

The Sisters Brothers (15)

Directed by Jacques Audiard



'18 France | Spain | USA 2hrs 2mins

Fri 5 April for at least one week

John C. Reilly and Joaquin Phoenix star in Jacques Audiard's (A Prophet, Rust and Bone, Dheepan) English language debut, a subtle and darkly funny Western about the adventures of two brothers sent to kill a prospector accused of stealing from a crime boss.

It's 1850s Oregon at the height of the Gold Rush. The quarrelling Sisters brothers, Eli and Charlie, are two grizzled guys liable to come riding into town up to no good. They are also assassins, working for a shadowy figure nicknamed the Commodore, and beginning a new mission - to 'whack' a disloyal prospector by the name of Hermann Kermit Warm (Riz Ahmed). To help them track their victim, the Commodore lends them the services of a private detective (Jake Gyllenhaal) who mostly annoys them with his pompous letters telling them what to do. Yet all is not what it seems, and gradually Eli and Charlie, like Butch and Sundance before them, begin to suspect there may be some pretty persistent people on their own tails too...

Based on Canadian author Patrick deWitt's award-winning novel, Audiard and his skilled cast have turned The Sisters Brothers into far more than a colourful romp. Darkly witty and delightfully offbeat yes, but Audiard inflects the tale with a dreamlike quality and a good deal of reverence, tipping his hat to the traditions of the Western, while providing his own unique stamp on the genre.

This article by David Simms featuring an interview with director Jacques Audiard originally appeared on the theatlantic.com on 3 Sept 2018.

"I was sitting outside the Commodore's mansion, waiting for my brother Charlie to come out with news of the job. It was threatening to snow and I was cold and for want of something to do I studied Charlie's new horse, Nimble. My new horse was called Tub." So opens Patrick deWitt's 2011 novel, *The Sisters Brothers*, a darkly comic Western narrated by a cold-blooded but warmhearted assassin named Eli Sisters, who roams the American West as a hired gun with his truculent brother Charlie. Though it's sharply funny, deWitt's story doesn't shy away from the blunt violence its protagonists deal out, striking a brilliant balance between its many tones.

That complexity is what stood out to Jacques Audiard, the French writer and director who has made many crime dramas but manages to tease out something new from the genre every time. The novel has "a grand lightness, a sense of cheeky derision, a naïveté constantly contradicted," he said in an interview about his film adaptation of *The Sisters Brothers*,

which premiered at the Venice Film Festival.

Audiard, who won the Cannes Palme d'Or for his previous film, *Dheepan*, has never made an English-language movie before—some of his other works include the searing crime epic *A Prophet*, the wonderfully nervy drama *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, and the wrenching romance *Rust and Bone*. But he decided to break that pattern when John C. Reilly (who produced *The Sisters Brothers* and stars as Eli) approached him with deWitt's book. Audiard and his frequent collaborator Thomas Bidegain adapted the novel for the big screen, and the ensemble was filled out by Joaquin Phoenix (who plays the hotheaded Charlie), Riz Ahmed (as Hermann Warm, a chemist who finds a formula for detecting gold in rivers), and Jake Gyllenhaal (as John Morris, a prospector who's initially in league with the Sisters brothers).

"With Joaquin, things went quickly because I wanted to work with him and so did John," Audiard said in an email (the interview was conducted through a translator). "During and even after filming [Reilly and Phoenix's] has been a kind of schoolboy camaraderie. At the start of *The Sisters Brothers*, each of the brothers has for a long time played his part as a sibling. Charlie is the younger, handsome and impulsive, a little mad and therefore charismatic; Eli is the big brother who is rough, blinkered, and not a natural charmer. As the story progresses, their roles, if not exactly reverse, at least change; Eli gains in heroic and charismatic stature."

In the book, Eli's somewhat sad-sack nature is reflected by his pathetic horse Tub, an unimpressive, lumbering animal that earns his master's sympathy, despite being the polar opposite of Charlie's horse Nimble. Reilly's performance is similarly lovable, with more than a hint of brutishness. Meanwhile, Phoenix does his most devilishly winsome and fun work in years, quite distant from his more muted (but stellar) turns in *You Were Never Really Here* or *Her*.

With its painterly visuals (shot by Benoît Debie), dramatic landscapes, and nasty gunfights, the film recalls many classic Westerns, even as its narrative is much more amoral and haphazard, with the brothers bouncing from town to town, leaving behind a bloody swathe. "Our model was more telling a tale outside the Western tradition," Audiard said. "One can see in *The Sisters Brothers* how these are two children in the bodies of weary adults ... The violence is treated like imagery in a storybook: It's exaggerated and visual, and meant to be taken at a remove from reality."

The film's weariness with much of the Western genre's traditional iconography is obvious, particularly the notion that the man with the fastest gun is the hero. The Sisters brothers are paid assassins, contracted by the mysterious Commodore (Rutger Hauer) to wreak havoc across Oregon and California, but there's nothing remotely valiant about what they do. The novel, and the film, succeeds because of that honesty, and because of Audiard's effort to find humor and humanity in characters who outwardly display very little of those qualities (aside from Eli's love for Tub).

"I think that it's the forthright and uncompromising virility of the heroes of classic Westerns that has kept me at a distance from the genre," Audiard said. "My taste runs to those that came later, ones that I saw coming of age in the 1970s: The Missouri Breaks, Little Big Man, Jeremiah Johnson, etcetera. The movie that was most on our mind during the screenwriting process isn't a Western but rather a dark fairy tale: The Night of the Hunter."

Audiard has long made films about flawed men struggling against their darker instincts, a world away from the white-hatted champions of Hollywood's Golden Age. "For me, between childhood and adolescence, the movies were a powerful educator," he said. "They informed me about life and the world, women and men. As a teenager, cinema without a doubt helped me learn about girls; Paul Newman, Marcello Mastroianni, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Jean-Paul Belmondo, and others have my gratitude. But as far back as I can remember, there was no learning about how to talk to girls from watching John Wayne."

Audiard's disdain for the Duke would probably have been mutual; one can imagine Wayne turning up his nose at the mercenary antiheroes of The Sisters Brothers. But as the film progresses, it becomes clearer that Wayne's classic, macho brand of marquee idol is just the other side of the same coin as Eli Sisters. The director's healthy contempt for the limits of cowboy justice, coupled with his ability to see past the cynical tone of deWitt's novel to its earnest core, makes The Sisters Brothers a film well worth paying attention to.

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