

“Mudbound”

It is the 1930's. Laura and Henry live on a hardscrabble farm in Mississippi. It is a harsh life but at least they own the property. Not so for their neighbors Hap and Florence. They are black sharecroppers consigned to endless toil on land they will never own. But they have something Laura craves but will never have - a warm and embracing marriage.

The course of all their lives changes dramatically on December 7, 1941. Laura's son Jaime becomes a bomber pilot and on a fateful mission two events transform him. One leaves him with PTSD and on returning home he takes to the bottle in an attempt to numb the horrors of his wartime memories. But something else happened on that mission which strips away the racial prejudice baked into him as a child.

Hap and Florence's oldest son Ronsel serves as a tank commander in Patton's Army. When the crowds welcoming American troops make no distinction based on the color of their liberators, Ronsel has his first experience of being treated as an equal. On his return home, however, he quickly discovers that his war time service counts for nothing in the eyes of the local whites. But because of their war time experiences, Ronsel and Jaime form a bond across the racial divide. It is not a friendship which can exist out in the open. When it comes to light, Jamie's father Pappy and the local KKK take violent action.

“Mudbound” is rich in the small and telling details of life in rural Mississippi. Laura's joy as water streams over her in the outdoor bucket shower Jaime rigs up for her speaks volumes about the paucity of everyday “luxuries” of old farm life. The depiction of rural Mississippi transports you to another world. A desperate young white woman in a tattered dress standing in a muddy field evokes Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph of “Migrant Mother” and rapt faces of worshipers as Hap delivers a sermon evokes the spirit of the black churches that would one day help fuel the Civil Rights movement.

Lastly there is director Dee Rees's gift for creating moments which grip your emotions which are made all the more powerful by their restraint. The casual cruelty of racial humiliation; Hap leading his family in grace; Ronsel's welcome home by his family after the war; the attempts by Ronsel and Jaime to transcend

the prejudice of their time; and the stoic dignity with which Hap and Florence lead their lives are all beautifully rendered. But one cannot be restrained when showing the underlying violence by which the system of segregation was maintained. Seeing the Ku Klux Klan in action is a harrowing sight and not for the faint of heart.

(Netflix)