

## Dark River [15] 2017|UK|90 min

UK release date **23<sup>rd</sup> February 2018**

Director **Clio Barnard**

Screenplay **Clio Barnard, Lila Rawlings**

Cinematographer **Adriano Goldman**

Cast **Ruth Wilson** (Alice Bell); **Mark Stanley** (Joe Bell); **Shane Attwooll** (Tower); **Dean Andrews** (Matty); **Mike Noble** (Rowan); **Esmé Creed-Miles** (Young Alice); **Aiden McCullough** (Young Joe); **Joe Dempsie** (David); **Sean Bean** (Richard Bell)

Ruth Wilson plays a trauma survivor haunted by her own past. She's Alice, an itinerant sheep-shearer who returns to her childhood home, a farm in Yorkshire, following the death of her father. He had promised the farm to her, so she has come to claim the tenancy.

The farm, a mess of rusted equipment, barbed wire and peeling paint, is a blot both on the scenery and on Alice's mental landscape. All that is left when she arrives is her brother Joe (Mark Stanley), a few sheep, an infestation of rats and her excruciating memories of her father's abuse. Alice is followed around the farmstead by manifestations not only of her deceased father (a sombre, mostly silent Sean Bean) but also of herself (Esmé Creed-Miles) and Joe (Aiden McCullough) as they were when she was last at home. Her absence for the past 15 years, and her planned improvements to the farm to secure her claim, provoke Joe's vicious rage. This psychological powder keg will explode in violence, an act of quasi-revenge against Alice's memory of her father and her brother's complicity in his crimes.

Despite a sadly muddled finale, this is a superior drama, led by Wilson's steely and focused performance and cleanly, concisely directed by Barnard. Though Alice is bitterly reserved, her face contorts with turmoil when she learns that her father suffered towards the end. She and her brother communicate mostly via barked and broken dialogue.

Alice's memories of her abuse are edited into the narrative. These cuts – tricking the eye into believing that her assailant is alive again, and close at

hand – evoke the fear of a child not safe in her bed at night, listening out for a step on the landing. It's a fear that Alice has never shaken off. Occasionally, Alice and young Alice are literally side by side, with Alice's desires literally blocked by a vision of her past, unprotected self. It's enough for Alice to be burdened with these reminders, unable to escape the trauma: the flashbacks spare the audience the details of her assault.

The gulf between Alice and Joe is amplified by the fact that he fears the future, not the past. His reluctance to accept Alice's innovations at the farm is motivated by a desire not to disturb the status quo. Killing the rats in the barn might put the fledgling owls in the eaves at risk; cutting the grass will endanger the rare wildflowers and minuscule insects in the meadow.

Alice's return betokens death from the moment she discovers that her teenage boyfriend is now the local 'knackerman', an animal euthaniser. After the casual misogyny of a neighbouring farmer at a sheep auction rattles Alice, her isolation as a lone woman in both her profession and her community is sharply accentuated. The earth is steeped in blood, and Alice wields a pair of old-fashioned manual sheep shears as she seeks her vengeance.

**After: Pamela Hutchinson, Sight and Sound, 2 February 2018**

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