

“Unforgiven”

The year is 1878 and former gunslinger Will Munny (Clint Eastwood) is now a homesteader. The film opens with Munny silhouetted against the sky visiting the grave site of his young wife. He and his two young children have a hard scrabble existence on their isolated farm but he is thankful that his wife led him out of his old ways. But his life as a farmer is about to change. One day a brash young rider who calls himself “The Schofield Kid”: (Jaimz Woolvett) appears. He tells Munny that a group of prostitutes in Big Whiskey, Wyoming have offered a reward for bringing to justice two local cowhands who cut up and disfigured one of their brethren.

So Munny decides to briefly go back to his old life to seek the kind of justice that the local sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) has brushed off. Joining him is his old comrade Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman) and together with Schofield they set off for Big Whiskey. It is a classic tale of Western “justice” but has a lot more going on than one might expect from a traditional Western.

I originally saw the film back when it came out in 1992 and was duly impressed as were the critics who rank it as one of the best Westerns ever made. It was even better than I remembered. Eastwood directed the film and his craft of filmmaking shines from almost every scene. What makes “Unforgiven” such a classic are:

The portrayal of the frontier of the late 1800’s feels absolutely authentic. Munny’s lonely farm gives you a deep sense of how harsh life was for the early settlers and Big Whiskey is a prototypical Western outpost. But there was another side to life in the West and as Munny and his companions ride towards Big Whiskey you see the beauty of rushing streams, snow capped peaks and the changing colors of autumn leaves.

The performances are letter perfect from the gleeful sadism of Hackman as Little Bill; to Richard Harris as “English Bob” a dapper railroad agent whose job it is to kill Chinese railroad workers who get out of line; and of course Eastwood and Freeman along with a host of memorable secondary characters.

Little Bill's colorful conversation in the jailhouse with W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek) English Bob's would be biographer (the proposed title – "The Duke of Death") where he sets him straight as to English Bob's true character. The extended dialogue is priceless.

The "sisterhood" of the prostitutes. They are disposable items to everyone else in town but they are fiercely protective of each other and are not afraid to take a stand.

And of course it wouldn't be a Western if the bad guys didn't meet their fate. Munny may have been out of practice (witness his first attempts at target shooting and getting on his horse at the beginning of the film) but like "Dirty Harry" he is not a man to cross.

"Unforgiven" won 4 Oscars and when you see it you will know why.

(Amazon Prime)