

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Scorsese, DiCaprio, De Niro, Gladstone tell impactful indigenous story

By T. Rob Brown

My fellow Martin Scorsese fans fear this may be his last film due to his age. He might retire, but there is no official word on that yet. If it happens to be his last effort, at least he went out with a powerful and important film: *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

This historical film is essentially about the value of human life—especially indigenous life. Unfortunately in the 1920s, little value was placed on the lives of those who weren't white in the U.S. The white characters in the film refer to that a few times in words alone, but show it in their graphic actions again and again. It does not glorify the death of this proud people, but mourns the loss of them.

The horrific actions against people referred to as “friends,” “neighbors,” and “family” remains shocking in the least, even after two viewings of the film. Coming from a modern mindset, it's difficult to fathom how cruel human beings can be to one another. Yet this film is real. It doesn't sugarcoat anything.

It's an Apple Studios crime drama about the theft of oil money from the Osage Nation in Oklahoma.

I grew up in Independence, Missouri, not far from Fort Osage, a national historic landmark originally built under the guidance of Gen. William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition in the Louisiana Territory. The tribe called themselves Ni-U-Kon-Ska, or “Children of the Middle Waters.” President Thomas Jefferson referred to them as “the great nation South of the Missouri.”

According to an article titled “The Louisiana Expansion” on the University of Missouri—St. Louis website, there were about 8,000 Osage living in permanent villages of thatched longhouses there in 1700. They were traders who sold furs, horses, bison hides and meat. They were also warriors, with the men averaging more than 6 feet tall. Jefferson called these warriors “gigantic.” Despite their warrior tradition, the Osage Nation remained friendly with the French and later U.S. residents—they even advised Lewis and Clark. They signed the Treaty of Fort Osage, for the location they called the “Fire Prairie,” in 1808 to give 50,000 square miles of their territory, which was most of what would later be called Missouri, to the U.S. government. In 1825, another treaty was signed and the Osage left their Missouri homeland forever, moving to “Indian Territory” locations in Kansas and then Oklahoma.

In the early 1800s, it was impossible for anyone to know the future value of the oil beneath the ground of their later Oklahoma land. By the time automobiles began to take over most transportation, the Osage Nation grew wealthy off the oil rights. As the Osage say in the film, that wealth came with another unexpected cost—their lives.

Early in the film, I was a bit disappointed in star Leonardo DiCaprio’s performance as Ernest Burkhart; by the last part of the film, though, he kicked his acting skills into high gear and gives a spectacular showing. He and co-star Robert De Niro (William Hale) play well off of one another as nephew and uncle, respectively. Both are seemingly innocent characters at the start, but revelations and their transformations due to greed lead to an impactful story about injustice and abuse of power.

Lily Gladstone expertly plays Mollie Burkhart, an Osage and Ernest’s wife. Her character’s journey is that of a victim’s great loss and betrayal. Her trials and tribulations are so strong, most of us wouldn’t wish that on an enemy. What I admire in her performance is her strength to persevere and survive no matter what gets thrown at her. Her character earns our respect, even if she has poor taste in men.

I don’t know if I’m the only one, but did anyone else feel like Brendan Fraser’s attorney character was out of place? He struck me as odd and a bit over the top. At first, I was excited to see Fraser in the film but then I realized he stuck out like a sore thumb. I think this role was just playing off the success of his film *The Whale*.

My only other criticism of the film was its long runtime. The pacing runs a bit slow in places. Keeping the runtime closer to 3 hours would have helped the film.

In my heart, I wanted to see a story of redemption that set things straight. I shouldn’t always get what I want.

This isn’t that kind of story. Nor should it be.

It’s important that we remember these dark deeds so these actions are never repeated.

According to an article titled “The Osage Nation Today” in *Missouri Life Magazine*, Chief Geoffrey M. Standing Bear of the Osage Nation in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, said there are 21,000 members today, half of whom live in Oklahoma.

Killers of the Flower Moon (2023), directed by Scorsese, Rated R, stars DiCaprio, De Niro, Jesse Plemons, Gladstone, Tantoo Cardinal, John Lithgow, and Fraser. At 3 hours and 26 minutes, it received a certified-fresh 93% on the Tomatometer at Rotten Tomatoes and an 85% audience score, plus an 8.1/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up.

Additionally, let's take a look at the new horror thriller *Five Nights at Freddy's* film vs. *Willy's Wonderland* (2021).

If you go see *Freddy's*, I recommend you check it out at Alamo Drafthouse and get there 30 minutes early for the pre-show. It features old videotape camcorder footage from Chuck E. Cheese, ShowBiz Pizza Place, and a bunch of other children's funhouses that featured animatronic figures in the 1980s set to pizza parties. When we were kids, my parents took my siblings and me to ShowBiz several times. I loved that place back then.

Nowadays, it's not easy to look at those animatronic figures without finding them at least a little creepy.

It all began with *Westworld*—not the HBO series, but the Michael Crichton-directed 1973 film that started that franchise. This was a film about animatronic figures whose programming malfunctioned and they started killing off park guests. That theme repeated in the 1976 sequel *Futureworld*. After that, Crichton switched from animatronic-theme-park woes to cloning-theme-park woes when he wrote *Jurassic Park*.

Coincidentally, *Westworld* was the first film to include a scene with computer-generated imagery. This CGI scene originally was supposed to cost \$200,000, take nine months to create, and would last only a couple minutes, according to the article "Behind the scenes of *Westworld*" in *American Cinematographer* magazine. Crichton ended up going another route to complete the animation faster and cheaper. The digital scene is when we see the animatronic Gunslinger's point-of-view.

On Aug. 8, 2014, the first *Five Nights at Freddy's* video game released; the series of nine games achieved worldwide success. Popular YouTubers created shows about the game and the word spread online. This led to action figures, other toys and related properties.

On Feb. 12, 2021, Nicolas Cage starred as the Janitor in *Willy's Wonderland*, a film that appears to lift *Freddy's* entire premise. Lots of folks online pointed out the similarities, even one Quora poster called it a "blatant and obvious FNAF rip off movie." Both films are about someone staying overnight in a defunct old pizza parlor from the 1980s that featured animatronic figures. In both films, those figures are possessed. There are some differences between the two concepts, but many similarities.

One of the main differences is that the central viewpoint character from *Freddy's* has a deeper backstory, more motivation, and a mystery to solve in the plot of the film. Cage's loner character doesn't even have any speaking lines in *Willy's*. *The Banana Splits Movie* (2019) also features killer animatronics.

In one hand, you have a fun-but-campy destruction film starring a legend of the silver screen. In the other, you have a film with more heart that remains true to the original source material. They may appear to be the same thing at a surface glance, but they really aren't.

Five Nights at Freddy's (2023), directed by Emma Tammi, Rated PG-13, stars Josh Hutcherson, Elizabeth Lail, Kat Conner Sterling, Piper Rubio, and Matthew Lillard. At 1 hour and 49 minutes, it received

a rotten 30% on the Tomatometer yet an 88% audience score, plus a 5.6/10 on IMDb. Obviously, the fans and critics aren't even close to agreeing on this one. I give it one thumb up.

Willy's Wonderland (2021), directed by Kevin Lewis, Rated TV-MA, stars Cage, Emily Tosta, Beth Grant, and Ric Reitz. At 1 hour and 28 minutes, it received a 61% on the Tomatometer and a 68% audience score, plus a 5.5/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up.

"The show must go on."