

Hollywood Coverage

Date: 7/30/11

Title: Adventures With an American Emperor
Author: Judith Gaior
Genre: Period Drama / Coming of Age

Locale: San Francisco, New York
Pages: 150
Period: 1870s

Logline:

A young woman's family sends her to live in San Francisco, where she befriends the eccentric, self-proclaimed Emperor of the United States.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
Concept:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Story:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Characters:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Recommendation for Adaptation:

- Strongly Consider
- Consider
- Needs Improvement

Best Medium for Adaptation:

- Motion Picture
- Television Series
- Live Theater

Brief Summary:

Eleven-year-old Noelle Browning finds herself sent off to stay with her Aunt Maddie in San Francisco, while her father and stepmother enjoy a long European honeymoon. There, Noelle meets Joshua Norton, a real-life historical figure who calls himself America's Emperor, prints his own currency, issues his own imperial decrees, and convinces most of San Francisco to go along with it. With Norton beside her as a friend, Noelle experiences her first crush, her first taste of danger, and her first steps into the grownup world.

Synopsis:

NOELLE BROWNING has spent most of her eleven years confined to polite society's rules for small children. Sheltered, lonely, and constantly under the thumb of her governess, MISS DRUMMOND, she can only sit and sulk as her FATHER and STEPMOTHER ship her off to her AUNT MADDIE, while they enjoy a long honeymoon together in Europe.

A long journey by ship carries Noelle and Miss Drummond into the port of 19th-century San Francisco. There on the docks, Noelle sees an old man in a military

dress uniform, welcoming the new arrivals and introducing himself as “NORTON THE FIRST, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico.” Noelle greets him courteously before being hastily pulled away by Miss Drummond.

Shortly thereafter, Noelle meets ABIGAIL LORD, her Aunt Maddie’s housekeeper, who’s come to the dock to pick up the pair. Abigail’s friend, a big African-American driver named PETE TANNER, helps them all load up into his horse-drawn wagon, then drives them to Maddie’s home, letting Noelle ride the horse along the way.

Aunt Maddie Martin greets Noelle warmly and welcomes her into her home. As she settles in, Noelle sees a painting of her mother, Beth, on the wall. It’s the first time Noelle has ever seen what her mother, who died giving birth to her, looked like. Maddie, Beth’s sister, explains that Noelle’s father sent the painting to her after Beth passed away, finding the memories too painful to keep.

Noelle enjoys Maddie’s easygoing hospitality, though she’s surprised to find herself asked to help in the kitchen almost immediately. For her part, Miss Drummond makes a quick exit from the premises the following morning, hopping the next boat out of town before Noelle can even wake up for a goodbye.

As she starts adjusting to her new home’s routine, Noelle learns that she’s free to take a walk around the block, something they had never let her do back at home. She strolls down the street to the livery, where she has a friendly conversation with Pete the driver. He compliments her riding skills and invites her to ride his horse, Maybelline, again.

After the ride, Noelle is approached by a gang of SIX BOYS, all about her age. The biggest of the six, an abrasive newsboy named BILL BARKER, harasses her, both for her ginger hair and for staying with “Mad Maddie.” As he starts getting rough - stealing her ribbon and threatening to cut her hair with a knife - Norton comes along and intervenes, commanding Bill to stop and threatening to throw him into the “royal dungeon.” Bill runs off with his friends, but not before calling out, “Loony” over his shoulder. Noelle stands there stunned, unsure of what to say. Norton promises to replace her ribbon, then strides off with his walking stick, drawing salutes from passing CITIZENS.

Later, Maddie invites along Noelle to the tea shop. Several CUSTOMERS greet Maddie, but one WOMAN recoils in fear, calling out Maddie for practicing “black arts.” Noelle reacts with confusion, but holds her tongue.

Afterwards, Maddie takes Noelle to her workplace. The back room looks like any other office, albeit with more varied and exotic books on the shelves, but the front room is a comfortable, relaxing parlor. There, Maddie invites Noelle to ask her

questions. The two of them discuss their family, particularly Noelle's departed mother. Maddie teaches Noelle about what she calls "heart signals," clues given off to what people are thinking and feeling, explaining that reading and interpreting the signals is part of her work.

Outside, Emperor Norton speeds by on a velocipede – an old-timey bicycle – and they both go running after him in alarm. As the brake hasn't yet been invented, Norton crashes the vehicle on the sidewalk, luckily with only a scrape to show for it. The Emperor suggests that someone invent the brake, for the safety of his walking citizens. He then asks Noelle if she'd care to take a turn on the vehicle, but Noelle turns him down flat. Norton smiles, telling her, "It takes courage to speak truth to your sovereign."

The next evening, Maddie hosts a party. Noelle dresses in her best finery as instructed, but none of the older guests pay attention to her. She overhears a loud man, MR. SMITHSON, ranting about "Emperor" Norton's eccentricities: he prints his own currency, "taxes" large businesses, and eats on the house wherever he goes. Smithson says that Norton ought to be locked up for lunacy. Angry, Noelle finds Smithson's top hat and stomps on it, then sneaks off before she's found out.

Later, Noelle asks Abigail how Norton came to be Emperor. Abigail explains that Norton used to be a merchant, but went broke in hard times. Afterwards, he had an announcement published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, declaring that, at the request of "a large majority of the citizens of the United States," he would thenceforth be Emperor Norton I. He followed that up with more proclamations, and people began to take notice, accepting his currency and offering him tribute in the form of free meals, stylish canes, and honored seats at the theater. Abigail further explains that, while President Grant of course remains the legal leader of the country, Norton is the Emperor in the hearts of many San Franciscans. The conversation briefly turns to Bill. Abigail mentions that Bill is a better person than Noelle might give him credit for, but Noelle can't understand why.

Immediately afterwards, Norton himself comes walking up the street, greeting Noelle and giving her a new ribbon to replace the one stolen earlier by Bill. The two of them have a friendly conversation, after which Norton departs to attend to affairs of state. To cap off the day, Abigail takes Noelle to the stable and gives her a riding lesson.

A short while later, Noelle runs up against Bill Barker on the street again. He taunts Noelle, saying that his UNCLE has arrested Norton for vagrancy. Noelle runs and tells Abigail and Maddie, who soon rally Norton's other friends and head for the police station, leaving Noelle behind with a FRIEND. Noelle can only sit and wait until Abigail and Maddie return, and luckily, they return in triumph; the chief of

police was a reasonable man, they explain, and quickly saw that locking up Norton – which could have meant committing him to an asylum – would have been much more trouble than it was worth. They go on to explain that four of Norton’s other friends have seen him safely home. The liberated Norton soon comes by to visit Noelle, introducing her to two of his companions: dogs named BUMMER and LAZARUS.

Before she can spend much time with them, Noelle has to run off to an appointment with Maddie, who teaches her a bit about her meditative therapy techniques and invites her to read from the books in the office. Noelle chooses one written by Maddie’s East Indian mentor, a man named AAHBA. Oddly enough, as she reads his words, she seems to imagine his likeness perfectly, an image Maddie later confirms.

Maddie continues to teach Noelle about her work, assigning her to rewrite Aahba’s book in her own words. As she works on the assignment, Noelle spends time with Bummer and Lazarus. When a runaway carriage barrels down the street past them, the two dogs spring into action, chasing down the horses and bringing them to a safe, controlled stop. Norton arrives on the scene, as does the CARRIAGE DRIVER, who thanks them all and offers them a free ride. Norton takes Noelle to meet another of his friends, SANGUINETTI.

Sanguinetti is one of Norton’s fellow eccentrics. A timid recluse, he lacks Norton’s charisma, and as a result, he lives in a driftwood shack on the beach and often has to scrounge through garbage for food. Noelle notices a number of beautiful sculptures in the shack, all carved from driftwood, and asks if perhaps they could buy them from Sanguinetti to help him out. Norton replies that the sculptures were gifts made by a friend of Sanguinetti’s – Bill Barker.

Late in the evening, Noelle finds a crumpled form on their doorstep. It’s Bill, who has been severely beaten by his FATHER. The women of the house take Bill inside and attend to his injuries, then allow him to stay there while he heals. Norton also stops by periodically, being concerned with the welfare of each of his subjects. Maddie explains to Noelle that Bill’s father fought in the Civil War, never managed to re-adjust after what he saw, and takes out his pain on his son.

As Bill slowly recovers, and as Noelle attends to him, the two of them find themselves growing closer together. Bill makes wooden sculptures for Noelle to thank her for her help and also begins helping out around Maddie’s house and office to repay his debt to her.

One night, they receive the news that Sanguinetti has been taken to the asylum, following a fight he had with two men trying to take his possessions. In the asylum, Sanguinetti loses the last of his sanity, refuses to eat for fear of being poisoned, and

dies three days later. Noelle, Bill, Norton, Abigail, and Maddie all attend his brief, quiet funeral, then return home to share their memories of him. Bill tells the story of how he and Sanguinetti became friends, lamenting that he owes Sanguinetti more than he can ever repay.

Shortly thereafter, a BANK OFFICIAL comes knocking, surprising them all with the news that Sanguinetti was actually incredibly wealthy and has left everything to Bill. The money is to be kept in the bank, per Sanguinetti's will, until Bill comes of age, or until Maddie or Norton decide otherwise.

Before the news can sink in, it travels to Bill's father, who comes banging on the door, demanding to take home his son. Abigail grabs a gun off the wall and scares him off, but all of them know that he'll be waiting for another chance.

With Norton's help, they devise a plan to sneak Bill onto a nearby ship and sail him up to Sacramento for the time being. All of them slip out of the house in the middle of the night, with Bill disguised in Abigail's clothes. Unfortunately, Bill's father sees through their plan and gathers a MOB to intercept them at the docks. A brawl ensues, during which several friendly SAILORS come to their aid, Bill and Norton disappear from sight, and Noelle trips up one of the thugs with a loose mooring line. Bill's father and his thugs retreat, but Bill and Norton remain missing.

Noelle, Abigail, and Maddie return to the house, still without a sign from either of the men. Finally, Norton arrives, exhausted, battered, and without Bill. He explains that, since Bill's father was onto the plan to ship him up to Sacramento, he smuggled Bill – through cold and dangerous waters – onto another ship, convincing its captain to take Bill all the way to London.

Noelle laments that she may never see Bill again, but then remembers that her father and stepmother are in Europe and should be in London around the time Bill's ship gets there. With Maddie and Abigail's help, she gets a telegram sent out, arranging for her family to meet with Bill and bring him back to New York with them.

The days roll on, and eventually, it comes time for Noelle to leave San Francisco and return to New York. Abigail accompanies her on the trip, and when she arrives, she reunites with Bill.

Five years later, Noelle and Bill, now both sixteen, enjoy a family Christmas party together. Bill surprises Noelle with an engagement ring, which she joyfully accepts with her father and stepmother's blessing. The two of them grow up together, marry, and have four CHILDREN.

Back in San Francisco, Norton walks the streets of an ever-growing city, always planning his next decree, when one day, he collapses on the sidewalk, passing away almost instantly as a crowd gathers and weeps for him. His remains come to rest in a special memorial, dedicated to “Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico.” At the memorial’s dedication ceremony, Noelle and Bill bring their children, reuniting with a grayer Abigail and Maddie, and all pay their respects together.

Comments/Suggestions:

Adventures With an American Emperor is a heartfelt and original story, and would play well as a TV family movie. In particular, the book makes good use of its source material. Joshua Norton is a compelling historical figure, a rare sort of “benevolent crazy” who inspired goodwill wherever he went, like a real-life Don Quixote. The story wisely makes him a supporting character, giving the audience a point-of-view character we can more easily relate to, in order to make Norton someone we can gradually get to know.

That said, a film version of *American Emperor* might give Noelle a slightly more active role in some of the proceedings. Specifically, there’s an episode in the middle of the story where Norton is arrested, threatened with committal, and eventually released, but all of it happens entirely off-camera. While the book never cuts away from Noelle, at least not until the epilogue, a film might follow Norton at that point, showing us his plight first hand. It could even take a page from *It’s A Wonderful Life*, and have Noelle take a role as one of his advocates, helping to convince the police to let him go.

Speaking of episodes, the book includes several peripheral characters and side stories which an adaptation might either weave more closely into the main story or cut for time. Specifically, the early pages introduce a friendly Irish woman, Molly O’Neil, who chats with Noelle for a page or two, leaves the story for a while, appears once more later on in an incidental role, and then disappears for good. A later scene has Noelle visit a phony séance, and while it’s amusingly written, the scene doesn’t do much to further the plot, other than to illustrate that Maddie’s work is different from the séancers’ con job.

Related to that, a prominent subplot involves Noelle learning how to perform Maddie’s meditative therapy techniques – and there’s even a hint of the supernatural there, when Noelle perfectly pictures a man she’s never seen before – but there isn’t really a final payoff for that. If Noelle somehow used what she’d learned from Maddy to help save Bill from his father at the end – maybe by reading

his father's intentions at a crucial moment – that would cap the subplot off nicely, at least in movie terms.

Likewise, Noelle spends several scenes learning to ride (first at a canter, then at a trot), but that element disappears about halfway through the book. Perhaps in the film, she could initially stay behind when the others leave to take Bill to the dock, see the gang of thugs following them from behind, and then grab a horse to ride ahead and warn her friends; that, again, would provide a nice payoff to the earlier setup.

All that aside, however, the book paints a very evocative portrait of old-time San Francisco and fills it with colorful characters. A particularly striking moment comes when Norton, out walking with Noelle, takes in the view of the city and remarks, “A perfect blue and gold California day, my girl. We live in paradise.” Those two qualities, combined with a little-known but fascinating piece of history, could easily give *American Emperor* a well-received, successful run on TV and DVD.

Why TV and not necessarily the big screen? That has to do more with marketing demographics and audience expectations. Specifically, audiences expect big-screen movies to show higher production values, which necessitates bigger budgets – and bigger-budget films need bigger audiences to make their money back. While *American Emperor* has great potential to resonate with its *target* audience, that audience isn't necessarily broad enough to recoup the costs on a Hollywood-sized production. Specifically, period pieces tend to be niche films (with occasional exceptions, the obvious one being *Titanic*), and the main protagonist is an 11-year-old girl, which tends to keep away young male viewers.

That said, it's not out of the question for some studios to take a *chance* on giving niche films theatrical runs, and if a studio were willing to take that chance, the character of Norton could draw a great performance out of a great actor, maybe even putting the film up for an award or two. Of course, that could happen just as easily on a cable channel, but awards for theatrical films tend to draw a bit more prestige.

In any case, *Adventures With an American Emperor* is a well-written story with charm to spare, and could play very well on film in one venue or another.