

# Open Range

A  
Film  
Review

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# Open Range: A Film Review

**H**AVE YOU EVER returned home from the video store with a movie for the evening, only to discover that you have already seen it? Or perhaps you simply became frustrated scanning the shelves, title after title, because all the movies began to look alike after a while. If so, you are not alone.

We Americans are plagued with mediocrity, inundated with too many choices and the curse of sameness. We find it in television programming, in music, and in films.

Lots of movies dazzle. Most flicker with a short-lived quickening, then fade away. Occasionally a film comes along that is capable of reaching us somewhere deep inside. *Open Range*, starring Kevin Costner, Robert Duvall, and Annette Bening, is one such film.

The Western genre has not been a strong one in American film since the days of John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Henry Fonda. But Westerns are trying to make a comeback. *Open Range*, set in the Montana Rockies in 1882, rises above the fray to establish a new, 21st century standard for Westerns.

As with any film, the secret to success is a compelling story. Good and evil must be discernible and the characters believable. Conflict must exist not only between the good guys and the bad guys, but also within the heart and mind of the main character. The viewer must connect at some level with one or more of the story's characters, and with their internal and external struggles. If not, the film will fall short in capturing its audience.

In *Open Range*, we are drawn to Boss Spearman (Duvall) and Charlie Waite (Costner).

On the surface, they appear to be simple, freegrazing cowboys, driving their herd of cattle across the lush green hills of Montana in search of better grazing ground. But underneath, they are complex men who cherish their freedom, men who will be forced to decide what price they are willing to pay to preserve it.

Like many Westerns, *Open Range* explores honor, friendship, loyalty, and justice. But unlike many, these characters are much more than cardboard cut-outs. At the outset of the story, we learn a little about Boss and Charlie by observing their two young, playful hired hands, Mose (Abraham Benrubi) and Button (Diego Luna). We see that Boss is all business, but that Charlie can enjoy a little fun. Charlie sees Mose and Button as projects, young men to be mentored and trained, not just in cowpunching, but in life. On the surface, Boss appears to see the two simply as workers he has hired. But Boss and Charlie both see themselves as father figures to these young men, exercising their mentorship in different, yet complementary ways.

The impetus of the plot is launched when the four cowboys encounter the ruthless Denton Baxter (Michael Gambon). Baxter is a well-to-do rancher in the nearby town of Harmonville. The age of freegrazing cattle is coming to an end as more and more of the west's open lands are being consolidated into private ranches. Baxter not only opposes these two Freegrazers, he wants their cattle. The callous rancher has the local sheriff and a cadre of henchmen on his payroll. He also controls the local townspeople through fear and intimidation.

Baxter attempts to muscle Boss and Char-

# Open Range: A Film Review

lie out of what he considers to be his turf. When Baxter's men murder one of Boss and Charlie's hands, and beat the other one to near death, the two must decide on their course of action. It is at this point in the film when we begin to learn a bit more about who Charlie really is.

Charlie has a past he's not proud of, but it's a past which will aid him in the battle to come. Mulling their options, Charlie wonders aloud, "You reckon them cows are worth gettin' killed over?"

Boss responds, "Cows is one thing. But one man tellin' another man where he can go in this country's somethin' else."

Later in the film, as the shootout is about to commence, Charlie counsels a townsman who is reluctant to have his sons assist the duo in their fight, "You may not know this, but there's things that gnaw at a man worse than dyin'."

Though few words are spoken between these two rangemen, their loyalty and friendship run deep. Charlie has been taking orders from Boss for ten years, but their coming face-off with Baxter and his accomplices begins to reshape their relationship. Charlie, we finally discover, is an erstwhile gunslinger. Boss must learn to listen to his younger, but more experienced partner as they plan their defense against Baxter's gang of thugs, who are now plotting to kill them both.

As the story presses relentlessly toward the clash between Baxter's brutes and the two cowboys, Sue Barlow (Bening) unexpectedly catches Charlie's eye. Though living on the frontier, Sue has tried to maintain a modi-

cum of the genteel. Bening, with understated makeup and showing some age, carries off her part convincingly. Sue Barlow has been holding on to her love carefully and for a long time, waiting for the right man to come along. Charlie, an essentially quiet but nevertheless manly man, stumbles over his words as he attempts to express his feelings for Sue. Charlie fears that Sue doesn't know his true self, the man who in the past, killed many.

"Men are gonna get killed here today, Sue. And I'm gonna kill 'em."

Sue's response gives us a solid understanding of where this budding relationship is headed. Their scenes together are genuine and satisfying, building our expectations toward what we hope will be the agreeable payoff.

Duvall is exceptional as usual. Boss Spearman reminds us of the Gus McCrae character Duvall played so adeptly in *Lonesome Dove*. Also a man of few words, Boss chooses them carefully and speaks them with authority. His nuggets of wisdom flesh out his character in a deeply gratifying way.

Like Bening, Costner and Duvall are beginning to show their age. Both do their best film work as cowboy characters, and this film brings out top performances from each.

*Open Range*, directed and co-written by Kevin Costner, is rated R for violence. But the intensity of bloodshed is reminiscent of the Westerns of old. Unlike most contemporary films rated R for violence, *Open Range* displays no gore, no blood-splattered walls, and no unnecessary, unseemly imagery. There is no nudity, sex, sex talk, or

# Open Range: A Film Review

bad language. The scenes are realistic without being gratuitous.

As intense as the film becomes, Costner has peppered the story with unexpected, yet ironic moments of comic relief. We chuckle to see the town Marshall and his cohorts preparing for the big fight, still reeling from the after-effects of their drugging by Boss the night before. Ordered by Baxter to get into the fight, the Marshall answers back. "We're not ourselves yet," he claims, still drug-dazed. And in another scene, while in Sue's kitchen, the two grizzled characters struggle to get their coarse, cowboy fingers through the tiny handles of their Victorian teacups. Several other brief and unanticipated light moments evoke laughter from the audience.

The film's cinematography is superb, due in part to the setting. Though the story takes place in Montana, filming took place in Al-

berta, Canada. Set in green, wide-open spaces against a big "Montana" sky, stunning blue snow-capped mountain peaks, and dappled with an occasional torrential thunderstorm, our eyes and ears are awash with pleasure. The savory soundtrack by Michael Kamen bears us along as we ride with the two urgent horsemen, galloping across a ridge and silhouetted against a big, bold moon.

The film is topped off with a gun battle that measures up to the one at the OK Corral. If at all possible, see this movie in a theatre with Surround Sound. The roar of the rifle, pistol, and shotgun blasts reverberates realistically throughout the auditorium.

All in all, *Open Range* will be worth your time. If the Western is not your normal cup of tea, check out this film anyway. You may change your mind.