

'Where the Crawdads Sing' gets winning adaptation

By Mark Meszoros

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"Where the Crawdads Sing" benefits from a woman's touch.

Actually, make that many women's touches.

The largely bewitching adaptation of first-time novelist Delia Owens' hugely selling romance-mystery drama of the same name — in theaters now — is directed by Olivia Newman, working from a screenplay by Lucy Alibar.

It is lovingly shot by director of photography Polly Morgan ("A Quiet Place Part II") and boasts thoughtful production design by Sue Chan ("Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings").

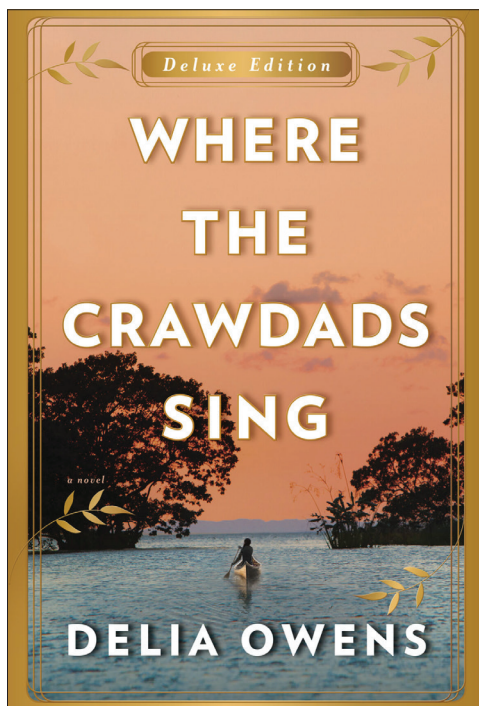
Daisy Edgar-Jones flourishes as the story's central character, Kya Clark, with Jojo Regina — making her feature-film debut — excelling in one very impactful moment as a younger version of Kya.

And while she does not appear in the film, actress-producer Reese Witherspoon largely is responsible not only for this adaptation being made — the film is produced by Hello Sunshine ("Little Fires Everywhere," "The Morning Show"), which she co-founded — but also for some of the book's success. (After she selected it for her Reese's Book Club, it skyrocketed up the bestseller lists, selling more than 12 million copies and setting a record for the most weeks atop the New York Times hardcover fiction bestsellers list, according to the film's production notes.)

Oh, and the movie features the haunting ballad "Carolina" by one Taylor Swift.

"Where the Crawdads Sing" takes place over the 1950s and '60s, the story consisting of two timelines that eventually merge. It is set in Barkley Cove, North Carolina, which gives the film much of its personality. Here, Kya becomes a thing of legend as the mysterious girl who lives out in the marshlands, aka the "Marsh Girl."

First, though, we meet Regina's version of Kya, whose abusive, heavy-drinking father (Garret Dillahunt of "Ambulance") first drives away her mother but then also



Penguin Random House/TNS

Kya's handful of siblings. For a while, when it's just daddy and daughter, he stops drinking and teaches her a few things, but a reminder of the past undoes the progress he's made. Soon enough, he's gone, too, leaving the uneducated girl to figure out how to take care of herself alone in the family's secluded home.

In the present day, Kya is accused of killing Chase Andrews (Harris Dickinson, "The King's Man"), a town celebrity as its former star quarterback. While many in town believe her to be guilty, she is defended by a kindhearted lawyer, Tom

Milton (David Strathairn), who will do his best to poke holes in the prosecution's narrative surrounding Chase's death.

Before the jury of her supposed peers reaches its verdict, we get the fuller Kya story, a tale involving romances with the good-natured Tate Walker (a solid Taylor John Smith of "Sharp Objects" and "The Outpost"), who was a childhood friend of her brother Jodie, and then with Chase. While she connects with both young men, each will let her down, albeit in different ways.

Tate has an extremely positive impact on her life; he first brings her gifts and teaches her to read and later encourages her to use vast knowledge of the marshland and its wildlife toward what could be a fulfilling and lucrative venture. However, Tate has goals of his own, ambitions that butt up against her fear of the outside world.

"You can't live here in the marsh forever," he tells her.

Her fiery response: "Watch me!"

With Chase, it's different. He can be kind and ... not so kind. Does he truly care for Kya or does he simply enjoy getting away from the stresses of his everyday life to enjoy some secret time with her?

"Where the Crawdads Sing" is at its most engaging when we spend time with Kya living her unusual life — when she's collecting seashells for research or interacting with the few people in her life, such as husband-and-wife owners of the local

bait-and-tackle shop, Jumpin' (Sterling Macer Jr.) and Mabel (Michael Hyatt), who are a positive force in her life, especially after her father leaves.

Edgar-Jones ("Normal People," "Under the Banner of Heaven") gives an understated but penetrating performance. Although her older version of Kya is quite standoffish early on after being arrested for the crime — it's frustrating that she'll barely speak with Tom when he visits her in jail to offer his help — we will feel her ups and downs throughout the flashbacks.

The story's emotional resonance also is a credit to Newman ("First Match"), Alibar ("Beasts of the Southern Wild," "Troop Zero") and, surely, Owens, a wildlife scientist herself and the author of nonfiction books about her work in Africa.

"Where the Crawdads Sing" is less successful as a murder mystery, the proceedings in court feeling like too much of an afterthought.

Similarly, at least in the film version of the tale, Tom is a frustratingly underdeveloped character, especially given just how dependable Strathairn ("L.A. Confidential," "Nomadland") is with a range of character types. We see Tom have a gentle interaction with a young Kya, but the movie doesn't show us what really makes him tick.

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