



FILM: **WIND RIVER**

FDG RATING: 3.7

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Taylor Sheridan: *Director*
Jeremy Renner: *Actor, Cory Lambert*
Elizabeth Olsen: *Actress, Jane Banner*

DATE: September 17, 2017

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **WIND RIVER**

Wind River was one of the most powerful and unsettling films we discussed in 2017. The opening scene is bleak and disturbing, as we feel the freezing cold of a winter's night on a vast, desolate, Indian reservation in Wyoming, where a young native American woman is fearfully, frantically, running barefoot in the snow over a long stretch of open land, eerily lit by the full moon. The scenery and cinematography is spectacular with ice capped mountains in the distance, but the ominous weight of whatever has happened and the difficulty of living in such harsh conditions is palpable.

Jeremy Renner's compelling role as Cory Lambert, a federal wildlife officer who hunts predatory animals on the Reservation, is on par with his intensely memorable performance in Hurt Locker. He finds the frozen body of an 18-year-old woman in the snow and when the autopsy reveals that she suffered a head injury and was raped, the FBI is required to investigate, since homicide on an Indian reservation is considered a federal crime. Ill-equipped, (dressed in a light windbreaker and looking like the wind could blow her over) rookie FBI agent Jane Banner (Elizabeth Olsen) arrives from her regular post in Las Vegas to team up with Lambert who will be her guide. He has intimate knowledge of the reservation and a keen sense for tracking predatory wild animals, skills he will use to hunt the human predators in this crime. Cory calmly informs Jane that she'll be dead within five minutes if she goes up the mountain dressed like that. Evidently, the seemingly miscast petite Olsen as an FBI agent, serves a thematic purpose. "See what they send us," one resident says mournfully, shaking his head.

We learn that Cory's ex-wife is a Native American with family on the reservation which is why he relates so easily to the natives on the reservation. The dead young woman, Natalie, was the best friend of their teenage daughter, who died three years earlier under similar mysterious circumstances, and this is the deep emotional motivation driving him to hunt the predators just as hunts down wolves that prey on sheep on the reservation.

The film reaches a violent climax and flashbacks vividly reveal the violent attack on Natalie that underscores the prejudice, dehumanizing marginalization, and injustice done to Native Americans. In fact, we rarely see films about life on American Indian reservations. And what we learn at the end of the film is alarming: While missing person statistics are compiled for every other demographic, none exist for Native American women. The director had hoped to include an exact number but attorneys who spent three months trying to get that statistic, said it doesn't exist. Violence, and sexual assaults on young girls on the reservations are not reported because there is so much fear and distrust of law enforcement.

A couple resident film critics thought the Tarantino tinged violence was gratuitous. Another thought the note at the end about the lack of statistics was an attempt to give the film social significance that it otherwise didn't have. But the film earned high marks from everyone else. Raw emotions, good pace, spectacular cinematography, sparse landscape as well as dialogue, and even some sprinkles of humor made the film compelling. Shocking and sad was another comment. The characters were intriguing and provided insight into native American culture. Two reviewers said it was the best film so far in 2017.

A flurry of 4s and a 4.5 overpowered a couple 2s and a 3 resulting in a windfall score of 3.7 on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best). (Scores from 4 virtual participants included.)

Footnote:

The Wind River reservation first made news in 2012 when it was the subject of a New York Times expose. The size of Rhode Island and Delaware combined, Wind River is Wyoming's only American Indian reservation. For the 14,000 residents, life expectancy is 49 years, unemployment rate is higher than 80%, and the high school dropout rate is 40% higher than the rest of Wyoming. Violence against American Indian women is endemic on the Wind River reservation and beyond. According to a Department of Justice study, 84% of Native American and Alaskan Native women have experienced violence of some sort; 56% have experienced sexual violence. Wind River translates these statistics into a visual, visceral experience.

Wind River director, Sheridan, said that until 2013, "sexual assault of a Native woman by a non-Native couldn't be prosecuted because it was a state crime on federal land. At the same time, if you were a Native accused of assaulting a non-Native, you could be prosecuted twice, once by the federal government and once by the tribal police. It was a double standard of medieval proportions."

Codes of masculine behavior, both positive and negative, are a major theme in Wind River. Natalie's grieving father, Martin. Is masculine stoicism and swagger until his proud veneer crumbles. Also important, according Sheridan: "Grief, how you overcome a tragedy—accepting it, making whatever peace you can with it, without ever knowing what really happened. I wanted to watch someone go through that struggle. The social issues that Native Americans face are the same as in other parts of the country—domestic abuse, poverty, drug addiction, alcoholism—but on the reservation, no one is watching or listening. Most chillingly, rape—by Native and non-Native men—has become a rite of passage for adolescent girls, some of whom simply disappear."



See you at the movies!

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