

Emma Jones (JSB287): *Mystery Road* (2013 film)

A dead Aboriginal girl under a bridge; an apathetic and corrupt police force; a town in turmoil and a dangerous criminal underbelly hiding in plain sight: these are the circumstances that bring Aboriginal detective Jay Swan back to his hometown in Kamilaroi man Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road*. A masterclass in genre-fusion with elements of crime thriller, film noir, and even classic Westerns, the film intentionally lures in viewers under the guise of a murder mystery before revealing its true nature as a provocative, urgent plea to reckon with the wounds of the past and the unchecked crises still unfolding today.

Throughout his investigation into Julie Mason's death, Swan (Arrernte-Arabana man Aaron Pedersen) is met with extreme resistance, racism, and isolation from not just those he is closing in on, but his colleagues and his community as well. Caught in the chasm between being Aboriginal and being a member of the police force, Jay is seen as a traitor to his community and a liability to his fellow officers. Even those closest to him, his estranged alcoholic wife Mary (Bunurong woman Tasma Walton) and daughter Crystal (Tricia Whitton), resent him for leaving them behind in the first place. This is crystallised in a terse and cold exchange with the crooked Farmer Bailey (David Field) who attempts to bait Jay while exemplifying the disdain everyone around him holds by asking, "Are you one of them 'black trackers' who turns on his own?". This exchange is just one of several that allude to the traumatic and even deadly history of Indigenous Australians and law enforcement. Since colonisation, First Nations people have only been afforded conditional forms of justice with terms set by their white oppressor (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Jay's homecoming reception shows the price he paid for his commitment to such a career as he is greeted only with disrespect, dismissal, and desolation. Nevertheless, Jay continues to pull at the frayed edges of the town

fabric until he exposes the truths so many attempted to conceal, compelled to not let Julie's death go unresolved like countless others before her.

Now a decade old, *Mystery Road*'s central themes of the many injustices faced by Indigenous Australians are just as prevalent in the real world. At the film's heart lies the central theme of the way Indigenous women and girls are treated in this country and their interactions with an imbalanced justice system. It's a theme Walton resonated with as she drew on her own childhood in Western Australian housing commission for her role as Mary Swan. In an interview, Walton spoke of the familiar hopelessness, poverty, violence, and "disregard society has for people in that situation" she drew from to personify the raw and brutal reality of Indigenous women and girls left behind and forgotten (O'Neill, 2013). It is seen in her hardened and angry exterior, her venomous exchanges with Jay, and her hopelessness as she realises she cannot protect her daughter from the same fate, and is a deliberately uncomfortable thematic inclusion from Sen as a means to finally get people to acknowledge the crisis these women face.

Despite Mary's story being unacceptably familiar for Indigenous women across the country, Australia remains blinded by denial and unmotivated to act. In a groundbreaking 2022 report, ABC's Four Corners revealed First Nations women are being murdered at rate that makes up some of the highest homicide rates in the world, or twelve times the national average. Since 2000, more than 300 Indigenous women have gone missing, been murdered, or were killed under suspicious circumstances, and yet this crisis remains unchecked and ignored (Brennan et al, 2022). Even Sen's own family members who have suffered the same fate served as part inspiration for the film (Maddox, 2013). Just as Julie Mason's death is relegated to Jay who is covertly told to just accept this is how things are, countless Indigenous women and girls are

dying and disappearing every day with little meaningful action from dangerously ambivalent and apathetic authorities and communities.

This deadly ambivalence is best exemplified in an exchange between Jay and the local sergeant (Tony Barry), who we first meet as he arrives at the crime scene eating an ice cream and appearing entirely unbothered by Julie's murder. After another Aboriginal girl's body is discovered at the local tip days after speaking with Jay, the sergeant explicitly warns Jay, "There'll be more than a few black girls to worry about if this town turns into a fuckin' war zone." Jay responds by landing a fatal blow on the sergeant's carefully crafted façade as he states, "For some people, it already is a war zone." The sergeant thinly veils his attempts to guide Jay into accepting such crimes as commonplace, urges him to not disrupt the status quo, and resists his relentless pursuit for answers. In doing so, he represents the parts of Australia that have accepted this as the unchangeable albeit sad norm, and those who turn a blind eye and change the channel or look the other way when it suits them because they can. It is this that makes *Mystery Road* such a deeply important work: Sen's nameless sergeant shows us the blame lies not just with failed policies and corrupt institutions, but with us all. If we are all silent, we are complicit and nothing changes. Sen uses the sergeant to ask the audience just how blissful our ignorance really is when we are faced with the reality of Indigenous women and girls, and how many more must suffer the same fate as Julie before we do something about it?

Ivan Sen sought to make *Mystery Road* co-exist somewhere between arthouse and commercial cinema to prove just how critically, culturally, and economically successful Indigenous stories told by Indigenous storytellers can be. His masterful fusion of genres has played a critical role in ensuring his message is heard loud and clear, with the *Mystery Road*

world expanding to a second feature film, three TV seasons, critical acclaim, awards and more since its first instalment (Ward, 2016). Pedersen described *Mystery Road* as “the conversation we should be having”, and the injustices faced by Indigenous Australians have remained a core tenet of the pair’s work throughout the franchise (O’Cuana, 2013). But ten years on the conversation remains just that, as Indigenous Australians remain victims of unjust and corrupt institutions and wilfully ignorant attitudes entrenched country wide. *Mystery Road* serves as a timely reminder that there is still so much work to do to heal the wounds from the past and the significant cost of the country’s collective blind eye.

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