

Mudbound and life in post-World War II Mississippi: Dreaming “in brown”

... and a word on James Franco’s *The Disaster Artist*

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Mudbound, directed by Dee Rees, screenplay by Rees and Virgil Williams, based on the novel by Hillary Jordan; *The Disaster Artist*, directed by James Franco, screenplay by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber

Mudbound

Dee Rees’s *Mudbound*, a Netflix original movie, centers on two families, one black and one white, in rural Mississippi immediately following World War II. Based on the 2008 novel of the same title by Hillary Jordan, the film attempts to make sense of the tormented social and personal relationships that existed in the Jim Crow Deep South during this period.

In the movie’s prologue, two brothers dig a grave for their father during a torrential downpour. To their horror, they discover the remains of a slave’s grave. The film then jumps back to 1939 when Laura (Carey Mulligan), a cultured woman from Memphis Tennessee, is courted by and marries Henry McAllan (Jason Clarke), one of the two brothers in the opening sequence.

From Laura’s point of view, the union is primarily based on concerns about her “advancing” age—31 places her on the cusp of spinsterhood—rather than on love. Eventually, Henry brings Laura and their two daughters to his muddy Mississippi Delta cotton farm (“Henry’s version of paradise”), where Hap Jackson (Rob Morgan) is a black tenant.

Also a preacher, Hap sermonizes about the futility of the poor tenant farmer’s dream of ever owning land:

“What good is a deed?” asks Hap rhetorically. “My grandfathers and great uncles, grandmothers and great aunts, father and mother, broke, tilled, thawed, planted, plucked, raised, burned, broke again. Worked this land all their life, this land that would never be theirs. ... All their deeds undone. Yet this man, this law, this place, say you need a deed. ... One morning...we’re going to break the chains around our feet.”

The other McAllan brother, the charming and handsome Jamie (Garrett Hedlund), and Laura have a more enlightened view of race relations than do Henry and the McAllan patriarch, Pappy (Jonathan Banks), a Ku Klux Klan supporter.

Pearl Harbor changes everything: Jamie goes off to become a bomber pilot and Hap’s son, Ronsel (Jason Mitchell), ends up a sergeant fighting under General George S. Patton. While in Germany, Ronsel falls in love with a white German woman. A little too symmetrically, Jamie’s life is saved by a black pilot.

At the end of the war, both decorated veterans return to Mississippi—Jamie suffers from post traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism, while Ronsel experiences a newfound sense of pride and confidence. The two war heroes develop a friendship, a bulwark against the community’s backwardness and prejudice that helps them adjust to their depressing lives (Ronsel: “Over there [in Europe], I was a liberator, here I’m just another nigger pushing a plow”).

Laura is also frustrated. She thinks of the farm as “mud and crust and knees and hair, marching in boot shaped patches across the floor ... I dream in brown.” In fact, one of the farm’s principal “luxury” items is a rudimentary shower built by Jamie that consists of an enclosure and a hanging bucket.

Some of the white men in town, including Pappy, are unnerved by Ronsel and his “uppity” attitude. When they see him riding in Jamie’s truck, the KKK goes on the warpath. Matters only get worse when they find a photo of Ronsel’s German girlfriend and a child—Ronsel’s—left behind in the truck. In a shocking scene, Pappy and some “white sheets” string up Ronsel and torture Jamie until he is forced to make the decision as to whether Ronsel should be blinded, have his tongue cut out or be castrated. But a slave’s grave may well be Pappy’s final destination.

Director Rees, to her credit, has created a work that largely eschews the current obsession with racist politics. Although a bit schematic and formulaic, *Mudbound* has its heart in the right place. Moreover, it shows that the white McAllans are only marginally less poor than the black Jacksons, that the social differentiation between the two families is paper thin. The friendship between Jamie and Ronsel is moving and further cuts through structural racism.

Mudbound is set in an era when the Jim Crow system remained in place, but had been undermined by powerful economic and social forces. Between 1940 and 1950, 1.5 million African Americans left the South. They were escaping racism, but economic processes, including mechanization, had transformed agriculture, and industrial jobs in the North were drawing them. Racist violence in states like Mississippi endured as a means of maintaining extreme labor exploitation and dividing poor African Americans and whites, as well as shoring up the one-party monopoly of the Democratic Party.

The intuitions of the novelist and filmmaker are important and valuable. However, without a somewhat broader view of the history of social relations in America, it is difficult to go far beyond the surface. This may help account for the fact that *Mudbound* tends to deal in abstract and unchanging human types, either “good” or “evil.”

On the positive side, *Mudbound* portrays the acute misery of both the black and white populations. This must be fed by present-day conditions, where the impoverishment of every section of the working class is a palpable fact of life. One feels that the filmmakers were correctly looking at the past through the prism of the present.

The Disaster Artist

James Franco is a very busy man. *The Disaster Artist* is the latest in a cluster of movies he has either directed or starred in, or both. His new effort is a comedy based on the true story of the 2003 production of *The Room*, the self-financed vanity project of a foolish individual, Polish-born Tommy Wiseau, and a film so terrible it has managed to achieve cult status.

Franco, a talented performer, plays Tommy, the disastrously eccentric director of a work that in 2003 various critics described as “an unforgettable collision of demented ambition and utter incompetence,” a “hodgepodge of hideousness,” and a “movie that prompts most of its viewers to ask for their money back.”

However, unfortunately, *The Disaster Artist* is also something of a vanity project for Franco, and a bit too much of an in-joke.

There are some amusing moments, the funniest being an audition in which Tommy “performs” the iconic scene from Tennessee Williams’ 1947 play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by writhing and screaming “Stella!” over nearly every inch of the stage and its surrounding walls.

Franco’s film would have more happily satisfied its ambitions if it had been distilled into a 20-minute skit. In fact, viewing these two trailers may prove the point.



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