

## Review of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, 2020.



Do we have the power to write our own stories? Justin Kurzel's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, an adaptation of Peter Carey's novel, begs this question, although its answer is murky. The film begins with the claim that "nothing you are about to see is true", a promise that kicks off a muddled and twisted story of self-discovery, following Kelly's journey from boy to man.

The legend of Ned Kelly weighs heavily on the film. Ned is told from a young age he must become the man he's supposed to be. No doubt most of the audience knows who that is, and the supporting characters all seem to know it as well. This is the man who will rob, thief and murder across Victoria, and be celebrated for it. The only person who doesn't know this is Ned himself. Everyone else so sure of the legend that it becomes inevitable. Ned falls victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

His mother sends him to work for murderous bushranger Harry Power, played with charm by Russel Crowe. Assisting Power in his crimes, Ned learns two lessons: that men will do whatever you want if you point a gun at their willy and that you are responsible for writing your own story.

Violence and crime robs Ned of a childhood. To compensate, our young adult protagonist commits to a straight life: he promises himself there'll be no killing, robbing or thieving. Unfortunately, everyone else seems to be rooting for the just the opposite. Everyone seems to beg him to follow the opposite direction, to take up arms. Perhaps this is because we're seeing this story through his eyes – could this version of the Ned Kelly narrative be that of a man trying to deny responsibility?

The biggest influence is Ned's mother, who desperately wants him to be a cold hard killer that will provide for the family. It's not exactly clear why everyone looks up to Ned so much, but it seems like everyone wants a piece of him. The end result is that the abnormal amount of pressure to become a tough, masculine badass gives Ned a full-bore messianic complex.

In turn, Ned becomes something of a colonial Jesus Christ, a hero of the oppressed and fighter of the oppressors. However, instead of writing his own story like he often states, he seems to be imagining it. Ned's reality becomes twisted, leaving a disconnect between him and the world – but by this point, he doesn't seem to care. The end of the film ticks away like clockwork, with a visually striking third act full of visceral set pieces and beautiful poetic imagery, although it loses some of the delicate patience of the previous acts. Once Ned dons the iconic bushranger armour and sets out to fulfill his legacy, the film turns into an adrenaline-fuelled ride to its end. The mysteries and character studies are replaced by spectacle, although the spectacle is rich and entertaining enough not to disappoint.

*True History of The Kelly Gang* depicts colonial Australia's final days in brutal fashion. The film borders on gratuity, but ultimately its barbarity and heavy-handedness allows it to explore themes of history, violence and truth in a fresh and intriguing way.