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“Because the Mouth Bone is Connected to the Body Bone”

## movies BY JASON BLAIR



Russell Crowe as Ben Wade and Christian Bale as Dan Evans in *3:10 to Yuma*

## Train in Vain

Christian Bale looks for redemption

**3:10 TO YUMA:** Directed by James Mangold. Written by Halsted Welles, Michael Brandt and Derek Haas. Cinematography, Phedon Papamichael. Music, Marco Beltrami. Starring Russell Crowe, Christian Bale, Gretchen Mol, Ben Foster and Peter Fonda. Lions Gate Films, 2007. R. 117 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

You know the Hollywood Western is in flux when the best cowboy pictures of recent memory are *Shanghai Noon* and *Brokeback Mountain*. The former is an overlooked screwball comedy containing Owen Wilson's niftiest work post-*Bottle Rocket*; the latter, a stirring but unfairly politicized drama in which Heath Ledger closets his male affection and throws away the key. Not exactly John Ford country. These two films, like *Unforgiven* before them, subvert the false mythology of the Western genre — namely, that men who aim to kill each other can be divided into “good” or “bad” — by showing us flawed men in various states of disrepair. These men won't be coming to your rescue any time soon. These men would make *Shane* spit.

Into this changing landscape rides *3:10 to Yuma*, a traditional Western and remake of the 1957 classic. Both films are based upon the Elmore Leonard dime novel, taking essentially the same premise: A dirt-poor rancher agrees to help transport a murderous gunslinger to a train bound for Yuma prison. In the current version, rancher Dan Evans (Christian Bale) takes the job as an act of redemption. He stands to make \$200, but Evans has debts beyond his beleaguered homestead: He was an inglorious soldier in the Civil War, getting his foot shot off by his own regiment. Evans is the type of luckless, practical fellow who gets shot dead in other Westerns, but in *3:10 to Yuma* he arouses the interest of Ben Wade (Russell Crowe), the captive under his care. Wade, like the villains of Cormac McCarthy, is an erudite, philosophical killer, reciting scripture as easily as the pious but with a deeply

forked tongue. Indeed, Wade's gun is called the Hand of God; he kills more men while shackled in custody than he does prior to his capture.

Crowe and Bale give *3:10 to Yuma* an urgency and power that few other actors could provide. Rarely have I been so certain that two lead actors were so perfectly suited to their roles. (This film was in development for years while the likes of Tom Cruise and Eric Bana were attached. All along the producers wanted Crowe and Bale.) Crowe plays Wade with a deadly calm. There's a slipperiness and ease to his performance that makes his relative obscurity — he's made four films since *A Beautiful Mind* in 2001 — seem unfortunate. Opposite Crowe, Bale's Evans is morally firm but physically shaky. Bale is all stubbornness and perseverance. On at least two occasions, both spontaneous confessions, he'll likely move you to tears. Mention should also be made of Ben Foster (*Six Feet Under*) who plays Wade's second-in-command, Charlie Prince, with a twitchy, zany confidence. I luxuriated in the weird, dark humor of this film, and Foster is a frequent source of this darkness.

Unfortunately, *3:10* derails in its third act. One by one, Wade's captors are burned, shot or stabbed until only Evans and his oldest son William (Logan Lerman) — who joins them en route against his father's wishes — remain of the original party. Before the climactic battle, the film lays its cards on the table: Bale, vastly outnumbered by Wade's men, can walk away with his life or regain his honor by dying. What follows is an odd pact between Evans and Wade that, even if you consider it plausible, leads to an outcome that is simply unjustifiable. The film, just when clarity is called for, stops making sense. It's a shame, because for most of the journey, this train was full steam ahead. **EW**

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