

# 'The World to Come' Review: Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby Lead Swoon-Worthy Frontier Romance

Venice: Mona Fastvold's delicate same-sex love story is lit with the kerosene romance of "The Assassination of Jesse James."

[David Ehrlich](#)

**Katherine Waterston stars in "The World to Come."**



As coldly drawn as an atlas yet no less capable of enflaming the imagination, Mona Fastvold's "[The World to Come](#)" is a hard and brittle period love story that thaws into something much warmer — what its hyper-literate heroine would call "astonishment and joy" — as a merciless 19th-century winter blushes into a most unexpected spring.

Tuesday, January 1, 1856. Abigail (Katherine Waterston) mourns the daughter who was taken by diphtheria a few months prior, and journals about a world that feels barren in the young girl's absence. "This morning, ice in our bedroom for the first time all winter," she reads aloud in voiceover, offering the first excerpt from an interior monologue so pronounced that Fastvold's romance often feels like an epistolary film written by a woman to herself. "The water froze on the potatoes as soon as they were washed. With little pride, and less hope, we begin the new year."

And what a new year it will be for the ever-studious Abigail, an overgrown schoolgirl who likens her loneliness to “a library without books.” It will begin with new neighbors. It will bloom with new memories. And it will shudder with the tectonic aftershocks of a woman who — with no means of escaping her nook-like place in the world — dares to remap herself.

That cartography motif provides “The World to Come” with a clear sense of place from the moment it starts; the credits are scrawled above a map of upstate New York (played with patience and edenic possibility by the hills of Romania), and they give way to a valley so petrified in gray ice, even the slightest hints of color seem exotic. Embodied by a mealy-mouthed Casey Affleck (whose quietly moving performance as Abigail’s husk of a husband sneaks up on you), Dyer bristles against the depressive pall that’s settled around their house like it’s just another fallow period any farmer worth his beard could survive. “Contentment is like a friend he never gets to see,” Abigail notes in her journal with a novelist’s sense of invention, sketching the inner life of a spouse always less expressive than his shadow. They may be married, but what can that really mean to a woman who’s only met a handful of people in her life? At night, he grabs her breast and offers her another child. Abigail requests an atlas instead.

It could be worse. Abigail could be married to the more controlling Finney (Christopher Abbott), a jealous brute who’s just leased out the log cabin nearby and doesn’t appear to have any inner life at all. Not that his wife Tallie ([Vanessa Kirby](#)) would try to draw it out if he did. Unlike the bookish Abigail — who’s been raised to think of the world as a hidden empire built of ink and imagination — Tallie walks through life with her chin up, her cheeks flushed, and her hair caught in the wind. She is a woman less compelled by what she can imagine in her mind than what she can feel on her skin. Things like the webbing between Abigail’s fingers, which Tallie explores with unclear intentions as the two prairie housewives trade polite gossip about

their husbands.

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Has Tallie been with a woman before? Has any woman been with a woman before? Abigail doesn't know the answers to these questions, or even how to ask them. All she knows is that the house seems warmer after Tallie's visits. The swirling winds of Daniel Blumberg's clarinet score — which can whip into a winter storm at a moment's notice — grow as warm and soothing as an orange hearth. And a story that opens with the grief-stricken chill of a rustic horror movie starts to pull focus away from its monsters, eventually settling into a harsh but hypnotic love story less rewarding to watch than it is to remember.

In that respect, it differs from a recent spate of similar films. Critics — and this one speaks from experience — should be careful about relating every restrained sapphic romance to the likes of "Carol" or a Céline Sciamma movie. But Fastvold's stiff knockout of a second feature (which arrives six years after "The Sleepwalker," and trembles with the same intensity its filmmaker wrote into the scripts for "The Mustang" and "Vox Lux") shares a common interest in female interiority and the sweet vertigo of falling in love. "The World to Come" takes that pioneer spirit and runs with it deep into the woods, even if its characters spend most of their lives standing in place, even if the movie around them — which entwines the furtive eroticism of "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" with the kerosene ache of "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" — owes as much to the latter as it does any of its more obvious influences.

Without "Jesse James," "The World to Come" literally wouldn't exist.

Andrew Dominik adapted the Western from a historical novel of the same name, sparking an artistic kinship between Affleck and author Ron Hansen — whose writing partner Jim Shepard got the idea for a novella about a forbidden affair when he found a note scribbled in the margins of an old farmer's journal: "My best friend has moved away, I don't think I will ever see her again." When Hansen and Shepard offered Fastvold the script version, Affleck came with it, as did the implosive fatalism he brought to the role of Robert Ford, and the bitter survivalist mindset of living at nature's mercy.

"The World to Come" is so withholding that the characters from "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" are practically sky-writing their emotions by comparison, and Fastvold's film — despite its delicate lilt of a last scene — never detonates inside of you with remotely the same force. It's jabbing and elliptical instead of lush and symphonic; old-fashioned where some of its predecessors have thrummed with contemporary zeal. No one filters drugs through armpits, or scissors their bodies into shapes that Abdellatif Kechiche might cut together. On the contrary, Abigail and Tallie are seldom onscreen together at all, and only in hindsight can we appreciate how charged the space between them is when they are. Fastvold shoots the movie at a polite and unfussy remove, the fuzzy vibrations of Andre Chemtoff's 16mm cinematography hinting at an energy invisible to Abigail and Tallie's husbands.

If there's a spectacle inherent to the sight of famous actresses enacting a same-sex affair, Fastvold does her best to mute it out. "The World to Come" is as compelled by thought as "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" was by gaze, and Abigail's journal entries — which Waterston reads over the soundtrack in a way that's at once both measured and mad with desire — secure her emotions in the one place where she's able to keep them safely. A typical sentence: "My heart a maelstrom, my head a bedlam." This might be the

only film ever made to casually drop the word “farrago” (and I don’t have time to watch 2019’s “Farrago” to find out). Fastvold doesn’t offer much in the way of laughs, but I cackled when Tallie impishly justifies the film’s most explicit moment by arguing “won’t our farms benefit from that?” She knows how to speak Abigail’s love language. She knows that Abigail has read about love in Shakespeare plays but never felt it for herself, and “The World to Come” is at its sharpest when trying to articulate the alchemy that happens when theory and sensation collide with each other and morph into something new.

Many of the script’s most pivotal moments are folded into the margins like the two lines of chicken scratch that gave birth to these characters; each scene begins with the date scrawled across the scene as Abigail reads from her diary, and it isn’t until the end of the movie that you realize how much she’s kept hidden from us. It’s enough to know that she has access to it, and always will, but it’s also frustrating that we’re stuck watching some more ordinary histrionics instead. Abbott’s performance shivers with a sociopathic affectlessness, but “patriarchy incarnate” is thin gruel in a film where everyone else gets to play so many layers (even Affleck, who earns Dyer some hard-won dimension by the end). It’s not that his character doesn’t ring true, nor that Finney’s jealous chaos is at all contrived. Only that his destructive boorishness is such a plain way to spoil a story this ornate, like a wedding invitation embossed in comic sans.

But “The World to Come” is about the things we remember, and not the ones so easy to forget. “I hold our friendship and study it,” Abigail writes of her bond with Tallie, “as if it were the incomplete map of our escape.” Whether or not she ever finds her way free, the first half of 1856 will linger in Abigail’s mind like all of the best love stories do, her neurons and nerve endings rearranged into forest trails that forever lead back to the legend that explains them.

## Grade: A-

*“The World to Come” premiered in Competition at the 2020 [Venice Film Festival](#). It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.*

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