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Hell or High Water: Tattered and Familiar

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Hell or High Water: Tattered and Familiar

Abstract

"Turns out the hell or high water of the title is less about lines in the sand than it is about commitments."

Posting about the movie *Hell or High Water* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/hell-or-high-water-tattered-and-familiar/>

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Comments

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Hell or High Water: Tattered and Familiar

 [inallthings.org /hell-or-high-water-tattered-and-familiar/](https://allthings.org/hell-or-high-water-tattered-and-familiar/)

Bob De Smith

Note: If you want to get to know this film, begin with Jim Schaap's [earlier and excellent piece](#) on this film. Then maybe see it—there be spoilers below.

Hell or High Water (dir. David Mackenzie) is like a frayed and tattered shirt, particularly something with a Western cut and maybe those little metal (I wrote “shiny” here, but it didn’t fit) snaps for buttons. Jeff Bridges might as well have been Tommy Lee Jones from *No Country for Old Men* or even *The Fugitive*, and if Bridges’s personal dialect calls back the actor’s Rooster Cogburn, he’s also a rundown Roy Rogers with Tonto as a sidekick. This Texas Ranger pair is in pursuit of another—serial bank robbers—whom we learn are brothers Tanner (Ben Foster) and Tyler (Chris Pyne). They are the bad brother and the good brother, though that’s very relative here: the older, Tanner, is an ex-con who killed their abusive father (not the crime he did time for) while the younger, dutiful son cared for their mother in her last days and wants now to provide for his estranged family. So he’s the brother who concocts a scheme to rob from the banks that are robbing them of their family ranch. Have you heard this one before? They are a brotherly Bonnie and Clyde; they are the hardscrabble settlers holding out against big business or evil city slickers in every B-movie Western. And West Texas is familiar, too, standing in as it does for boom and bust America, which we see mostly from a series of getaway vehicles: bleak, blurry landscapes punctuated by signs advertising predatory loans and with empty, dirt packed streets (every bank in this film has an alleyway—a backdoor out of town). The brothers can pull off their fairly simple and bold robberies because there’s no one on the streets or in the banks. When that changes, well, everything does.

I hope there is no real Texas Midlands Bank because, boy, does this small chain come off badly in the film: incompetent, land-grabbing, robbers themselves. No one feels too bad about their losses, and the elegant scheme to pay off a loan with the bank’s own money has a satisfying sense of justice to it. Justice? Well, like any good Western, even one set in the present, this is the theme of the film. The movie transcends all that familiarity with its reap-the-whirlwind logic tempered by a deep love between the brothers. The climax of the film comes when the two are parting ways on their horses—I mean vehicles—and need to say those three words that brothers find so hard to say. The scene is perfect (This from a brother whose only crimes with his bro were a few backroad drag races—sorry, dad). And while the plot is intricate and well paced, especially after the brothers part to their separate destinies (will the farm be saved? Will the Ranger get his man?), it is punctuated with revenge, sacrifice, friendship, and duty. On the topic of revenge, graphic headshots are exchanged, but that’s not what stuns us; rather it’s the old Ranger’s complex brokenness after the deed is done, conveyed by Bridges with an understated hand gesture. An eye for an eye hurts. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a film in which violence is so poignantly shown for what it is. *Shane*, anyone?

The film is full of interesting moments and great lines. Asked to describe the dark color of the robbers, the first victim offers, “Their souls or their clothes?” That’s what the film is about. Later, an aging waitress (she’d kick me out the joint just for calling her that) wrangles the two Rangers through the menu like they are being served up. The film also has some fun with conceal and carry—I know I’m going to be real respectful if I ever need cash from a Texas bank. Better yet is the conversation between the now outlaw father and his son (you’ve seen these visits in the movies before). After telling his son to choose the path opposite his and his own brother’s, the father asks his clearly underage son why he’s not drinking an offered beer. The answer says the son has a chance.

The film offers a great deal to ponder on the front porch, where a decent amount of time is spent in the film—by both the brothers and the Rangers. So it’s fitting that in the aftermath of the action, the Ranger, recently retired, shows up at the ranch, now in a state of repair with pumpjacks nodding in approval in the background—fortunes have changed. The scene begins in another cliché: a man shows up at the ranch and is met with a loaded gun. But the 1/2

Ranger has a need to know and the brother a need to tell, and when the brother's (still estranged) family shows up, diffusing the situation, the new pair agree to meet later in town to keep talking. They speak of burdens and of peace, good things to work out on a front porch. Turns out the hell or high water of the title is less about lines in the sand than it is about commitments. By the way, the arrival and the parting in this scene is reminiscent of the classic Western *Shane*, and perhaps truer to the spirit of that film than is the recent release [Logan](#), which calls up the old film consciously.

The film earns its R rating. Don't show it to your sons and daughters unless you're ready to talk about the destructive potential of a high-powered rifle, the ubiquity of a certain word, the desire for casual sex, or why some folks start to drink as soon as the sun comes up. There are lessons to be found there, but they take some maturity. And a little time on the porch.