

Sweet Land (2005)

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Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 50 min.

Our Content ratings: Violence 0; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

1 John 3:14-22

“Drive out the wicked person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:13

There are two deaths and two reckonings that conjure up the past in director Ali Selim’s film, his script based on Will Weaver’s short story “A Gravestone Made of Wheat.” At the death of his grandfather Olaf Torvik, Lars visits with his grandmother Inge (Lois Smith) and helps bury the old man in the middle of a wheat field. Through her stories and old photographs he is drawn into the story of her youthful days

when she came from Norway to Minnesota just after WW 1. The second death is that of Inge herself, and now older and bearded, Lars wrestles with the decision as to whether or not to sell the farm, now that his grandmother no longer lives on the land. His wife sits by him for support as he again looks through his grandmother's photographs and papers.

One of the photographs is of a young and beautiful Inge (Elizabeth Reaser) taken in front of the house, not long after she had arrived in town by train lugging two suitcases and an unwieldy horn-speaker phonograph. She practices the one sentence of English that she knows, "I could eat a horse." Unable to understand the words of the two men—Olaf (Tim Guinee) and Frandsen (Alan Cumming)—who come long after her arrival to pick her up, she identifies the wrong man as the one whom she is to marry. Her pick, the talkative Frandsen is very married, he and wife Brownie (Alex Kingston) being the proud parents of nine children!

Her intended, Olaf, takes her to his church where the pastor Minister Sorrensen (John Heard) and the congregation apparently have gathered for their wedding. However, Inge does not have her citizenship papers, and when the pastor learns that she is a German who had been living in Norway, everyone is aghast. The final straw leading to his refusal to marry her is the revelation that she was a Socialist. Although the war has been over for two years, anti-German feeling is still strong, along with the new anti-Red phobia sweeping through the country.

Unable to marry, Inge accompanies Frandsen to his farm, where his wife Marta ("Call me Brownie") welcomes her with a hug and the offer of a bath. Seeing her hosts' nine children lined up waiting for their turn in the tub, Inge declines the honor of going first while the water is still clean. Over the next several days, Brownie helps Inge with her English and shows her the secrets of upper Midwest cooking. The scene in which Brownie introduces Inge to pie is a delight, the two finding

their pieces so good that they go on and consume the whole pie.

The night scene in which Inge wanders the fields while gazing at the northern lights is beautifully photographed. She finds that she has come to Olaf's house, so she enters, and thus begins her long but chaste stay with him, he sleeping out in the barn. As they grow closer, she works the fields with him. Their living together does not escape the church's notice, Minister Sorrenson declaring that the couple are going against God's way. The two leave the sanctuary, as does their friend Frandsen, despite the reluctance of his wife.

How this conflict is resolved, with a satisfying change of heart of the minister makes for a deeply moving, lyrical film. Although born in Minnesota and the creator of hundreds of TV commercials and company films, Ali Selim's film (his second) is more European in style than American. His is a minimalist style, far more being shown than spoken. When Inge speaks German and Norwegian, there are no subtitles, and thus we must rely on her expression and tone to surmise what she is saying. Like another of my favorite films, *Tender Mercies*, much of the action takes place off camera; and like that film, Mr. Selim's is full of grace. Minister Sorrensen could have easily been portrayed as one more narrow-minded hypocrite, so dear to many Hollywood filmmakers, but he is as multi-dimensional as the strict minister-father in *Footloose*. Relegated to the art house circuit, no doubt because the independent distributor lacks promotional funds, this lyrical film deserves a wider audience.

For Reflection/Discussion

Beware of the spoilers toward the end of this section.

1) What kind of a person do you think Inge is? What must she have in order to cross an ocean to live among a people whose language she does not know? What does her belonging to the

Socialist party in her native Germany suggest about her mind and education? Do you see any symbolism in her carting her large phonograph across the ocean? What role does music seem to play in her life? Have you found music a must in your life, and if so, why?

2) From the scenes in which characters react to Inge's German origin, what is the common view of Germans in 1920? Judging by what the law clerk says about Germans, is this view much different from prejudice against blacks or Jews?

3) What do you think of banker Harmo (Ned Beatty)? He is a church attendee, but do you think he has imbibed much of the spirit of 1 John? What does his statement concerning foreclosure on Frandsen and Brownie's farm ("Business is business.") reveal about the connection between his ethics and his faith? How is it necessary to put religion and business in tight compartments for him to live with himself?

4) From what you see of Frandsen and Brownie, who probably actually runs the farm? How is Brownie a good embodiment of the passage from 1 John?

5) When Minister Sorrenson says in his sermon that he believes in "a God of love and compassion," but also in the necessity to follow the narrow way, what conflict do you see in this—and perhaps within himself? Describe the tension between the two passages quoted at the beginning of this review. Do you think that this is a problem still for the church? How do you think that the church can be welcoming and yet also stand for certain beliefs and a code of conduct?

6) What do you think of Olaf's bidding on his friend's farm? A major act of grace? From a business standpoint, how is it foolish?

7) When Minister Sorrenson confronts Olaf and Inge about their living together, what do you think of her reply that in her heart they are married? And then to his assertion that in

reality they are not, her challenge to him that her belief is similar to his own faith in God, not something that is “real,” but is a matter of the heart? How is this exactly the answer that can get through to him?

8) How is the arrival of the minister and other farmers a matter of grace, of the community responding to a neighbor’s need, as John urges in his letter? What apparently had the minister been doing between the auction and that moment? (Similar to the minister’s acts in *Tender Mercies*.) How is the “dance” scene that closes the film appropriate? How does this film make you feel at its conclusion?

9) The film’s official website offers a number of excellent clips that you can download and use with a group. Go to <http://www.sweetlandmovie.com/> and click onto “Clips