



I do love me a good western.

Although most of its cowboys drive trucks, and many of the firearms in play are semi-automatic pistols instead of revolvers, *Hell or High Water* is a western – one that deftly reaches back in time to respectfully shake hands with classic western tropes.

While the story might be mistaken for a cliché with a revived “save the farm from the bank” scenario, *Hell or High Water* is anything but trite. Screenwriter Taylor Sheridan populates the harsh landscape of a West Texas still reeling from last decade’s housing crisis with characters so real and so compelling that Hollywood standards – like Jeff Bridges’ “sheriff on the brink of retirement” – feel comfortable rather than stale.

The movie really has two main characters: Toby Howard (Chris Pine) and Marcus Hamilton (Bridges). I’ll start with Toby, who, with his brother Tanner (Ben Foster), drives the story.

Anyone who has dismissed Chris Pine (best known for his role as Captain Kirk in J.J. Abrams’ *Star Trek* franchise reboot) as “just a pretty face” will need to look elsewhere for a pretty boy to make fun of after this. Pine brings to life a simultaneously disheartened and driven man. He skillfully keeps Toby balanced on a fine line between cautious and reckless, which perfectly complements Ben Foster’s performance as his older brother.

Ben Foster, who burns with charisma, is perfectly cast as Tanner Howard, a man who does not seek out a balance of anything. He is charged and dangerous, and even at rest, he is a coiled snake prepared to strike. Admittedly, I’d gladly watch Foster in any role he’s given, but in this film, he is a force to behold.

Marcus Hamilton is the second main character. He pursues the Howard brothers with his partner, Alberto Parker (Gil Birmingham), and their relationship is as well defined as that of the brothers on the other side of the law, partially thanks to great writing and partially because Bridges and Birmingham play so well off of each other.

The plot of *Hell or High Water* is about bank robbers and the law enforcement officers trying to catch them. The soul of the movie has numerous layers.

Most obviously, *Hell or High Water* is about morality and the questions that arise when a man does a bad thing for a good reason. It's also about the bonds formed between individuals who, by occupation or accident, traverse life-threatening terrain together. And it's about desperation, not just of those willing to commit criminal acts, but of those who aren't. When the only answer to financial struggles seems to be taking on crippling debt, what are the consequences for each generation down the line?

In the midst of this great storytelling and the incredible performances, the film's craftsmanship is impeccable. The cinematography gives West Texas a worn, dusty, almost abandoned look. The music choices fit both the tone of the film and the action on screen. Director David Mackenzie gives action sequences the energy they need to be believable and exciting, but keeps the primary focus on characters rather than activity. He also isn't afraid of slowing down and taking a breather, giving these characters time and space to be themselves.

*Hell or High Water* delivers action, drama, suspense, and humor and never feels as if it's lost its direction. It is engaging from the first frame to the last. It is well-crafted, entertaining, and engrossing. And it is a damn good western.

It's only September, and perhaps a little early to make the call, but I am pretty sure I just watched one of my top three films for the year [*Note: Hell or High Water turned out to be my #1 film for 2016*]. It's the kind of movie that deserves to be celebrated – if for no other reason than to encourage filmmakers to give us more like it.

Final Grade: A