

MOVIES

# Review: ‘The Illinois Parables’ Soothes and Inflames Feelings About America

**The Illinois Parables** | Directed by Deborah Stratman | Documentary, History | 1h 0m

By A. O. SCOTT NOV. 16, 2016

“The Illinois Parables,” Deborah Stratman’s hourlong essay film, arrives at just the right moment. A meditation on history and landscape, it has the power both to soothe complicated feelings about America and to inflame them. Alongside pastoral images of natural beauty — Indian burial mounds; deciduous forests; fields of corn and soybeans seen from the air — is a chronicle of violence, dispossession and disaster, stretching from before the European settlement of the continent to the political turmoil of the 1960s.

Organized into 11 chapters (or “parables”), the film is partly an anthology of things that happened in Illinois, and of responses to those events. Passages from the writings of Jacques Marquette, Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson are interwoven with eyewitness accounts and archival audio. Some of the historical episodes may be familiar from textbooks: the expulsion of the Cherokee and other Indian tribes along the Trail of Tears in the 1830s; anti-Mormon violence in Nauvoo in the 1840s; the Manhattan Project at the University of Chicago during the Second World War. Others, like the flourishing of a utopian sect known as the Icarians and the catastrophic tornadoes of 1925, are less well remembered.

But Ms. Stratman’s oblique and moving collage argues that all of them are part of a collective memory that seems to reside not so much in human consciousness as

in the lore and topography of places. There is more to history, she suggests, than a simple record, even if that record — writings, monuments, scraps of film and tape — is all that physically remains. “The Illinois Parables” is not, strictly speaking, an educational film, but it conveys a unique and precious kind of knowledge.

*“The Illinois Parables” is not rated. Running time: 1 hour.*

**The Illinois Parables**

**Director** Deborah Stratman

**Writer** Deborah Stratman

**Stars** Raven Wolf C. Felton Jennings II, Joshua Frieman, Anna Toborg, Jose Oubrierie, Daniel Verdier

**Running Time** 1h 0m

**Genres** Documentary, History

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