

Cry Wilderness

Frank Capra

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A bit of a fish story (if fish were replaced with political fisticuffs), Frank Capra's *Cry Wilderness* follows a fictionalized Capra to a wilderness cabin in the high Sierra and into local politics, where two long-term hermits-cum-vagrants are being threatened by developer pressures.

Some are intent on rebranding the Sierra region as a high-end vacation destination. Tony Caldwell, a local boy with his sights set on a political career aimed at the White House, spearheads the men's ouster. But just beneath the surface, a culture war is roiling. Competing interpretations of American values will go to trial as the two sides face off in a heated battle of humanism against the rule of law.

Capra's elliptical narrative moves through extensive exposition about the Mono Valley before giving way to local politics; much like his movies, it is strongest when it's character driven. A penchant for soliloquies leads to passages of environmental, philosophical, moral, and political grandstanding. These unbroken orations defy contemporary axioms about dialogue and pacing, but they also reveal much about Capra's instincts as a director and the underlying social tensions he's trying to work out.

As narrator, Capra's a hyperbolic raconteur—boastful, quick-tempered, and insistent. He fights on behalf of the local vagrants yet declares his wife's "no" a secret "yes" when he touches her. He refers to the indigenous Piutes as lowly, lethargic, and backward while vociferously advocating for primitive wilderness preservation. He rallies local power brokers to the hermits' cause while exhibiting deep homophobia about a key player's relationships. He wields his privilege in big swings, and his progressivism is littered with paradoxes.

Fiction is always a response to its own time and place, and when a deceased author's unpublished manuscript surfaces, a wild and woolly past is unearthed. *Cry Wilderness* is fiction as time capsule, a "tale full of half-truths, whole-truths, and no-truths at all."

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (September/October 2018)

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