Quebec Bill finally achieves solace, too. It's the "end of an era" that occurs so often in Howard Frank Mosher's work.

We visually and dramatically reveal each element of Carcajou's curse in the film. We debated about whether to also explain the curse of the loup garou more literally but I felt that, by doing so,



we'd shift the story's drama away from Quebec Bill and Wild Bill. We'd also break the rules. After initial preview screenings, I did add the line where, in the woods, Cordelia tells Wild Bill that she "knows how to break his curse," to make it clear when she finally dispatches Carcajou she's acting on this knowledge. But, keep in mind the severe penalty for disclosing the curse. Ironically, when Wild Bill refuses, in the woods, to hear Cordelia fully detail the myth, he may be saving her. Even after killing Carcajou, Cordelia does not and cannot explain it. In magical realism there is a parallel axiom—not to explain.

### **A Ghost Story?**

Since I've made the film, I've thought to myself how people I've known, who've died, remain very much present and alive, although in different ways. They move in and out of my thoughts and dreams and daydreams—for better or worse. Sometimes they haunt me—or cause me to think of the notion of how we live as long as the last person who ever knew us lives—that Carcajou lives in the body and soul of Cordelia—and Quebec Bill—for as long as they live. And how Quebec Bill and Cordelia will live on for as long as Wild Bill does.

### ***Is there something of a ghost story at work in Disappearances?***

I recently saw Connor McPherson's compelling new play, *Shining City*, with its hints of the supernatural in everyday life. It lingers with me and I made some connections to *Disappearances*. In the play, we're presented with images seen and not seen. The main character, John, meets with his deceased wife Mari and his interactions are quite similar to those he has with the play's other characters who, like him, suffer chronic disconnectedness and miscommunication. John describes how he sought to fill the void of disconnectedness before Mari's death. "You go searching," says John, thinking out loud. "...not searching, I wasn't going anywhere searching for anything, but I think I was always slightly waiting, you know?" This theme of disconnectedness resonates in modern life—and the play provides an opportunity for audiences to make use of the character psychologies to explore personal meanings.

So, too, in *Disappearances*, where the theme of loss joins one of disconnectedness. Like my own futile searching for a lost and abandoning father, Cordelia and Quebec Bill's search, after a time, also becomes a kind of "slightly waiting." Quebec Bill's soliloquy at night around the campfire shows how the ghost of his abandoning father remains, fifty years later—and it exists outside of literal and physical reality. When I was 17, I got word that my father had died at the age of 37, alcoholic and destitute. But that didn't put an end to my visions and conjurings of him; it only added dimension to the mystery. Likewise, Quebec Bill's father had become a creature of dreams and nightmares and delusional outbursts.

A recent article in the Science Times section of The New York Times by Rebecca Cathcart ("Winding Through Our Big Dreams" 7/3/07) tackles the notion of communicating with the dead through dreams, including Ms. Cathcart's own "crisp and vivid dreams" of her deceased father. "I sat up in bed and saw my father across the room. His figure was full and healthy and framed by the yellow light that glowed in the stairway outside my door. He was grinning, green eyes on me, and listening to sounds from the dining room below, the clinking of plates and the voices of my extended family laughing and sharing memories of him. He raised his dark eyebrows and laughed with them."



Ms. Cathcart continues: “Back to life” or “visitation” dreams...are vivid and memorable dreams of the dead. They are a particularly potent form of what Carl Jung called “big dreams,” the emotionally vibrant ones we remember for the rest of our lives.”

“Big dreams are transformative,” Roger Knudson, director of the PhD. program in clinical psychology at the Miami University of Ohio said in a telephone interview. The dreaming imagination does not just harvest images from remembered experience, he said. It has “poetic creativity” that connects the dots and “deforms the given,” turning scattered memories and emotions into vivid, experiential vignettes that can help us to reflect on our lives.”

“Grief itself is transformative. It is a process of disassembly. The bereaved must let go of the selves they were, as well as the loved ones they have lost. The dreams we have while grieving are an important part of that process.”

“Our dreams have to do with the people we love,” said Pamela McCarthy, director of counseling services at Smith College. “You learn to look within the loved one and the particular function that person played in life, such as caretaking or guidance in the case of a parent.”

Or even abandonment in the case of my own father—or Carcajou.

Cathcart continues: “Cultural narratives in regions like Vietnam and North and South America assign special importance to such dreams and consider them actual encounters with the spirits of lost loved ones.”

“This notion is so widely shared by traditions all across the globe that some scholars have gone so far as to argue that religion itself actually originated in dream experience,” says Kelly Bulkeley, past president of the Association for the Study of Dreams.”

“Apart from an effort to understand the psychology behind the content of dreams, what do we do with big dreams? If we ignore them, said Dr. Knudson, “we discount our most valuable resource in understanding ourselves.”

Or, as playwright George Bernard Shaw put it, “Or if you can’t get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.”

A young French filmmaker recently wrote to me, offering her thoughts on the film’s open elements: “What’s invisible in your film is somehow more important than what’s visible...how building one’s life, opinions, personality, requires us to walk through that past, to fight one’s own ghosts in order to find one’s truth...how a child needs to have his parents/father disappearing from his perspective to become who he is...”

I recently took the film to South Africa and was interested to see how audiences there connected the themes to their own views on the presence of ancestors and their spirits. Inuits likewise believe in the presence of and communication with their forbearers—and the epic narrative that emerges.



Pulitzer Prize winner Deborah Blum's new book, [Ghost Hunters](#) provides further context for this idea of a ghost story. Blum details how a number of celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, including Nobel Prize winning scientist Charles Richet, pursued and affirmed notions of contact with the dead. This notion remained current even into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially in a remote rural place like northern Vermont in the 1930's. And even the experts concluded, after 25 years of study, that the Creator had simply "intended this department of nature to remain baffling." Might Carcajou be a medium for William Shakespeare Goodman, as much as his physical embodiment? Possibly.

The Sunday New York Times Magazine (7/29/07) recently explored these ideas further, citing Plato as a source for contemplating the immortal soul and citing more contemporary thinkers, as well: "If God is dead," writes Times contributor Jim Holt, "does that mean we cannot survive our own deaths? Recent best-selling books against religion agree that immortality is a myth we ought to outgrow. But there are a few thinkers with unimpeachable scientific credentials who have been waving their arms and shouting: not so fast. Even without God, they say, we have reason to hope for — or possibly fear — an afterlife."

I'm reminded of Ibsen's play, "Ghosts," and of Mrs. Alving's comment in Act Two: "I almost think we're all of us Ghosts, Pastor Manders. It's not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us. It's all sorts of dead ideas and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we can't get rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see Ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be Ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sand of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light."

Cordelia grapples with her ghosts by looking beyond what is visible—and conjuring them. And she's intimate with the imagined worlds of Milton, Emerson, Shakespeare, and the Greeks, where images of ghosts and demons and even patricide and incest abound. Indeed, Cordelia quotes Shakespeare at will and prepares to take her leave from Wild Bill, urging him to fortify his mind and soul by "reading his Shakespeare daily." While there is no literal correlation between the stories, Cordelia's name invokes the image of King Lear's daughter and that play's themes of betrayal, regret, loss, disinheritance, and abandonment—and of Cordelia's search for her abandoning father. Indeed, Carcajou shows hints of Lear's madness and tortured soul.

Cordelia's voices, colored by her intimate engagements with literature and culture, sometimes seem as if they're coming from another world. Indeed, her intuitive parting comments before her own disappearance are drawn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century New England transcendentalist poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Mine and yours. Mine, not yours. Earth endures."

### **Carcajou's Civil War Past?**

There are suggestions of Carcajou/William Goodman's possible Civil War past (he wears both Union and Confederate officer's uniforms), for further exploration into his mysterious and very likely cursed past in that bloody war. Howard's Mosher's novel includes Civil War imagery and I saw that Carcajou was old enough to have served in that terrible human conflagration, during which Vermonters suffered and died in record numbers. This thread in Mosher's story prompted me to introduce some subtext related to that devastating war between fellow countrymen that remains in many ways misunderstood, unresolved, and steeped in our culture even today.



At a screening in South Hero, Vermont, a woman asked whether Cordelia might even be speaking metaphorically about Carcajou/William Goodman's Civil War past when, walking in the field, she tells Wild Bill about her ancestors. "Is it Carcajou," she asked, "that Cordelia obliquely references when she tells Wild Bill, "I loved a man once. A fine brave soldier whom I killed on the Common before I ever saw his face." Could it be that some spiritual, magical, literal, ironic, and/or metaphorical truth is being expressed here? Could Carcajou's strange curse and disappearance and inability to die a natural death could also be linked to his having been a soldier?

Or might it be, as my son Sascha suggested, while riding the Q train from his apartment in Brooklyn, that Cordelia is alluding to the "unknowable." "I think she's talking about things and people that existed before but are no longer present and therefore can not be known," he said. "Because they've vanished before they could be known or before they could become available to any possible future." Hmm.

Did Carcajou fight in the Civil War? Could that be where he picked up his curse? Didn't everyone who survived carry something terrible away from those battlefields? According to Civil War researcher Kris Hirst, recent studies based on data in the U.S. National Archives indicate that 43% of Civil War veterans experienced post-combat mental health problems throughout their lives. The nature of Civil War fighting caused very specific dysfunctions. "Each of the Civil War companies was made up of men from regional neighborhoods and thus included family members and friends," Hirst writes. "Men also readily identified with enemy, who were, after all, fellow countrymen and sometimes represented family members and acquaintances. Finally, close-quarters conflict, including hand-to-hand combat without trenches or other barriers was a common field tactic." Likewise, point blank shootings of men lined up only twenty yards from each other. Killings in this kind of brutal warfare reached levels exceeding 25,000 men per day in places like Gettysburg and Antietam.

While the resulting mental illness and trauma were recognized as "irritable heart" syndrome, there was little or no treatment for the maladies men brought away from this war. Many simply wore it as an inescapable curse and lived with drugs, alcohol, or varying degrees of violence, madness, and mental illness for the rest of their lives. Many studies indicate that these illnesses only intensified with age.

Might his Civil War experience be related to why Carcajou/William Goodman abandoned his family, preyed on others, smuggled whiskey, and fled back to his ancestors' homeland in Canada? Might his alternating Union and Confederate uniforms be linked to his embrace or, alternately, his disdain for officers on both sides? Or might it be linked to what Hirst's study found—that many Civil War soldiers felt a kinship to the enemy?

Finally, could William Goodman/Carcajou's curse in life only be lifted through death? And did he perhaps even perish in the war or its tortured aftermath – but refuse to truly die in the tormented memories of his loved ones—only to return as a ghost that requires some final resolution? And, repeating my earlier notion, might Carcajou have actually picked up Goodman's curse and become a medium for the departed man, perhaps after having killed him during a smuggling skirmish? These ideas continue to circulate for me—even as they interact with mythic notions of the loup garou.



Several months before *Disappearances* production I started work on a documentary film about the human impact of combat on WWII, Vietnam, and Iraq war veterans. And I researched similar consequences from the Civil War, and used soldiers' letters and quotes in the documentary. There's no question that, for many, the challenge of the post-war exceeded that of combat. For some, there would be no relief from the war's curse until death. For others, the challenge was to look straight into their enduring pain, and to find voice and meaning and vulnerability—to call it by its name.

I don't offer these as definitive explanations, since I've structured the film to remain open and fluid in its meanings. But these thoughts of war and its effects were working through my mind, prompted by Howard Mosher's images. I allowed them to find subtextual expression in Carcacjou's costume and character. I sometimes think of European filmmakers like French New Wave master Claude Chabrol whose psychological thrillers often include references to the French wars in Algeria and Vietnam. Chabrol recognizes strains that continue to resonate years later. He includes these visual and cultural clues, without literal embellishment, because he sees how the complex and troubled past can help reveal character and inform the present.

### **The Snow Owl, Magical Realism, Open-Ended Meanings, and the Natural World**

In my first feature film, *Where the Rivers Flow North*, protagonist Noel Lord cannot let go of this spectacular natural milieu that is the film's world. But neither can he tame it. In *Disappearances*, the natural world's power is less physical than magical, as we see through Cordelia's connection to the snow owl and woods—the vanishing steam train and Quebec Bill's half-baked rainmaking device.

Wherever she is, Cordelia sees beyond what is visible while Kristofferson's Quebec Bill navigates the Kingdom's physical world of lakes, hills, and streams. Cordelia sees an omen in the first appearance of the non-native snow owl. Quebec Bill simply remarks on its physical existence. "Look at that rubber necked son of a bitch," he says. "Ain't that a sight." Quebec Bill advises his son on how to cut stakes and lash rope for a hand-made travois to transport him home. Even in April, he plunges into the frigid waters of Lake Memphremagog. For him, the reviving of the trout frozen in a block of ice is evidence enough of the Kingdom's natural magic.

At a recent event in Newport, one audience member questioned the film's notion of a mythic North Country. I remarked how an Enosburg farmer had e-mailed me after a screening to say how he spends all times of day and night outdoors, during every season. He said how much he liked seeing the deep woods as a source of mystery and magic – even ghosts. "We readily ascribe mythic elements to the sea," I said. "We accept mermaids, Neptune, and all manner of sea nymphs and monsters, including Vermont's own "Champ" in Lake Champlain. But we have yet to explore all the magic that lurks in our own natural worlds."

In Waitsfield, an audience member asked whether Cordelia was real or an apparition. "I think it can go either way," I said. "I feel that she's real but has the power to inject herself into Wild Bill's thoughts, as we see during the trip. Or the kid experiences her so vividly that he can conjure her. I'm sure we all conjure people in our waking and sleeping life. But because Cordelia's interaction



in the film is almost exclusively with the kid, you could see her as a spirit that appears only to him, too.”

Another man asked what the snow owl means. I asked him and others to tell me what they think. Immediately, people spoke up. “The owl’s a messenger,” said one. “A witness,” said another. “It’s Carcajou making his presence known,” said a woman in the back of the theater.

Others offered their thoughts. “A sign of passage or transition.” “The spirit of ancestors.” “A protector.” “Extinction.” “Death.” “The presence of wisdom and death,” said one young woman, “manifest through both Cordelia and Carcajou—and a link between them.” A fellow in the second row said, “It’s just a goddamned snow owl.” Then someone added, “But snow owls are extremely rare here, coming down from the far north only very occasionally—and then leaving after mud season. That might be a sign in itself.”

“Any and all of those ideas work for me,” I said. “Simply trust your instincts on this.”

Another person asked whether the film’s ending was “real.”

“Real?” I asked. “The scene where Carcajou is hit by Wild Bill’s ferocious throw of the ax? Then he’s up and walking around a moment later, only to be shot and then to age and disappear a moment after that? I guess it depends on what you consider to be real.”

“I mean, was it a flashback or a fantasy?” the person continued.

“That’s up to you,” I said. “I think it plays either way. Literally, it plays as a flashback—an unconventional moment of narrative climax following the story’s denouement, when Cordelia vanishes. But the nature of the flashback could include the kid’s conjuring. Wild Bill has a need, finally, to know or to imagine—whatever it takes to find meaning and memory in all that has happened. Perhaps, in these final moments, Wild Bill combines what Quebec Bill and Cordelia have, respectively, given to him. Perhaps the boy conjures the vivid memory of the physical ordeal and heroic action in the woods with his father during that harrowing night before. And perhaps he willfully combines this with an equally potent imagination and vision that resolves the enigma of Carcajou — as William Shakespeare Goodman, rooted in Cordelia’s mystical evocation of family history and French Canadian folklore, through the finally resolved curse of the loup garou. After all, Cordelia told Wild Bill she knew how to break Carcajou’s curse. And, when all else fails, don’t we sometime explore and find personal resolution through our imaginations?”

A viewer rose after a screening in Essex, Vermont, “I’d bet that every person in this audience has a different interpretation of the film,” she said.

“Good,” I said. “I just want you to allow yourself to experience the film and feel free to put any open-ended pieces in place for yourself afterwards—or even leave out some parts of the equation, if you prefer. Or simply experience *Disappearances* as a tall tale.”

*Disappearances* was selected by the American Film Institute for travel to sites in different coun-



tries, and I've been pleased to see how international audiences have found different ways to key into the story. South Africans picked up on the idea of communicating with your ancestors and the presence of past generations in the present; in Israel several people spoke about Wild Bill's experience of loss as being necessary to his growth; in Kazakhstan some in the audience responded to the "curse" of alcohol while an animated group of screenwriters and filmmakers remarked on what they saw as the film's kinship to poetic narrative traditions there—and specific links to their views of rugged American individualism, parallels to the poetry of Milton, Yeats and Elliot, and the film's evocation of modern Western family relationship, especially as envisioned in *King Lear*. In China, audiences seem to pick up on notions of revelation, prophecy, and the simultaneous experience of past, present, and future time. In Venezuela, audience members discussed the intersection between two ideas in the film—the notion of the past being present and how that can be a "curse" if an unresolved past continues to haunt and encumber the present.

In finding a life for this story on film, I needed to orchestrate and sustain a dance between the narrative's magical and realistic physical elements—so that neither one overwhelms the other. This is essential to keep them both in play—but it does invite audience members to explore certain meanings for themselves.

Like Wild Bill and Cordelia in the classroom, I sometimes feel like I'm parsing an epic poem as I explore the various layers in Mosher's story and its film adaptation. And I've been intrigued by audience members who have done the same and found their own insights into characters' psychologies. Some posit themes, allegories, and metaphors related to disappearing cultural links, the decline of the natural world, alcoholism, gender, contemporary politics, historical memory, climate change, the experience of (Wild Bill's—and even Quebec Bill and Cordelia's) personal trauma, and more. Recently in Newport, Vermont, one viewer rose to say, "Isn't this story really about the age old struggle, now freshly relevant—about the struggle between a scientific view of the natural world and one that's religious—with its constituting belief in the unbelievable?" The man's comments caused me to reflect on the founding fathers' view of God in its link to nature, articulated in the Declaration of Independence where the pioneers refer to their God as "nature's God."

I hope there are many ways to approach the story. I like to see my job as posing rather than answering questions. If I'm successful, the audience can find their own meanings for the film, in its mainstream or in its margins. I'm reminded of what Cordelia says, during the classroom scene, when she asks Wild Bill "the point" of a passage from *Paradise Lost*. Wild Bill comes up dry. "I didn't know it had a point," he says.

I've spent the past six years looking for the "points" in "*Disappearances*." I'm still searching. And I don't claim to have any definitive truth about this rich and evocative story. That night in Austin, I found and followed a few leads. And I've pursued many more since then. Open-endedness is central to this story. After all, as Cordelia tells us early on, "Disappearances and extinctions are matters of human perception. Illusion and reality are interchangeable."

I hope that the film remains "open" enough for you to find your own ideas. And rich enough to stimulate your imagination and prompt you to trust your own instincts.