

# 'Beans' Review: A Mohawk Teen Navigates Personal and Political Unrest in an Affecting, Unusual Coming-of-Ager

Docmaker Tracey Deer brings vivid personal experience to her first fiction feature, set against the tumultuous Oka Crisis land dispute in 1990.

By **Guy Lodge** ▾



Courtesy of Sebastien Raymond

**Production:** (Canada) A Mongrel Media (in Canada) release of a Wazabi Films, Mongrel Media presentation of an Emafilms production. (World sales: Wazabi Films, Montreal.) Producer: Anne-Marie G elinas. Executive producers: Meredith Vuchnich, Justine Whyte.

**Crew:** Director: Tracey Deer. Screenplay: Deer, Meredith Vuchnich. Camera: Marie Davignon. Editor: Sophie Farkas-Bolla. Music: Mario Sevigny.

**With:** Kiawentiio, Rainbow Dickerson, Violah Beauvais, Paulina Alexis, D'Pharaoh McKay Woon-A-Tai, Joel Montgrand.

Anyone who has attended any public events in Canada in recent years will likely be familiar with the practice of land acknowledgement: a solemn formal statement, recited before sports matches, film festival screenings or simple school assemblies, that historically contextualizes the very land on which the crowd is gathered, and admits a debt to the Indigenous people who first owned it.

Depending on the delivery, it can sound like a formality, said and heard so routinely that it no longer prompts a pause for thought. That is, until you consider that it's only been 30 years since the Oka Crisis, a violent 78-day land dispute between the Mohawk community and the predominantly white government of Oka, Quebec — effectively pitting, with painful symbolic precision, a traditional burial ground against an expanding golf course. The wound is still recent and raw. Drawing on her own childhood experience of the 1990 events, Mohawk writer-director [Tracey Deer's](#) powerful, impassioned film "[Beans](#)" picks at an unformed scab.

Deer has previously made a number of documentaries centered on First Nations communities, the most high-profile of which, 2005's coming-of-age study "Mohawk Girls," inspired a fictional comedy series of the same name. Her first narrative feature, "Beans" bridges fiction and nonfiction storytelling in bold, resourceful ways, inserting archival news footage to convey the harsher realities of the Oka Crisis in ways that more elaborate and expensive reenactments might not necessarily equal. Deer's dramatic efforts, meanwhile, are more intimately concentrated on a young, lively alter ego: 12-year-old Tekahentakwa, nicknamed Beans, through whose alert, inquisitive eyes we see a world of cultural conflict.

Played with a winning blend of resilience and naive vulnerability by delightful mononymous newcomer Kiawentiio, Beans isn't merely a blandly wide-eyed protagonist to whom history happens. Rather, we watch her actively wrestling with the ugly events unfolding before her, and join her quest for understanding. She lives on the Kahnawake Mohawk reserve with her younger sister and her parents, who are both independent-minded and politically conscious in clashing ways: While her father (Joel Montgrand) is militantly protective of the Mohawk identity, her pragmatic mother (Rainbow Dickerson, excellent) is more willing to compromise and integrate if it means getting ahead.

The burden of such compromise is illustrated at the film's outset, as Beans attends an interview at the elite, predominantly white private school her mother wants her to attend — only for the principal to stumble, repeatedly and dismissively, over her given Mohawk name. Her nickname, affectionate in a familial context, takes on a more demeaning purpose here. Her father is less keen on the school altogether; once the initially peaceful Oka protest begins in earnest, he quickly takes to the front lines, blockading a crucially symbolic bridge that connects the Kahnawake reserve to whiter boroughs of Montreal.

Her mother, meanwhile, supports the cause, but with a third baby on the way, she's justly wary of how such actions may escalate. In one vivid, juddering sequence, she takes her daughters on an expedition to visit a protestor camp, armed with signs and high spirits, only for their innocent activism to be met with gunfire. Buoyed by the wit and conviction of lived experience, Deer's and Meredith Vuchnich's script is nuanced and perceptive on the challenges of raising a family and rightly raising hell at the same time.

Amid such extraordinary turmoil, Beans has her own nascent adolescent identity to figure out, pulled this way and that by the diverging sensibilities of not only her parents, but other chosen role models. In particular, she attaches herself to April (Paulina Alexis), a rebellious, swaggering older girl who responds to Beans' devotion with a big-sister kind of tough love that all too often tips over into cruel, hurtful hazing. Beans has more tenacity and stoutness of heart than she probably realizes: It's alarming to see her hardening slightly as the film progresses.

Yet April's actions pale beside the racist abuse Beans and her family receive from white locals as the crisis intensifies, hostility she doesn't yet know how to handle. At one point, she snaps into righteous fury against the oppressor; at another, she lashes out in a prejudiced attack of her own. The rhetoric of revolution is simpler than the draining, disorienting process of living through one: "Beans" is a thoughtful, stirring reflection by someone who survived it all, quietly demanding acknowledgement not just of her land, but of her life.