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| **Feature Article** | | | |
| Taunya Lovell Banks is the Jacob A. France Professor of Equality Jurisprudence at the University of Maryland School of Law. She is the author of *Both Edges of the Margin: Blacks and Asians in Mississippi Masala*, Barriers to Coalition Building, 5  Asian Law Journal 7 (1998); *To Kill A Mocking Bird: Lawyering In An Unjust Society* (accepted for inclusion in Screening Justice, Strickland, Foster & Greene, editors).              **"**  Although there is some suggestion that both families might not approve of the **interracial romance**, it is Hatsue’s family that is portrayed as anti-white. In contrast, Ishmael’s father, the liberal island newspaper man, comments on **Hatsue’s beauty**.    **"** |  |  | ***Snow Falling on Cedars*: History** ***Lite* and Stereotypes**  By Taunya Lovell Banks  �All Rights Reserved       Despite its often achingly beautiful scenery, *Snow Falling on Cedars* suffers from some of the same shortcomings as the novel on which it is based. This is not surprising since David Guterson, who wrote the book, co-produced the film.     When fisherman Carl Heine, Jr. (Eric Thal) is found dead in the waters of Washington State, suspicion immediately falls on KaBuo Miyamoto (Rick Yune). KaBuo, an army veteran of Japanese ancestry, happened to be fishing nearby. Guterson uses KaBuo’s trial as a backdrop for a superficial exploration of Japanese-American - Euro-American relations before and after World War II. Unfortunately, the film misses an opportunity to inform the viewing public about a disgraceful period in American history. Instead, *Snow Falling on Cedars* is Japanese-American history *lite*, merely hinting at things explored more explicitly in the1990 film, *Come See the Paradise* (starring Dennis Quaid and Tamlyn Tomita).  *Snow Falling on Cedars* only hints at the extensive legal restrictions imposed on Japanese Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. Someone who has not read the book might not fully understand why KaBuo’s father, a Japanese immigrant, is unable to purchase land in his own name. Washington and other western states prohibited persons ineligible for U.S. citizenship from owning land, and federal law denied naturalization to non-whites. KaBuo is a U.S. citizen by birth, thus his father purchases land from Carl Heine, Sr. in KaBuo’s name.     When the Miyamoto family along with the other island Japanese-American families are interned following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, KaBuo’s father is two payments short of owning the land outright. The elder Heine allegedly writes off the debt in exchange for the land’s strawberry crop. Carl dies before the war ends and his widow sells the land to another white farmer, making a handsome profit and sending some money to the Miyamotos. Thus, the film focuses on whether KaBuo’s father defaulted on the land purchase rather than on the inherent unfairness of the racially restrictive land laws. The Sheriff hastily concludes that the land dispute between KaBuo Miyamoto and the Heines is the reason behind Carl’s death.     The film also downplays the war experiences of Japanese Americans. The few fleeting internment scenes do not convey the harshness of internment camps like Manzanar. Unlike the internment scenes in *Come See the Paradise*, in *Snow Falling on Cedars* the audience gets only a brief hint of the sharp contrast between the barren dusty environment of Manzanar and the lush Washington island. Likewise, the film treats similarly the wartime experiences of Ishmael and KaBuo. The experiences of Japanese-American soldiers during World War II were much different from the experiences of white soldiers like Ishmael. Unlike white soldiers, most Japanese Americans served in World War II while their families were interned at home. Moreover, Japanese-American soldiers were more often used as cannon fodder than white soldiers.     Rather, it is the *obsession* of Ishmael Chambers (Ethan Hawke) with Hatsue Miyamoto (Youki Kudoh), KaBuo’s wife, that forms the film’s core. Ishmael is a white journalist in the small Washington island town where the film is set. He is a man shattered both by lost love and disability, having lost Hatsue and his arm during World War II. Emotionally and physically a partial man, and unable or unwilling to fill the shoes of his enlightened journalist father, Ishmael is paralyzed by the past, unable to move forward.     Ishmael’s blind obsession with Hatsue, the daughter of Japanese immigrants, is not simply the arrogance and narcissism of youth. His obsession is symbolic of the West’s obsession with Asia, and embodies the arrogance of twentieth-century Western imperialism. Although the camera focuses longingly on Hatsue, the audience knows little about her. She is merely the *object* of Ishmael’s obsessive love, not a fully drawn character. Ever the stereotypical silent, virginal, passive and obliging Asian woman, she utters few lines throughout the film. In fact, few of the Japanese-American characters in *Snow Falling on Cedars* say much. This is a white man’s film. Again, *Come See the Paradise* was much stronger in this respect; it also concerned a white-Japanese American love relationship but the Japanese characters were well developed.  We see young Ishmael spying on, forcing himself on, and doggedly pursuing a relationship with Hatsue, totally blind to the realities of life in Washington in the 1930s and early 1940s. Although there is some suggestion that both families might not approve of the interracial romance, it is Hatsue’s family that is portrayed as anti-white. In contrast, Ishmael’s father, the liberal island newspaper man, comments on Hatsue’s beauty. Lost on most viewers is the fact that many states, including California and Oregon, specifically prohibited marriages between Japanese and whites. Although Washington State was an exception, there were many reasons besides family disapproval that would cause Hatsue to think twice about marrying Ishmael. Surely the adult Ishmael was not totally blind to the realities of interracial marriage.  Perhaps the only surprise here is that *Snow Falling on Cedars* reverses the usual treatment of unsuccessful romance between Asians and whites. If rejection occurs, as in *Madame Butterfly* (1915) (1932) (1995), it is usually the white man who rejects the Asian woman.  As in the book, Ishmael Chambers comes across as an unsympathetic character. Still smarting over Hatsue’s long ago rejection of his love, he withholds evidence that will exculpate KaBuo. Ishmael feels *entitled* to speak with and hold Hatsue. She resists, understandable behavior from a proper married woman in the early 1950s, especially a Japanese-American woman pursued by a white man.  Inexplicably, Ishmael feels no remorse when he belatedly discloses the evidence. He waits until all the evidence has been presented and the jury has retired. Fortunately, the enlightened judge, a rarity in traditional courtroom films, considers the evidence and dismisses the jury and the charges.  Even more troubling is a scene reminiscent of the courtroom scene in *To Kill A Mockingbird* where the black community, relegated by Jim Crow laws or practices to the courtroom balcony, rise out of respect for Atticus Finch. In *Snow Falling on Cedars* the Japanese Americans in the courtroom rise, turn and bow to Ishmael who is standing in the balcony –another reversal. The reason for this gesture is unclear. Were the Japanese Americans bowing to Ishmael in gratitude? Surely this could not be the case. Ishmael Chambers is no Atticus Finch in either appearance or actions. Yet Ishmael appears to be ennobled on the silver screen for simply doing the right thing, not allowing his personal biases or grievances to foster racial bias in the criminal justice system.  Ishmael’s reward: an appreciative hug from Hatsue. Now he can go on with his life!    *Posted July 8, 2000*  **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments) |
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