

CHOCOLAT

US, 2000, Lasse Halstrom



On Ash Wednesday, 1959, in the tranquil French village of Lansquenet, Count Paul, the mayor, supervises his villagers coming to Church. He checks the homily preached by the newly-appointed and very young parish priest. The sedate village values its virtue of 'tranquillity'.

At the same time, a mysterious north wind blows. It signals the arrival of a mysterious woman, Vianne, and her daughter, Anouk, who have come to open a chocolaterie. The mayor, who has devoted his Lent to fasting and the promotion of moral rectitude, confronts Vianne and tries to turn the village against her.

Vianne provides wonderful chocolates, tempting the villagers who cautiously come to her shop and find their lives changed. Amongst these are Armande, who leases the shop to Vianne. Armande is a strong-minded woman whose straight-laced daughter forbids her son to see his grandmother. Another is Josephine, often battered by her husband, Serge, who takes refuge in the shop and works with Vianne.

A band of river people arrive at Lansquenet. They are resented by the village and the mayor instigates a campaign against them as moral outcasts. However, Vianne and her daughter welcome them, especially their leader, Roux, who is attracted to Vianne. Serge, taking the mayor's condemnation too literally, sets fire to the boats after a celebration. Josephine and Anouk escape the fire.

Vianne throws a party for Armande's 70th birthday - Armande returns home where she quietly dies. As Easter Sunday approaches, the mayor is desperate and goes to the shop to destroy the chocolates. Instead he wallows in them. Shamefaced, he realises and admits his narrow outlook on life. The priest preaches on the love of Jesus. The villagers are transformed into a more tolerant community and Vianne decides to stay there. Roux returns.

Chocolat is not meant to be taken as a realistic drama. A number of critics, judging it along these criteria, have dismissed it as implausible and sentimental. However, the movie touched popular audiences. The American Academy nominated the movie for a Best Picture Oscar, the luminous Juliet Binoche for Best Actress and Judi Dench for Best Supporting Actress. The rest of the cast includes Alfred Molina as the Count, Johnny Depp as the gypsy, Roux, Lena Olin as Josephine and Carrie Anne Moss as the repressed daughter of Judi Dench.

The movie was directed by Swede Lasse Hallstrom. His movies are marked by a strong sense of humanity and compassion: *My Life as a Dog*, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Cider House Rules*, *The Shipping News*.

Whether British novelist Joanne Harris would see her story as implausible and sentimental is uncertain. However, the movie can be enjoyed - and seen as a challenge to believers.

