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The Portland Observer

A Moving Portrait of Life on the Margins

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of ocean waves threatening to engulf children who have wandered out too far. I can't think when I have seen a film that conveys so much, yet preserves a sense of mystery.

One of the things I loved about this film is that it offers glimpses of Mexico at a level of complexity that we never see in the U.S. We're accustomed to stick-figure drawings of shadowy migrants and a lawless society; Cuarón gives us a culture in which privilege tends to follow whiteness; where a woman doctor outthinks her male colleagues; where corruption is hidden in plain sight; where indigenous beauty goes unrecognized. As a Mexican-American who has had to scrounge my whole life for scraps of clues as to my own heritage, this film felt like a cool drink of nutritious water.

The film also captures something profound about memory. Cuarón sought to capture some of what was essentially true about his own childhood, yet wisely focused less on plot details and more on fragments of sound and touch and water and sun, recreating them with contemplative care. From the perspective of middle age, he intuited the importance of centering on the perspective of a central but marginalized person. And from those fragments of beauty and brokenness, Cuarón has assembled one of the most moving films I have ever seen.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. Find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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