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Living Downstream

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Abstract

This is a review of *Living Downstream* (2010).

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Living Downstream, an engaging documentary based on the work of acclaimed biologist, poet and social critic Sandra Steingraber, delivers a potent blend of word, image and sound. Director/producer Chanda Chevannes of The People's Picture Company, who describes her style as artistic and socially-driven, worked closely with Steingraber to create a taut balance of societal concern and personality. Significantly autobiographical, the film combines the unsettling observations of Steingraber's relentless intellect, her dedication as a reformer gripped by the hazards of degraded environments, and her philosophical reflections as a cancer survivor and mother.

Steingraber's research, rooted in Rachel Carson's analysis of the toxicity and far-reaching effects of pesticides, originally appeared as a book in 1997 which has been revised to coincide with this production. Since the publication of Carson's widely read *Silent Spring* in 1962, environmental awareness has prompted limitations in the use of toxic chemicals. However, even as many toil to ameliorate our habitat, the legacy effects of damage are compounded and still not fully understood. Steingraber's words convince us, freshly and deliberately, of the scale of our dilemma; Chevannes' skills focus our attention.

The film opens with aerial images of a powerful river, its strength enhanced by the rhythms of persuasive sound design. Steingraber adds a voice-over parable to conceptualize what we sense: dwellers by the river, shocked by the numbers of

drowning people caught in its current, tried valiantly to find resuscitating technologies, so valiantly that they failed to look upstream for causes. Thus Steingraber's task is set before us: as a professional science writer, she will forge useful links between environmental contamination and cancer. Her intention is to make the science clear enough for us to grasp this combination as a social justice and human rights concern.

Steingraber grew up in Pekin, a small town on the Illinois River near Peoria. As chemicals transformed industry and agriculture there in the years following the Second World War, cancer became common in many forms, in clusters and in her family. When, as an undergraduate, she was diagnosed with bladder cancer, she did ask, "Why me?" The complexity of the answers propels this documentary. In her book she delineates chemicals and general reluctance to speak openly about the dark consequences of their mingling. Those rich details facilitate Chevannes' design. The documentary approaches the depth of this subject matter by allowing Steingraber to assess her research and methods through the stages of her life and the complications of her disease. We are invited to monitor her engagement with the individuals and audiences she encounters and to enjoy the insights of experts who stretch and configure her concepts. Emblematic is a journey into the night waters of a swamp to capture frogs which Dr. Tyrone Hayes describes as sexually

malformed from the effects of a common herbicide at even lower levels than those allowed.

At the center of *Living Downstream* is the lone figure of a capable, articulate and charismatic woman. Her voice draws us close; her quest discloses global concerns. When she arrives in an unfamiliar city for an event, she learns about it by checking toxicity levels and jogging along its streets. Her slender figure becomes familiar, so too the slap of her feet on the pavement. Yet her subject is not an easy one. How can we judge her truth against the cascade of encouragement to douse our bodies and the space around us with potentially, or perhaps certainly, toxic elixirs? The success of the documentary hinges on how we judge her personal quest, her claims to expertise and the impact of her work, much of which is rendered in the careful and exquisite language of a poet. In an interview in Terrain.org (No. 20, Summer/Fall 2007) Steingraber describes her modus operandi: “Like Carson, I seek to seduce my readers through some pretty tough science by finding a language beautiful and compelling enough to honour the loveliness of the biological systems I write about.” She succeeds at this but there is more: “As an autobiographical writer and speaker, I simply tell my own story, lay out the scientific evidence, and then step back. This is also my belief as a Quaker. I believe in speaking truth to power.”

When the lights come up, our encounter can continue on the film's website (www.livingdownstream.com). One section, Walking Upstream, indicates the intended reach of the documentary with generous support materials for the general public as well as educational, health care and community groups. There are also frequent essays by Steingraber, science and public policy updates, and Chevannes' blog on outreach activities.

The inherently complicated chemical profile of our world has been intricately rearranged: some lives are lost while others are saved. Our veins course with chemicals; our jobs and the places we live are compromised. However we respond individually to *Living Downstream*, the lithe, determined, caring and able Dr. Sandra Steingraber chose her words deftly, words that Chanda Chevannes built into a satisfying structure of images and sound. This is a thoughtfully designed documentary that delights in its medium.