

Wind River [15] 2017|USA/Canada/UK|107 min

UK release date **8th September 2017**

Director **Taylor Sheridan**

Screenplay **Taylor Sheridan**

Cinematographer **Ben Richardson**

Cast **Elisabeth Olsen** (Jane Banner); **Jeremy Renner** (Cory Lambert); **Kelsey Asbille** (Natalie Hanson); **Gil Birmingham** (Martin Hanson); **Graham Green** (Ben); **Martin Sensmeier** (Chip Hanson); **Jon Bernthal** (Matt); **James Jordan** (Pete)

Just the snow. And the silence. That’s all.” With these agonised words in the movie’s dying minutes, a key character summarises its two ambient ideas: a deathly whiteout in the piercing cold and an oppressive quiet, far from the city’s bustle where help in a crisis might conceivably be at hand. Screenwriter Taylor Sheridan – who scripted Denis Villeneuve’s Sicario and David Mackenzie’s Hell or High Water – now makes his hyphenate debut as a writer-director with this gripping movie, muscular in its confidence and storytelling punch, the kind you could call a western forensic thriller.

The setting is the Wind River Indian reservation, a vast, wintry area of land in central Wyoming. Here, the overstretched police force have been called to attend a crime scene: a young Native American woman, Natalie (Kelsey Asbille) has been found dead in the snow, with a head wound and evidence of sexual assault. An FBI agent is called in from Las Vegas: this is Jane Banner, played by Elizabeth Olsen. She is inexperienced and physically untested but courageous, mentally tough and willing to learn.

Agent Banner is way out of her depth. She needs help, particularly in talking to the Native American community, and the Comanche actor Gil Birmingham is excellent as Natalie’s grieving father, Martin. And so Jane teams up with the guy who found the body in the first place: a professional game tracker called Cory Lambert, who lost his own daughter some years ago in brutal circumstances. He is used to tackling predators, and offers his own off-the-record services. He is played with maturity and presence by Jeremy Renner, in perhaps his best performance so far.

The snow is the paradox; it is their friend and their enemy. Tellingly, the medical examiner says that he can't register the cause of death as homicide but rather as the snowy cold itself – the catastrophic effect subzero temperatures have on the lungs. This means that a full criminal investigation can't be mobilised, but it does force them into unofficial and very effective inquiries. Snow is what causes tracks to be visible: an eerie trace of what happened and when, and Cory has an almost Sherlockian grasp of what different tracks mean. But the snow impedes their progress, and more snow effaces the tracks themselves.

When the complete explanation has to be produced, Sheridan does it by means of a single, unselfconsciously clear flashback, which lets us understand everything without the accumulation of indirect revelations that another movie might have considered essential. But it cancels any possible anticlimax that could follow this scene with a brutally violent sequence in the present tense.

Sheridan is emerging as a master of the Mexican standoff, the shootout, the stomach-turning crime scene, the procedural office politics, but he's also adept at tuning into the vulnerability and strength of the women and men called in to uphold the law. *Wind River* is a smart and very satisfying movie.

After: **Peter Bradshaw**, *The Guardian*. 7 September 17

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