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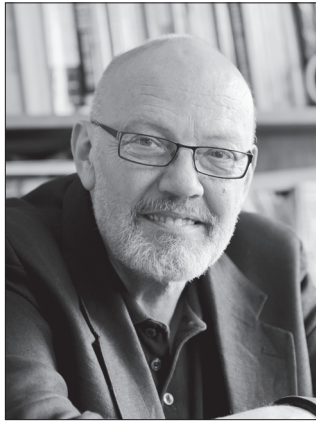
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The Revenant—A Brutal Masterpiece: Review Essay



by James Schaap

The Revenant is a film-making masterpiece that's both beautiful and just plain awful. Its sheer violence is matched only by the frightful deprivation Hugh Glass endures when he drags his bloody, broken self out of untrammelled wilderness, a place and a state of mind where the word *Disney* has absolutely no meaning. Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *The Revenant* is not for the faint of heart. Brace yourself. Its magnificence is as compelling as it is repellent.

Like Shakespeare, Iñárritu is working with materials long ago established, in this case one of the great sagas of the American West, the story of Hugh Glass, a badly mauled trapper left to die on his own by companions who understand their lives are in jeopardy if they wait to bury him. Instead, in danger, they leave.

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It's pure rags-to-riches Americana, in a way, because Hugh Glass does not die, nor will he, miles and miles from civilization. It's revenge that he breathes, revenge that brings him life. The story goes that Hugh Glass pulled himself up and away from death itself even though he had no bootstraps at all. Slowly, with pain that's as unendurable to imagine as it is to witness, he slogs back through American wilderness, then returns to the fort in search of Fitzgerald, the man who left him behind.

In origin, the myth belongs to South Dakota. Legend has it that Glass was mauled by a she-bear somewhere near Lemmon but eventually fought the elements, hand over hand, all the way back to Ft. Kiowa, near Chamberlain, a 200-mile trek. Iñárritu chooses to set *The Revenant* in the Canadian Rockies, in winter, which makes the suffering even more profound—and without a doubt more profoundly beautiful than the legendary sameness of the Great Plains.

That's the material Iñárritu is bending and shaping in *The Revenant*, a myth many have repeated, retold, rewritten, and redone.

The power of the story—of the myth itself—is that at its climax it refuses to deliver what it promises all along. Call it what you will—retribution, spite, anger, hate—what gives Hugh Glass life is not simply a refusal to die but a gorging thirst for revenge that is never satisfied in its own terms. When Glass finds Fitzgerald, he legendarily doesn't kill him.

That unforgettable end is precisely what keeps the story alive. Had Hugh Glass simply put a gun to Fitzgerald's temple, no one would have been surprised and the story wouldn't have been mythol-

ogized. That he doesn't is the shock that lifts the story into the level of what's unimaginable.

Frederick Manfred took a shot himself at the Hugh Glass saga and wrote *Lord Grizzly*, his rendition of the tale. It was published in 1954 and nominated for a National Book Award. Of all the Manfred novels, *Lord Grizzly* has probably outsold the rest combined. It's one of five he called his "Buckskin Man Tales," stories of the Northern Plains where he lived, the place he loved.

Fred Manfred's real name was Feike Feikema. He was born somewhere around Doon, Iowa. He loved his father but worshiped his mother, Alice Van Engen, a deeply religious woman, born and reared in the Christian Reformed Church, who made sure her precocious oldest son got a good Christian education. Manfred spent four great years, he used to tell me, at Western Christian High, then went to college at Calvin, graduating in 1934. He was immensely proud of that education.

But it is fair to say that his people, his tribe, "received him not," a rejection that often pained him. Once upon a time, Manfred told me that he couldn't understand why it was that the men and women he grew up with had such faint toleration for his stories, when the most famous novel he'd ever written was really all about forgiveness, the central thrust of orthodox Christianity. That's what the story is about, he told me.

Manfred's problems with the community of his youth and childhood is a fascinating topic, but what's interesting about that statement in the shadow of *The Revenant* is his assessment of the Hugh Glass story—it's about forgiveness.

Íñárritu thinks so too, but he changes motivations, even hypes the revenge by giving Glass a son, Hawk, by way of a Native wife, a son who is with him because Glass's dearly beloved wife was murdered in a massacre. Íñárritu plays with the myth the way Shakespeare played with the story of Hamlet, King of Denmark, twisting and bending it in ways that he sees fit. That's legal, of course. It's even part of the way myth grows and lives.

Before the trek that made Glass famous, Fitzgerald murders Glass's beloved son, Hawk, in this new telling, which makes Glass's motivation in *The Revenant* something greater than revenge. Hawk's murder reshapes the cause into a thirst

for pure justice in the American frontier, where there are no courts of law. If the score that needs to be settled is a matter of justice, then forgiveness is really of little importance, a point that makes Manfred's assessment of the shape of the Hugh Glass story irrelevant.

The Revenant is not without spiritual power, however. This isn't just secular yarn-spinning. What Íñárritu does thematically is give over the right of revenge to God. It's a principle oft stated by the spirit of Hawk's wife, who is a frequent companion. Revenge belongs to God, Glass is told, and eventually he bows to that truth. In that way, Íñárritu doesn't step back from the inherent spirituality of the story.

But its shape is different, and that's a bit sad. Whether or not Manfred is right about the story's heart isn't the point. We're all free to alter the shape of the Hugh Glass story because it belongs to American mythology. But it's fair to point out that the reshaping which Íñárritu has given us in this simply incredible film does make the story more Hollywood and, if Manfred was right, less, well, divine.

There are distractions in this film, a film that will create untold dissertations in film schools, I'm sure. Íñárritu risks melodrama now and then. It's as if he can't stop himself. The horror and deprivation is so painfully acute that he would like to think the man has no limits. At some moments near the end, the story gets more than a little heavy-handed, even preposterous. The horror of the story doesn't need embellishment. There are moments I rolled my eyes.

Another distraction is the shock an audience can't help but feel about how the movie was shot. Íñárritu was committed to natural light; therefore, frequently the crew could shoot only when the light was there—and *there*, in this case, is wilderness areas so remote you wonder if any other human beings have ever been even close. Reportedly, crew members quit in droves when they were forced to live in those conditions. When you watch this film, you can't help stopping yourself to shake your head at how it was accomplished.

And then there is the myth itself. One of the reasons Shakespeare's audience found his *Hamlet* so interesting, or so say the scholars, is that they already

knew the story; what interested them was how the playwright would tell it. I really loved watching this telling of the Hugh Glass story unfold, loved watching this new telling play the myth itself.

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What's entirely Inárritu's addition here is the whole Native American story. It's understandable why Leonardo DeCaprio, who is Hugh Glass, would say what he did at the Golden Globes, sharing the prizes awarded to the film with Native America, then crusading with them in their own

political sagas: "It is time that we recognize your history, and that we protect your indigenous lands from corporate interests and people that [are] out there to exploit them," he said. "It is time that we heard your voice and protected this planet for future generations."

To my knowledge it seems only right, only just, to give Native America a voice in this legend of the American West. Inárritu's new telling does just that, especially by way of Native spirituality. *The Revenant* is a greatly religious movie.

My wife didn't go with, wouldn't, and I don't blame her. *The Revenant* spares nothing, soft-pedals nothing, refuses to restrain itself. It is a magnificent film that requires guts simply to watch. It has already taken home a number of big awards, and there will be more, I'm sure.

But *The Revenant* is not easy to watch. It's brutal and unceasing; it revels in a beauty that's somehow painful to visualize. It's a brutal masterpiece, an amazing rendition of a grueling, bloody story we've enjoyed hearing for more than a century, but a story that's not at all easy to see.