Oscar Micheaux: Siouxland's Filmmaker

When James Fennimore Cooper complained about the novel he was reading, his wife told him to put up or shut up, to write a better one himself. That tiff launched the Cooper’s career, a man considered America’s first novelist. His output was huge, even though Mark Twain claimed, “his English is a crime against the language.” That's an unsettling review.

Oscar Micheaux did the same thing—he just figured he could write a better novel and so he did. Micheaux, who should require no intro to Sioux City, was born in a Mississippi River town, son of a slave. When he was 17 he picked up and moved to Chicago, where a significant chunk of his first novel, The Conquest: the Story of a Negro Pioneer, is set.

But a whole section of that book is set in South Dakota, Not all that far from here, where Oscar Micheaux homesteaded—or tried to. If you have trouble thinking of African-American homesteaders, so did I—but there were, Oscar Micheaux, among ‘em. Micheaux put down roots just outside of Gregory, and started into farming.

Thousands of African-Americans tried their luck at "proving up" Great Plains homesteads. Most failed, just like most white families did, my own among 'em. It takes some wherewithal to weather the seasonal blows of Great Plains misfortunes.

Oscar Mischeaux’s novel feels autobiographical because it is. Oscar Devereaux Micheaux's hero is a man named Oscar Devereaux--that didn't take much twisting. Both Oscars homesteaded. Both Oscars wrote novels to make some cash. Both Oscars failed at first marriages.

Conquest: the Story of a Negro Pioneer likely wouldn't be remembered at all if it weren't for the oddity of a black man breaking Great Plains ground just west of the Missouri, a black man surrounded by white ethnics and displaced Yankees all trying their hand at making a life on what seemed to be free land (no one asked the Lakotas).

Conquest is not a great novel, but it offers a look at late-19th century African-American life, at Black culture of the time, a world that had its own issues, even bigotry and racism. The cursed villain of the tale is a snake-oil preacher-man, lionized by his meek disciples and an out-and-out sociopath daughter. Conquest often feels like melodrama.

But then, novels tell us who we are even if they don't try. If we believe the story, Micheaux wrote The Conquest to make some bucks. But the novel's gift is a glimpse of time and place no one else explored. Micheaux’s homesteading was unique. Thus, so is the tale.

Besides, Oscar Devereaux Micheaux himself is a wonder, an African-American homesteader, the son of slaves who made it out here on the open prairie, a South Dakota novelist who became a film-maker. How many of those do you know?

When a Hollywood director wanted to make Conquest into a movie, Micheaux agreed, then pulled out when the director didn't want him to have a say in how the story was told. In a snit, Micheaux quit the company, said he could do it better, and, as some know, set about starting his
own film company right here in Sioux City—that's right, in Sioux City, Iowa. Micheaux is partly ours too, or we are his.

The man didn’t stay here long because he had his eyes on bigger things. Soon enough, he left for Hollywood, where he was writing, directing, and producing "race films," named that way because they were intended to play to segregated movie audiences, to black folks who could get into only those theaters open to African-Americans.

If you’re wondering, most of those who know Oscar Micheaux would say he was far better at film than he was at novels. I dare say nobody will ever lug *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Homesteader* along to the beach. But I liked it, and I liked visiting the ground the man worked out east of Gregory. I liked thinking about him out there on the Plains, about him starting his own film company right here in Sioux City, Iowa, about the star with his name beneath it on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Oscar Micheaux was the son of slaves. He wrote novels and made movies for his people.

*The Conquest* may not the world’s best novel, but it's great, great story. Pick it up from the library. It’s our story, too.