

LONE STAR (1996) __ 10/10

Uncovering crime and passion in a Texas border town

Written and Directed by John Sayles

Chris Cooper	Sheriff Sam Deeds
Elizabeth Peña	Pilar Cruz
Kris Kristofferson	Sheriff Charlie Wade
Matthew McConaughey	Buddy Deeds
Joe Morton	Colonel Delmore Payne
Ron Canada	Otis Payne
Frances McDormand	Bunny

Watching reviews and hearing promotions of this movie more than 10 years ago, now, I had no concept of its dimensions, the universals it deals with so effortlessly: race, legal oppression, cross-cultural taboo-challenging love, the drug laws, the environment... and Texas itself. Lone Star is solidly on my top 10 list.

The story is of Sam Deeds (Cooper) the son of a former popular sheriff Buddy Deeds (McConaughey) of a small border town (loosely patterned after Del Rio, Texas) who returns to take the same job his father had. A skeleton has been discovered on an old military target range, which appears to be that of the murderous racist sheriff Charlie Wade (Kristofferson) who preceded Sam's father.

As Sam proceeds to figure out what happened, he reignites a passion he once had for Pilar (Peña), who is working as a teacher. The movie flashes back to the late 1950s into the early 1970s to show the stage from which the main characters have been propelled, and the influences that make the town of "Frontera, Texas," the menudo (soup) it is today.

The military base near to the town is being shut down, and Big O's, a bar that serves the relatively small number of blacks from the base and town, figures prominently in several plot-related incidents. A parallel story to the families of Sam and Pilar is the story of the family of the new base commander, Colonel Payne (Joe Morton).

The colonel's father is Big O, himself, i.e. Otis Payne (Joe Canada). O is a fascinating man, who, though he may have once been irresponsible for abandoning his wife and son, has an intense interest in the bigger picture of who the Paynes truly are. Otis maintains a personal museum with photos and artifacts that go back to his slave ancestors intermarrying with Seminole Indians from Florida.

Big O shares these ancestral stories with the colonel's son, O's grandson, who is struggling with his relationship to his own militarily inclined father. Will we find resolution in this family matter?

What's brilliant in the film is how Sayles weaves all these different lives together into and out of families, then with families of differing backgrounds—Mexican, Anglo, Indian, African-American—living their stories among other families.

The immigration issue comes into play, as well, and it's portrayals such as these that humanize those who so many want to wall out, imprison, or expel. Hey, people, these are people you're talking about here, not alien invaders.

The plot thickens and some discoveries are made that will disturb the sensibilities of many in the audience, but I won't give either away. I will state the acting is first-class, especially from Cooper and Peña.

Finally, one of the best qualities of the dialog in the film is its natural, extraordinary humor. The lecture from the town bar redneck bartender to Sam is worth the price of admission, as he tells Sam the decline of civilization is upon us now that the Anglos are being pushed out of authority. You 'cain't build no civilization' when the climate isn't colder, as in Europe.

So many funny pieces, so much life and reality, and a fair amount of action and romance, too. A 10.