

'The World to Come' Review: A Lyrical Exploration of Female Desire in 19th-Century America

[Guy Lodge](#) Sep 6, 2020 10:15am PT



Courtesy of Sea Change Media

A shy, introverted farmer's wife in Schoharie County, New York, Abigail has stopped going to church since the death of her young daughter Nellie. "I no longer derive comfort from the thought of a better world to come," she says, in one of the many narrated diary entries that give [Mona Fastvold's](#) period drama its literate, contemplative voice.

The line provides "[The World to Come](#)" with its title, which reverberates and expands in meaning as the film's simple, year-spanning story unfolds: At first Abigail may be speaking of the afterlife, though as an exhilarating new love is denied her by the ruling patriarchy, it seems she's looking to a liberated world far ahead of her modest existence in 1856. For Abigail finds

her soulmate in another woman, fellow unhappy farm wife Tallie, and the intensely moving romance that ensues finds release in the imaginative freedom of their desires, even as fate — and men — conspire against their physical union.

As played by Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby, respectively, Abigail and Tallie are women ahead of their confined, frustrated time. But “The World to Come” doesn’t stress the point with modish anachronisms or film-pausing speeches. Instead, Fastvold’s film leans into the measured vernacular and daily routine of the mud-stained 19th-century lives it depicts, finding a satisfying kinship between the hard, gradual blossoming of its chosen landscape and the formal, subtly expressive language of writer Jim Shepard — who has gracefully adapted his own 2017 short story with fellow heartland novelist Ron Hansen (“The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford”). The exquisite result, premiering in competition at Venice, straddles its own mountain somewhere between the peaks of *Cold* and *Brokeback*. Discerning arthouse distributors should take the climb.

For Norwegian-born director Fastvold, recently a co-writer on her partner Brady Corbet’s films “*Vox Lux*” and “*Childhood of a Leader*,” this richly textural sophomore feature represents a considerable step up from her intriguing but opaque 2014 debut “*The Sleepwalker*.” Like that film, however, it demonstrates her fine instinct for brittle, pervasive domestic tension, and her ability to draw it out of a small, tightly wound ensemble of actors. That’s evident as early as the film’s sober introductory scenes between Abigail and her undemonstrative husband Dyer (Casey Affleck, also taking a producing credit), as they handle the strain of a severe winter freeze with nary a word of warmth spoken between them.

Structured around the dates of Abigail’s diary entries, the film opens on January 1, following an evidently not-so-festive season. It’s been some months since their daughter died of diphtheria, and wife and husband have

settled into a grief-smothering routine of constant labor. In her words, she anticipates the new year "with little pride and less hope." Cinematographer André Chemetoff supplements the mood with vividly frost-bitten tableaux of rural drudgery: Certain shots here look etched in glass. Yet when Tallie turns up at her doorstep in gray mid-February, the whole screen seems to blush slightly, tinged either by the copper explosion of her hair or by Abigail's instant, instinctive flush of good feeling around her. A long winter, it seems, is finally thawing.

Tallie is new to the region, having moved onto the neighboring farm with her husband Finney (Christopher Abbott), who treats his wife as brusquely as Dyer does his, only with an additional hint of under-his-breath cruelty. Both lonely and limited by the constraints of milking cows, peeling potatoes and fending off talk of motherhood, the women identify in each other in a kindred spirit, but also an impulsive, reckless connection that feels entirely unfamiliar. They're slow to call it "love" out loud, but it blooms with the spring anyway, heedless of their husbands' growing suspicion and hostility. One would like to imagine this summer passion is forever, but "The World to Come" is no romantic fantasy; the weather, when it turns, will do so roughly.

Fastvold doesn't resist the obviousness of her film's seasonal metaphors, but doesn't overwork them either: This is filmmaking as attuned to incremental shifts in light and landscape (Romania's, in fact, gorgeously filling in for undeveloped upstate New York) as the ebb and flow of a character's interior joy, written in a face unaccustomed to smiling. Matching the film's variable physical and emotional temperatures throughout, a marvelous score by avant-garde British musician Daniel Blumberg is full of unexpected woodwind breezes and sharp percussive intrusions.

Kirby — who, between this and her celebrated turn in Kornél Mundruczó's "Pieces of a Woman," has emerged as the breakout star of this year's Venice fest — gets to play the life-breathing force of this story, and is duly magnetic without giving in to whirling free-spirit cliché. Her Tallie may be

more outspoken in her emotions than her neighbor, but she also wearily knows the score for women like her, seizing moments of freedom where she can and gritting her teeth for the rest. She duets beautifully with Waterston, who arguably has the harder task of guiding the audience through her cramped, slowly widening view of the world, and whose running voiceover handles the earthy poetics of Shepard and Hansen's writing with aching care.

A duller film would write the story's menfolk as uniform oppressors, but Dyer and Finney emerge as unideal husbands of a very different stripe, each increasingly wary of the other. Affleck plays the former rather poignantly, not as a callous misogynist but as a man with equally limited experience in giving and receiving affection, holding his grief close because it's the one feeling he knows for certain. Abbott, meanwhile, is quite extraordinary: at once terrifying and pathetic as a man who all but breathes abusively, but whose petulant, Bible-bashing possessiveness over his wife reveals his own gaping weak points. He, too, can see the world to come, crushingly far away as it is.