

HBO's *True Detective*: Gruesome doings and deep-going pessimism

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To put it mildly, there is nothing uplifting about HBO's *True Detective*. Written by Nic Pizzolatto and starring Woody Harrelson and Matthew McConaughey, the show can be visually stunning at times, and is certainly well-acted by all involved. There is definite chemistry between Harrelson and McConaughey, and it is interesting to watch them work together. Their timing is close to impeccable, their intensities playing well off of each other. However, the story depicted in its first season is one of moral degradation and unhappiness on a scale seldom seen on the small screen.

Initially, the story shifts between 1995 and the present, when former policemen Rust Cohle (McConaughey) and Martin Hart (Harrelson) are questioned by detectives about a murder case they supposedly closed in the earlier decade. We witness the truth stretched thinner and thinner by the two men, their actions on the screen deviating with increasing fervor from the words they speak under interrogation.

The case they work on, in the 90s and again when they reunite in the present day after the questioning, involves serial child abuse and murder, and predictably involves players high up in Louisiana politics, incest, and—naturally—pagan/voodoo rituals. All the worst easy Louisiana stereotypes are at play here. The camera wallows in the decrepitude of the sinking state—old houses, once grand or always humble, are either barren or crammed full of junk, and all are filthy. The people who live within are hopeless, broken, victims of or on the verge of violence. The landscape itself threatens to reclaim anything man has dared to carve out.

References are made to hurricanes Rita and Katrina and the lasting devastation of those storms and the neglect that followed, but these seem off-hand, and serve as plot devices (the loss of birth records in destroyed hospitals, for example) to justify extra-legal measures being taken to get information. Torture is treated casually, presented in a

way that is becoming all-too-familiar, as just another skill set that comes in handy.

The two pursue what leads they get, past and present, with no regard as to the legality or ethical implications of their actions. No one, no matter how fragile, is exempted from their probing. When the unbalanced are sent over the edge, the two walk away calmly—on to the next lead, leaving someone else to clean up, if that's even possible. Their dealings with the criminal element are brutal, physical violence often being the first resort. As with so many police procedurals now, any violent or illegal action on the part of law enforcement is justifiable to catch the bad guys. *True Detective* presents some rather extreme and gruesome scenes, all beautifully shot.

Along the way, McConaughey's Cohle, who carries his own wounds, mumbles half-profound phrases about the darkness and futility of life. He insists that time is a flat thing, and we all come back to live exactly the same lives exactly the same way—utterings which amplify the horrors encountered by removing all hope of progress or change. Early on, Hart suggests Cohle not talk at all, and while the exchange is tensely funny, one ends up wishing Cohle would oblige.

While it could be argued that, given the subject matter—police doings in an impoverished and historically unequal state—it is not surprising that the people encountered would be in some way or another distressed or that things could get rough, it does beggar belief to see every single person taking all the wrong actions at every single turn. False “uplift” would be no truer to life, but *True Detective* sees only the dark side of human existence. There is not a character involved who does not betray someone—often grievously—or kill someone, with the possible exception of one of the interrogating detectives. In the entire season, there is not a healthy relationship on display, and no sense is given that any such thing could develop. Every interaction, from the

most casual to the most intimate, is riven with anguish or the promise thereof.

Some of the killers are caught; some are not. The subject of those who are not is not well handled, as it is casually dropped. In the end, the message is “well, what are you gonna do?” It is one thing to not have everything neatly tied up—and things seldom are. However, to sigh and give up any attempt at bringing those at the top of such a horrible conspiracy to any form of justice because they’re just too high up, politically speaking, sends a clear message: don’t even try it, it’ll never work.

All this leaves the very last scene between Cohle and Hart out of sync with the rest of the show. Perhaps meant to redeem some of the unrelenting bleakness of the foregoing episodes, the final discussion between the two and the small burst of hope coming from Cohle falls flat, seeming tagged on.

There have been allegations that Pizzolatto plagiarized some of Cohle’s dark and dreary speeches from the works of horror writer Thomas Ligotti. Indeed, a comparison does reveal a strong similarity in phrasing, and debate has raged in writerly communities as to what constitutes plagiarism and homage, and where that line can be drawn. What is not gone into is why Ligotti? Likewise, why Alan Moore, to whom Pizzolatto has pointed as an influence? Why Robert W. Chambers’ supernatural and decadent novel *The King in Yellow*, referenced throughout the series? In each of these works, what Pizzolatto takes, translates, or just plain lifts is a deep sense of pessimism.

As with Quentin Tarantino, Pizzolatto’s “homage” —albeit more stylistically refined—is to the very worst elements of human experience and potential. According to the outlook of Ligotti et al., even striving for some sense of justice will never get one anywhere— there’s a huge “reset” button that will undo any attempt at progress. The entire world is a Sisyphean cheat—with the rock ever rolling back to the bottom of the mountain. This is a hell of a place from which to take inspiration.



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