



A sparsely plotted, low-key but ultimately rewarding slice of South Dakota reservation life.

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Film Critic

Shot and largely cast on location, [Chloe Zhao](#)'s debut feature, "Songs My Brothers Taught Me," is a very low-key portrait of life on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. This sparsely plotted slice-of-life may in fact be a little too low-key for some viewers, yet its poetic minimalism is atmospheric, with eventual emotional payoff in some incisively written scenes and a surprisingly effusive wrap-up. Despite marginal commercial prospects, it should accumulate its share of fest travel before scoring niche cable and on-demand sales of the Sundance Channel/Selects ilk.

Though several years in development (through Sundance Labs, natch), the drama arrives close on the heels of Anna Eborn's "Pine Ridge," an intriguing documentary that proved frustratingly fragmentary in its glimpse at contemporary Lakota Nation residents. Zhao's drama is not dissimilar in its resistance to explaining character circumstances upfront, or in its attractively austere aesthetic tied to the stark plains

landscapes. But the sometimes cryptically developed narrative here is nonetheless enough to draw the patient viewer in.

High schooler Johnny Winters (John Reddy) and 11-year-old Jashaun (JaShaun St. John) live at home with their single mother, Lisa (Irene Bedard); an eldest son is in prison. But they have many, mostly unknown half-siblings by the father they never met — a famous rodeo cowboy who sired at least 25 kids by nine or so “so-called wives.” At the pic’s start, the brothers learn he’s just died a predictable drunkard’s death in an accidental fire. So it’s ironic, perhaps (if also somewhat predictable), that Johnny is making money home-delivering booze for entrepreneur Bill (Allen Reddy), a trade that’s illegal given that tribal law prohibits alcohol — the destroyer of many generations’ lives here — on the reservation.

Any other work is scarce, and Johnny needs to save up some cash: He’s planning to follow his college-bound girlfriend, Aurelia (Taysha Fuller), to Los Angeles, though he hasn’t yet told his mom or sister. When the latter overhears him talking about it, she’s understandably alarmed at the notion of being left alone with their remorsefully hard-drinking mother and her latest bad-news boyfriend. JaShaun goes searching for possible substitute father/big-brother figures, making a tentative selection in kindly if hapless tattoo/clothing designer Travis (Travis Lone Hill), to whom she appoints herself an assistant. But he may require adult supervision more than she does.

Less a plot-driven narrative than a casual-feeling accumulation of mostly small incidents, “Songs My Brothers Taught Me” isn’t about particularly talkative people, which lends real impact to the script’s few late-arriving pointed exchanges of dialogue. Similarly, so much restraint makes a climactic montage of reservation life, including and beyond what we’ve already seen, quite surprising in its sweeping, upbeat spirit. While the relatively few moments of humor or surrealism make you wish Zhao had taken more such tonal detours, the pic’s satisfyingly poignant sum impact makes its occasionally near-monotonous quietude pay off.

Perfs are strong, also including Eleonore Hendricks in a somewhat cryptically written role as Bill’s Caucasian outsider girlfriend, with whom Johnny develops a slightly sexually charged friendship. Joshua James Richards’ lensing alternates between raw intimacy and breathtaking shots of the dramatic regional vistas. Other design contributions are apt and interesting, tech packaging pro.