

## A Simple Plan

Just about two years ago, a chilly little picture called *Fargo* introduced many D.C.-area people to a small piece of the not-quite-wonderland winter of middle Minnesota. Sly and grim, knowing and naive all at the same time, it was both a critical and popular hit. The newly released *A Simple Plan* bears some immediate resemblances to *Fargo*, but they are superficial ones. This is no black comedy; instead it exposes the heart of darkness in certain men's souls. Perhaps most importantly, *A Simple Plan* turns out to be as good, in its own way, as *Fargo* was.

The premise of *A Simple Plan* is this: three small-town Minnesota mugs happen upon a downed light plane hidden in the woods with a very dead pilot and a duffel bag containing more than \$4 million bucks. After minimal consideration given to informing the authorities, the three agree to hold on to the money and see if anyone claims it, with thoughts of eventually dividing it up. Ethical questions about taking the dough are answered by their assuring themselves that the money is ill-gotten, and nobody but some insured financial or corporate entity will get hurt by their holding it.

The character of the three discoverers is crucial. Hank Mitchell (Bill Paxton) is the brains of the trio, a college-educated guy who works as an accountant at the local feed store and has a modest, comfortable life with his big frame house and his lovely, expectant wife Sarah (Bridget Fonda). His brother Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton) is a sweet dim bulb who has never really gotten a job, a woman, or a life, other than his dreaming about moving back to the family's ruined farmhouse. Jacob's buddy Lou (Brent Briscoe) is a good ol' boy as well as an uncontrollable drunk. The interplay of the three protagonists is as important--more important--than any element of the plot.

Their simple plan becomes, of course, anything but, and complications ensue when Jacob--and Hank--kill an old farmer who has gotten too close to their cache. Covering up the crime becomes the next concern for the Mitchells, while Hank also has to also contend with a whining Lou wanting some of the cash in advance and his now-scheming Sarah ultimately wanting to get Lou out of the picture by implicating him in the killing of the old farmer. Then the FBI comes to call... Such turns keep coming at the characters--and at the viewer--right up to the end of the picture.

Directed by Sam Raimi (previously known for over-the-top, tongue-in-cheek action pictures) *A Simple Plan* seems wonderfully of a piece: the setting, the characters, the dialogue, the pace. The picture offers a linear, straight-ahead tension, made all the more compelling by the utter *plausibility* of what happens to the ill-starred trio. From the start, you feel you know these guys (or somebody like them) and you wonder--along with them--what to do next (what would *you* do?). It makes for a gripping motion picture.

I mentioned above the interplay of the characters. It's what makes the picture as splendid as it is by transforming a very clever suspense-heist film into a fine-grained, mature study of simple men under inordinate pressure. The actors form a wonderful ensemble. A sad-eyed Bill Paxton is beautifully torn between his own moral code, his wife's entreaties, his brother's sad dreams, and his own troubled sense of what the money could do for him. "Do you ever feel evil?" he rhetorically asks at one exasperated

point, summing up this new dilemma for an man with an otherwise spotless--if routine--life. Fonda as the calculating Sarah is a fine foil for Paxton, playing the small town Lady Macbeth to her feed store lord. As Lou, Briscoe is witless bluster incarnate, but dirt-clever enough to smell out when he is being patronized or put down.

The revelation of this film is Billy Bob Thornton as Jacob. For those who might have wondered if this actor could ever again have a role as rich as the one he wrote for himself in *Sling Blade*, *A Simple Plan* provides the answer. He is superb as Jacob, a fellow who lacks learning and life skills but has fine-honed instincts into other folk's condition, including his own. In one scene in particular, when he and Hank are talking about their possible futures in the car, Thornton is, in his way, as mesmerizing as the young Brando talking to Rod Steiger in another car scene 45 years ago in *On the Waterfront*.

You won't come out of this movie redeemed and uplifted; you will come away with the treasured memory of a tight human drama impeccably limned.

*("A Simple Plan" is rated "R" for violence, profanity, and adult situations.)*

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