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### Emotional Rescue

#### Men fight pornography and polar geography in two Canadian movies

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**LAST WEEK**, after Denys Arcand won a well-deserved Oscar for *The Barbarian Invasions*, the film's distributors were wondering if now, finally, people might take the trouble to see the film in English Canada and the United States. Despite glowing reviews, this wonderful tragicomedy about terminal cancer has done only modest business outside Quebec and Europe. Perhaps people are afraid of seeing a death trip with subtitles (although that hasn't stopped millions of viewers from submitting to *The Passion of the Christ*). Perhaps they fear *Barbarians* is too arty, too intellectual . . . or just too French. Well, here are two broadly entertaining movies from English Canada with none of those barriers.

They're both stories of men who get tripped up by their own egos and find themselves powerless in the company of cooler, more sensible women. But they're as different as black and white -- literally. *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* is a romantic comedy about urban blacks, the tale of a porn addict who grapples with impotence as he woos a new girlfriend. *The Snow Walker* is a '50s tragedy of wilderness survival, about a stupid white man stuck in the Arctic with an Inuit maiden who quietly saves his hide.

**Love, Sex & Eating the Bones** arrives like a warm breeze in the chilly landscape of English Canadian film. Instead of playing perversely against formula, someone has finally made a movie that deals with erotic obsession without being irredeemably dark -- a romantic comedy that's romantic, comic and sexy. With his first feature, 34-year-old Toronto filmmaker Sudz Sutherland tackles a loaded subject while avoiding genre clichés. Although his characters are black, the movie is not *about* being black. Yet Sutherland realizes he has set a cultural precedent of sorts. "This is the first time in the history of cinema," he says, "that you'll see a black man with a sexual dysfunction."

Michael Joseph (Hill Harper), an aspiring photographer who works as a security guard, dreams of true love but fulfills his fantasies with porn. At a laundromat, he meets Jasmine LeJeune (Marlyne N. Afflack), an advertising executive who's been celibate for a year. They click with an instant chemistry. But Jasmine's cousin, a struggling actress named Peaches (Kai Soremekun), gets a job at Pornucopia, the adult video store where Michael is a regular customer. She warns Jasmine about his dirty little secret, and after Michael finds he's unable to perform without watching porn, Jasmine loses her patience. As Michael fights to win her back, he learns to shift his male gaze from pornography to photography, finding his true vocation as an artist.

It's all rather snugly contrived. And the story, which Sutherland developed with his wife, producer Jennifer Holness, follows a predictable arc. But there's a freshness and originality in the details. Harper, a Harvard law graduate who's acted in two Spike Lee films ( *Get on the Bus* ,*He Got Game* ), makes an engaging male lead, undercutting the unsavoury aspects of his character with an amiable wit. Afflack conveys the classic ambivalence of an attractive, intelligent career woman in a world of unworthy men who wonders if the wildly imperfect one she loves is worth the effort. Serving as comic counterpoint are Michael's fellow security guards -- his skirt-chasing Jamaican cousin (Mark Taylor) and a good-natured joker played by the Barenaked Ladies' Ed Robertson.

While Sutherland says he's never been a porn addict, he has worked as a security guard. And there's a specificity to his script that smacks of experience, although he sometimes shatters credibility for the sake of a good scene. (It's hard to believe that anyone's idea of a first date would be a campfire on a Toronto beach, or -- in another campfire sequence -- that he would toss a plastic pile of video cassettes into the flames.) But with a vivid, almost tropical palette, *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* is eminently watchable. And it's been a hit at festivals from Los Angeles to Toronto -- where it won the award for best Canadian feature debut.

Whether Sutherland can overcome Canadians' chronic failure to support their own pictures at the box office remains to be seen. Last week he was handing out coupons offering a \$6 rebate on tickets. If that suggests that his juicy little Canadian movie (costing \$2.5 million) is worth less than the competition, Sutherland says he doesn't mind. With his unorthodox tactic, he generated more publicity than if he'd invested the money on a smattering of local TV ads.