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You and Me and West Texas: Review of Hell or High Water

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You and Me and West Texas: Review of Hell or High Water

Abstract

"*Hell or High Water* isn't about bank robberies. It's about hard-pressed brothers, bad dudes who love each other and will do just about anything to right their own family's ship."

Posting about a 2017 Academy Awards Best Picture nominee from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/you-and-me-and-west-texas-review-of-hell-or-high-water/>

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Comments

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You and Me and West Texas: Review of Hell or High Water

 allthings.org/you-and-me-and-west-texas-review-of-hell-or-high-water/

February 13, 2017

James Calvin Schaap

Leading up to the Academy Awards on February 26, we will be featuring reviews on some of the movies that were nominated in the “Best Picture” category. Return to iAt throughout this week to read more reviews. And, if you have seen the movies, give us your own movie review by leaving a comment.

When I left the theater, I stopped to eat at Golden Corral and sat down with a plate full of buffet food. Just like that, a guy in a cowboy came by and sat at the table beside me. I had to pinch myself to remember I wasn’t still in west Texas.

John Gardner, the writer, used to say that what we do when we tell stories is create fictional dreams. When those dreams are perfectly seamless and we don’t wake up easily, they’re great dreams, great stories. Taylor Sheridan, we might say, “wrote his-self a winner” in *Hell or High Water* because sure as anything, I was taken, even though the only time I’ve been to west Texas was in that movie. But I think I was there.

Hell or High Water is two stories really. One of them features a pair of financially-strapped brothers, Toby (Chris Pine), and Tanner (Ben Foster). Tanner’s an ex-con, Toby not; but together they determine the only way to keep the bank from grabbing their deceased mother’s ranch is to pay off the bills with the bank’s own money. Like the James Gang of old, they rob banks, little tiny ones in tiny west Texas towns. So long as no one gets hurt, bank robbery is great sport; but you know somebody’s going to take a bullet, and eventually someone does.

But *Hell or High Water* isn’t about bank robberies. It’s about hard-pressed brothers, bad dudes who love each other and will do just about anything to right their own family’s ship. *Hell or High Water* succeeds because the story is about us and not just them, if that makes sense.

A second story features two Texas Rangers determined to grab whoever it is doing the heists. The older of the two, Marcus (Jeff Bridges) is just a short ride from retirement. His less-seasoned sidekick Alberto (Gil Birmingham), who takes any number of ethnic slurs (he’s half Comanche and half Mexican), is clearly a student of the master, Marcus.

An hour into the movie, I told myself the plot was masterfully done because it created two stories and four complex human characters throughout and placed them on two roads with an inevitable end. The four of them were eventually going to cross—that much we knew even though no one in the theater had a clue as to what would go down.

That’s a plot that sparkles even in the dry heat of west Texas.

But it’s not plot that drives this film. It’s character. It’s us.

It may well be impossible for any of us to escape the imminence of Donald Trump these days. He not only takes the oxygen out of the room—he takes it out of the entire nation. I couldn’t help see him hover over the long-drawn fields of dry grass because Toby and Tanner walk right out of J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*. They don’t dig coal like Vance’s kin, they run cattle, or should. But the brokenness, the horrifying dysfunction of their family (once, long ago, Tanner murdered their abusive old man) is right from the pages of J. D. Vance, a memoir that sold millions to people who wanted to understand who on earth could love Donald Trump. And why Trump is here.

The real villains in *Hell or High Water* are not Toby and Tanner. Their motives are right out of Robin Hood. The real evil is, first of all, poverty that creates bank robbers who then became murderers. It’s the grinding circle of poverty you can’t help but hear in that screeching windmill on the brothers’ ranch. Toby will knock off banks just to keep his boys from suffering as he did.

And Tanner, the ex-con? Even though he'll kill to meet his ends—men die in this movie—he'll kill because he loves his brother. The real villains are elsewhere.

Alberto and Marcus sit out on a store front on a dusty street in a hapless west Texas cow town awaiting a bank robbery that never happens. They talk, and when they do, Alberto reminds Marcus that a couple of centuries earlier his people, the Comanches, ran wild and free over all that land out there. What he says is a rejoinder to Marcus's endless racial slurs.

But then Alberto looks across the street at the little bank and tells the old ranger that Marcus's people—the poor, white folk of this woebegone world—are now being chased off themselves, just as the Comanches were long ago, and he points out across the street at the bank, the new evil.

Hell or High Water is not without its politics. Poverty grinds away at our humanity, and its perpetrators, Alberto would have us believe, are the very, very rich. The desperation of poverty rides shotgun here, beginning to end. These are Trump people.

While the dramatic climax of *Hell or High Water* is accomplished with a deer rifle, it's the emotional climax that follows the violence that takes your breath away. Marcus, now retired, finds Toby, who's free by engineering his freedom and his legacy. Before he leaves home to find him, Marcus packs heat because the old ranger knows what Toby got away with and understands desperation.

When he finds him, Toby's got a rifle, as well he should, guilty as he is.

And there they stand. Could well be, right then, another OK Corral. But when Toby's ex-wife drives up in a dusty SUV and his boys tumble out, Marcus knows in an instant that this sad story and its wealth of shed blood is really all about family. Poverty, Toby tells him—"it's a sickness is what it is. Passes from generation to generation and it affects everyone you know." And then, with certainty, holding that rifle, "Not my boys."

When men talk in *Hell or High Water*, there's often a good deal of silence. "The things we do for our kids, huh?" Marcus says finally, leaving, as if those words were only a cliché.

Gorgeously, at that final moment, Taylor Sheridan, the writer, fashions a brotherhood from an old ranger and a young bank robber.

Hell or High Water is rarity, one of those low-budget films that's a treasure. But I'm guessing few will see it because it's not about spectacle at all, but about us. And, Lord a'mighty, what we want to watch on the screen is most often not about us.