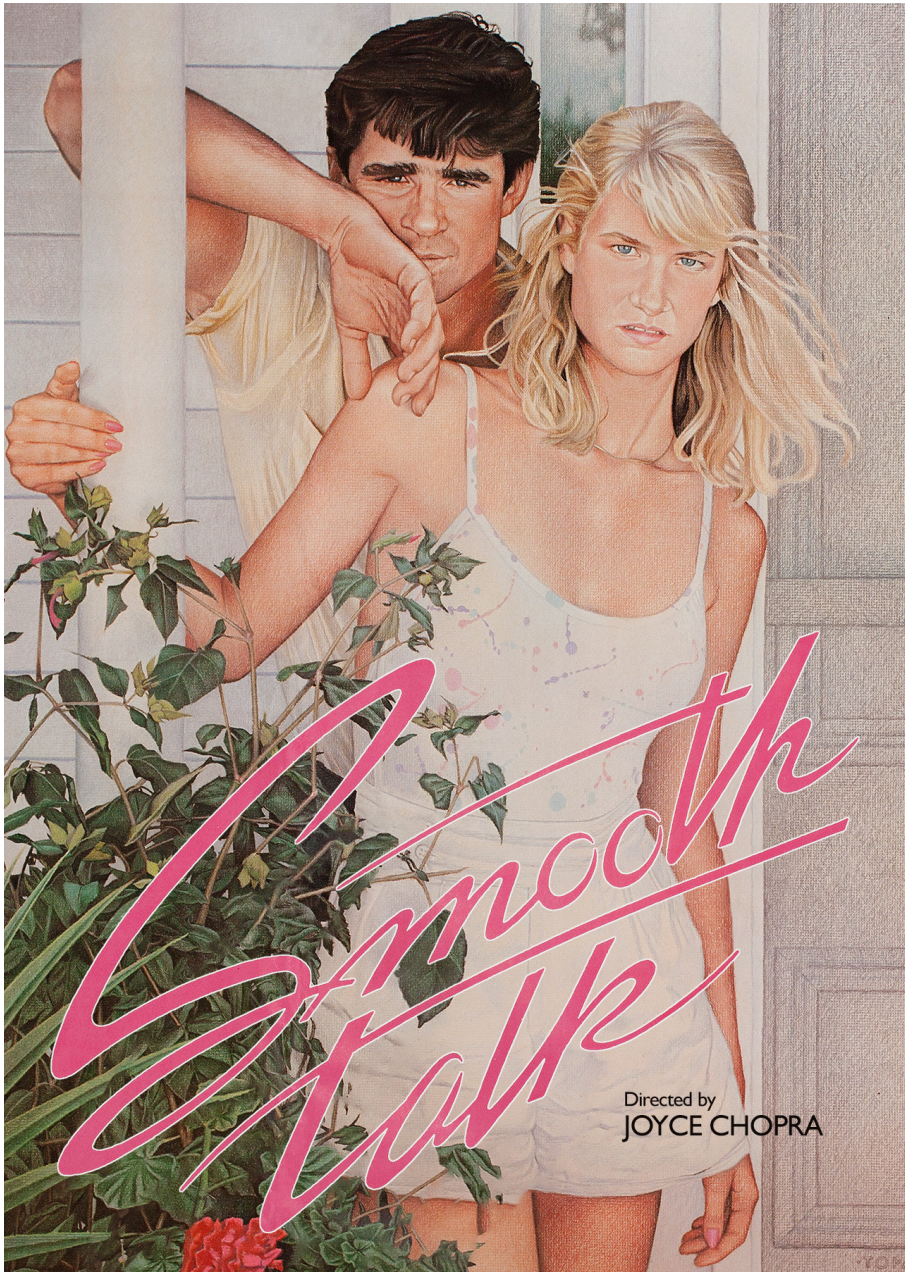


JANUS FILMS

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SMOOTH TALK

Winner, Grand Jury Prize,
Sundance Film Festival, 1986

Suspended between carefree youth and the harsh realities of the adult world, a teenage girl experiences an unsettling awakening in this haunting vision of innocence lost. Based on Joyce Carol Oates's celebrated short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and produced for PBS's *American Playhouse*, the narrative debut from director Joyce Chopra features a revelatory breakout performance from Laura Dern as Connie, the fifteen-year-old black sheep of her family whose summertime idyll of beach trips, mall hangouts, and innocent flirtations is shattered by an encounter with a mysterious stranger (a memorably menacing Treat Williams). Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, *Smooth Talk* captures the thrill and terror of adolescent sexual exploration as it transforms the ingredients of a standard coming-of-age portrait into something altogether more troubling and profound.

This new 4K restoration was undertaken by the
Criterion Collection.

United States • 1985 • 92 minutes • Color • Stereo • 1.85:1 aspect ratio • Screening format: DCP

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FROM “DEATH AND THE MAIDEN” TO *SMOOTH TALK*

By Joyce Carol Oates

Excerpted from “When Characters from the Page Are Made Flesh on the Screen: When Fiction Becomes Film” (in the New York Times, March 23, 1986), from The Lost Landscape by Joyce Carol Oates. Copyright © 2015 by The Ontario Review, Inc. Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers.

An early draft of my short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”—from which the current film *Smooth Talk* has been adapted by Joyce Chopra and Tom Cole—had the rather too explicit title “Death and the Maiden.” It was cast in a mode of fiction to which I am still partial—indeed, every third or fourth story of mine is probably in this mode; “realistic allegory,” it might be called. It is Hawthornian, romantic, shading into parable. Like the medieval German engraving from which my title was taken, the story was minutely detailed yet clearly an allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by way of her own vanity; she mistakes death for erotic romance of a particularly American/trashy sort.

In subsequent drafts, the story changed its tone, its focus, its language, its title. It became “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Written at a time when the author was intrigued by the music of Bob Dylan, particularly the hauntingly elegiac song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” it was dedicated to Bob Dylan. The charismatic mass murderer drops into the background and his innocent victim, a fifteen-year-old, moves into the foreground. She becomes the true protagonist of the tale, courting and being courted by her fate, a self-styled 1950s pop figure, alternately absurd and winning.

In adapting a narrative so spare and thematically foreshortened as “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” film director Joyce Chopra and screenwriter Tom Cole were required to do a good

deal of filling in, expanding, inventing. Connie’s story becomes lavishly, and lovingly, textured; she is not an allegorical figure so much as a “typical” teenage girl (if Laura Dern, spectacularly good-looking, can be so defined).

Joyce Chopra—who has done documentary films on contemporary teenage culture, and, yet more authoritatively, has an adolescent daughter of her own—creates in *Smooth Talk* a believable world for Connie to inhabit. Or worlds: as in the original story there is Connie-at-home, and there is Connie-with-her-friends. Two fifteen-year-old girls, two finely honed styles, two voices, sometimes but not often overlapping. It is one of the marvelous visual features of the film that we see Connie and her friends transform themselves, once they are safely free of parental observation. What freedom, what joy! The girls claim their true identities in the neighborhood shopping mall!

Smooth Talk is, in a way, as much Connie’s mother’s story as it is Connie’s; its center of gravity, its emotional nexus, is frequently with the mother, played by Mary Kay Place. (Though the mother’s sexual jealousy of her daughter is slighted in the film.) Connie’s ambiguous relationship with her affable, somewhat mysterious father (played by Levon Helm) is an excellent touch: I had thought, subsequent to the story’s publication, that I should have built up the father, suggesting, as subtly as I could, an attraction there paralleling the attraction Connie feels for her seducer, Arnold Friend.

A girl’s loss of virginity, bittersweet but not necessarily tragic. Not today. A girl’s coming of age that involves her succumbing to, but then rejecting, the “trashy dreams” of her pop teenage culture. “Where Are You Going, Where

Have You Been?” deliberately betrays itself as allegorical in its conclusion: Death and Death’s chariot (a funky, souped-up convertible) have come for the Maiden. Awakening is, in the story’s final lines, moving out into the sunlight, where Arnold Friend waits: “‘My sweet little blue-eyed girl,’ he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with (Connie’s) brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.”

I quite understand that this is an unfilmable conclusion, and “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is in fact an unfilmable short story. But Joyce Chopra’s *Smooth Talk* is an accomplished and sophisticated movie that attempts to do just that. •

CREDITS

Directed by Joyce Chopra

Produced by Martin Rosen

Written by Tom Cole

Based on “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates

Production design by David Wasco

Music direction by James Taylor

CAST

Treat Williams as Arnold Friend

Laura Dern as Connie

Mary Kay Place as Katherine

Margaret Welsh as Laura

Sara Inglis as Jill

Levon Helm as Harry

Elizabeth Berridge as June

TRIVIA

Although based on Joyce Carol Oates's 1966 short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," *Smooth Talk* was also partly inspired by director Joyce Chopra's own experience with raising a daughter as well as her previous film *Girls at 12* (1975), a documentary short that follows three girls' lives over the course of several months. Chopra replicated several moments from *Girls at 12* in the first half of *Smooth Talk*.

Though *Smooth Talk* was filmed in the Northern California cities of Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, Chopra sought to evoke her East Coast home of Kent, Connecticut, in the film's imagery. Photographer Joel Meyerowitz's 1979 book *Cape Light*, a collection of images from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, also served as inspiration. For example, the climactic scene between Connie and Arnold, with them standing on opposite sides of a screen door, was modeled after one of Meyerowitz's most haunting photos.

Chopra first discovered the story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" in an O. Henry Prize collection in which her husband, Tom Cole—the eventual screenwriter of *Smooth Talk*—also had a story published.

The casting of Connie proved particularly difficult, and two weeks before shooting was scheduled to start, an actress still had not been cast. Producer Martin Rosen was lamenting that fact on the phone to photographer Nancy Ellison when she said, "I see her. She's walking by the window on the beach. It's Bruce Dern's daughter."

Chopra knew Laura Dern was right for the role of Connie when she heard James Taylor's "Handy Man" playing on Dern's answering machine. Unknown to Dern, Taylor was the film's musical director, and Cole had already incorporated the song into two major scenes.

Initially, *Smooth Talk*'s ending was supposed to be far more in line with that of the short story: Connie goes off with Arnold Friend, her fate unknown. But Chopra and Cole, who grew attached to Connie during filming, eventually couldn't bear the thought of her being killed, so a new ending was written.

Treat Williams, who was Chopra's choice to play Arnold from the beginning, was only available for a week and had to leave before all the shots featuring him and Dern had been completed. Dern acted the climactic close-ups with Chopra standing in on the other side of the screen door.

