

The Dry: Murders in a small Australian town

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The Dry is Australian director Robert Connolly's ninth feature film. Based on Jane Harper's 2016 book of the same title, the plot centres on an investigation by Australian Federal Police (AFP) detective Aaron Falk, played by Eric Bana, of a suspected murder-suicide pact in an economically struggling rural town. The two-hour movie, which was released in Australian cinemas earlier this year, is now available on streaming services.

With local filmmakers struggling to keep their heads above water, there was, no doubt, pressure to bolster and publicise one of the declining number of Australian films produced and released each year.

Variety's Richard Kuipers praised the movie, ambiguously insisting that "the contradictory nature of Aussies embracing romantic visions of their vast continent, while holding deep fears of its dry interior, is never far from the surface." Influential local critic, David Stratton for the *Australian* newspaper, declared it to be Connolly's "best work yet" and gave it four out of five stars.

While Connolly's latest movie is a sincere effort, it is largely, however, a missed artistic opportunity, skating across the surface and individualising the social tragedy it examines.

The Dry opens with Falk returning, after a 20-year absence, to his hometown of Kiewarra (a fictional amalgam of rural Australian towns) to attend the funeral of Luke, a childhood friend. It appears that Luke murdered his wife and young son, before ending his own life. Falk doesn't want to get involved, but is persuaded by Luke's parents to investigate the tragedy because they do not believe everything is as it seems.

Falk begins by going over the events leading up to the incident, including the fact that Luke's body was found, not at his family home but at a now dry riverbed, and starts interviewing those with nearby properties.

The federal policeman is harassed by some of the townspeople in response to his investigations. It is

revealed, through a series of flashbacks and run-ins with locals, that he and his father fled the town after the death of 17-year-old Elle Deacon, (Bebe Bettencourt), who was found drowned in the same river decades before. Deacon's father Mal (William Zappa) and her cousin Grant (Matt Nable) still harbour deep hostilities and suspicion toward Falk, whom they regard as the prime suspect in Elle's death.

At the same time, Falk runs into Gretchen (Genevieve O'Reilly), another friend from that period, who now works at the local primary school. While revisiting old memories, both nostalgic and painful, they soon find themselves romantically involved. Bana and O'Reilly have considerable chemistry and convincingly replicate the complexity of emotions two people with such a shared history would have.

Despite the hostilities and tight lips of the locals, Falk studiously follows various leads, including the fact that the shotgun shells that Luke owned were different to those used in the apparent murder-suicide. The plot contains a few red herrings and sub plots that stem from the social and economic problems facing the drought-stricken community. Grant is suspected of wishing to buy Luke's farm, though he denies it; Gretchen has a child, but is unable to explain who the father is; the town's only police officer focuses on issues of school funding, which Luke's wife Karen was grappling with.

The Dry has certain strengths that allow it to rise slightly above the usual fare currently being made by the Australian film and television industry. The cast members all give solid performances, with genuine empathy towards those struggling in the economically harsh rural environment. The cinematography is of a high standard, effectively capturing the unique bushland, riverbeds and harsh semi-desert terrain.

The tough and brittle life for many small farmers and others, struggling in much of rural Australia, certainly

cry out for serious and sensitive dramatic explorations. Farmers and small regional towns confronting huge debts, failing crops or unemployment have significantly higher suicide rates than the rest of the population. Gambling, addiction and other social ills are widespread.

The Dry, however, tends to present these social problems as individual and psycho-sexual aberrations. The social and economic factors are largely an exotic backdrop to the narrative, rather than finding expression in problems and collisions that drive the story and which, in turn, inform the actions of the characters.

Ultimately the revelations presented at the end of the film have little to do with the circumstances the characters have been battling out, or, at least, they are not sufficiently drawn out from the latter. The story, unfortunately, never fully rises above the level of a tragic, interpersonal small-town drama.

Is Kiewarra simply a “black hole,” as the hotel bartender asides, or is this a common situation for rural areas across Australia in the third decade of the 21st century. This is not explored. The suffering of the population, in fact, is almost taken as a given for rural communities, despite the time or place, and simply due to the unforgiving forces of nature.

Significantly, none of the main characters utters a word of criticism against the authorities, nor do they ever complain that they have been economically and socially abandoned. That is simply not realistic. Initially, most of the townspeople passively accept Luke’s murder-suicide, and insist that Falk should simply “move on.”

No-one, apart from Luke’s parents and the AFP detective, questions why the tragedy occurred, what broader processes might be involved, or what might be done to avoid this in the future. All in all, the prevailing community sentiment is a socially discontented but defeatist one. This is false and unconvincing.

Connolly has taken a more socially critical stance in previous films. These included *Balibo* (2009), which told the story of the Balibo Five, a group of Australian journalists who were captured and killed while reporting on activities just prior to the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, in 1975, and *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* (2012), about journalist and publisher Julian Assange’s younger pre-WikiLeaks

years. Hopefully, Connolly will return to this more challenging approach in future works.



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