

FICTIONAL FILM ADAPTATION

“A White Heron” (1886)

Sarah Orne Jewett

(1849-1909)

from *Follywood* (2005)

Then he described the short he had just directed, based on a story by Sarah Orne Jewett. The studio saw it as a woman’s picture, offering a balance on double bills appealing to the desire for peace, for a sanctuary from the Cold War. A girl named Sylvia is sent from the city to live with her grandmother on a farm where the surrounding woods, on the Fox backlot, become a mystical paradise. There she discovers a beautiful white heron roosting high in a tree, mysterious and spiritual, with a vision beyond her own. A young ornithologist with a rifle, cast by the producer to resemble a dark Senator Joe McCarthy, comes hunting for the heron. He wants to penetrate her secret place and offers money to Sylvia if she will lead him to the bird, rented by the studio from an aviary.

She refuses to inform.

“I dreamed that I was little Sylvia, looking for the white heron up in the trees. Instead, I saw something else. Dim in the swamp fog. It was squatting on a low branch, devouring a kill. Mechanical looking. More like a giant insect than a bird. It had a hammerhead and a beak like a sickle! It almost got me!”

Michael Hollister
from Chapter 20
Follywood (2005)



Follywood dramatizes the 1940s and 50s, with deep focus on directors, writers and politics. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the young 20th Century Fox director Ryan Eisley films a documentary on women working in a defense plant, where he meets Sarah. They marry and settle down on a ranch in the San Fernando Valley with their two kids and their dog Boffo.

The Eisleys go on to make independent films adapting American classics, while Sarah tries to overcome Ryan's infidelities with scripts and actresses. Just after their film *Women in Hemingway* is released, the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities resumes investigating Communist influence in Hollywood, provoking their stars John Huston, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall to fight back by

joining a delegation of stars who fly to the hearings in an airplane named Star of the Red Sea. Some suspect the Eisleys are Communists and the hearings could end their careers. They hope to clear themselves by producing the anti-Communist film *Blithedale*, starring Tracy and Hepburn.

The Eisleys become involved on both sides of the Blacklist scandal, as Sarah resists the Communists who control the Screen Writers Guild and Ryan fights the conservatives who try to impose a blacklist on the Screen Directors Guild. Like the nation, their marriage is threatened by disloyalty and the prospect of war. Orson Welles takes over their *Pierre*, then Josef Stalin courts Judy Garland in their *Flowering Judas*. Their lives interwoven with their films, the Eisleys dramatize the dominant political and aesthetic conflicts in Hollywood.