

Sweet Country [15] 2017 | Australia | 113 min

UK release date **9th March 2018**

Director **Warwick Thornton**

Screenplay **Steven McGregor, David Tranter**

Cinematographer **Warwick Thornton, Dylan River**

Cast **Hamilton Morris** (Sam); **Sam Neill** (Fred Smith); **Ewen Leslie** (Harry March); **Anni Finsterer** (Nell); **Bryan Brown** (Sgt Fletcher); **Matt Day** (Judge Taylor)

Sweet Country is Old Testament cinema, with an almost biblical starkness in its cruelty and mysterious beauty. It's a place where white men are traumatised by the heat, hardship and memories of serving the motherland in the first world war, and where Indigenous Australians are treated with casual racism as virtual plantation field-hands, in a colonial situation nearer slavery than Jim Crow. These are the "blackfellas" whose serfdom to the "whitefellas" creates a society of paranoia and violence.

The Indigenous actor Hamilton Morris plays Sam, who works as a farmhand at the cattle station run by Fred Smith (Sam Neill), a Christian pioneer who makes a point of treating the blackfellas on his property with respect. But Smith makes a fatal mistake in allowing, against his better judgement, a boorish and drunken newcomer Harry March (Ewen Leslie) to borrow Sam, along with his wife and niece, to do some work at his own station, a day's ride away, and this drunken and self-pitying March believes that raping Indigenous womenfolk is his prerogative.

Later, March will effectively borrow another blackfella from another farmstead, and his sheer arrogance results in murderous violence. Sam goes on the run into the outback, disappearing into the thrumming, brain-frazzling heat, and a posse of tribally loyal white men is gathered to go after him, led by a local police sergeant, played with sharp-faced anger by the veteran Australian actor Bryan Brown.

This is fiercely powerful storytelling, simple and muscular in one way, but also conveying nuance and sophistication in its depiction of character; the plot meanders like a creek-bed, taking odd turns and looping back on itself, interspersed with unsettling flashbacks to violent episodes of the past and almost subliminal flashforward-premonitions and glimpses of the violence which is yet to come.

But it never loses its grip on the audience, and its culminating outdoor courtroom scenes – summary justice being arrived at to the accompanying noise of sawing and hammering as the scaffold is being erected – never feel like an enervation or an anti-climax the way they might in another movie. This trial scene feels like the exegesis or elaboration of a communal bad dream, an attempt to impose order on the hallucinatory chaos and delirium that is being kept under control, and in fact it is a kind of justice which is executed with a fair attempt at rational decency.

Sweet Country achieves an eerie illusion-effect in showing a rope bisecting the screen; at one moment this means the creation of the hanging platform and the noose, and at another moment the raising of a church, by Smith: the hoisting of the wooden frame of its outer wall. This is the erection of power by the white man: the building of norms, and social structure: the law and the church. Slowly, but surely, the Anglo-Saxon order is being put in place in the Northern Territory, at a terrible cost for the people who were there first, and indeed for the people doing the displacing themselves. Sweet Country is about a brutal and tragic violence.

After: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, 16 Sep 17

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