

*Sling Blade* (1996)

Rated: R

Starring: Billy Bob Thornton, Lucas Black, Natalie Canerday, Dwight Yoakam, John Ritter

Runtime: 2 hr 15 min

Reviewed by Cade Carver

Library Assistant, Systems Department, Marshall District Library

If you haven't seen *Sling Blade*, you are soon to meet quite a unique protagonist. If you have, you'll know that Billy Bob Thornton's original character Karl Childers is like a disturbed cousin of Forrest Gump, with his chin jutting out and a gravelly voice (he sounds like he's been gargling broken glass) slurring out southern slang and broken sentences.

Thornton captures the right tone for this movie. In an early scene, Karl is interviewed by a journalism student just before his release from the psychiatric ward, and the camera lingers uncomfortably close to his face, shown in harsh light and shadow. The score by Daniel Lanois (*Camilla*) is raw and minimalistic as Thornton's monologue plays out, revealing in casual terms but with heavy breathing and his signature grunts how, as a boy, he killed his mother and her lover with a sling blade. "Some folks calls it a sling blade. I calls it a Kaiser blade," he groans before jutting his chin out further and affirming the statement with a low "mm-hmm." It's a chilling scene before the film segues into slightly more heartwarming territory.

After that opening interview and his release, Childers travels to his small childhood town in Arkansas. Having been cooped up most of his life, he has nowhere to go and nobody to take him in, and many of the town's inhabitants have heard of him and what he did as a young man. In a way, he's like a lost child, and the first person to befriend him happens to be a preteen named Frank Wheatley (Lucas Black of *Friday Night Lights* fame). Frank meets Karl coming out of a convenience store and immediately takes a liking to him. During the early moments of their budding friendship, I didn't know just what to feel - if I should be nervous for Frank or happy for Childers. As the film played out, it became the latter as I saw the sweetness in their comradery.

Frank doesn't judge the man for his strange demeanor. Instead, he perceives the goodness in him and listens with sympathy late in the film when Karl finally confides in Frank the crime he committed when he was only a boy and why he did it. The film slowly reveals the darkness in Karl's childhood, which mirrors the abuse Frank now suffers at the hands of his mother's no-good boyfriend Doyle, played brilliantly by country star Dwight Yoakam (*Panic Room*).

The most distressing scenes in the film are the ones involving Doyle, who is cruel with his words even at the best of times, and has a nasty tendency to slip into a drunken rage at the drop of a penny. He berates Linda, Frank, Karl and most of all Linda's coworker and close friend J.T, played by John Ritter (*Three's Company*). J.T. is a gay man living in a traditional southern town and Doyle is a personification of the bigotry he lives in fear of. The bully has taken total control of Linda's household, but there's an explanation for her loyal behavior in the film: he's threatened to kill her "deader than a doornail" if she were to ever think of leaving him.

Though much of the film plays like a bizarrely feel-good drama, focusing on Karl's friendship with Frank, it slowly morphs into an unsettling southern-gothic fable, with Doyle the monster hanging over the proceedings. Young Lucas Black gives an impressive performance as a nice kid who cares deeply for his mother, though Frank is much too young to take on the heavy responsibility of protecting her. Natalie Canerday (*October Sky*) is also good as Linda, likable and caring despite being stuck in a miserable relationship. Canerday makes a slightly underwritten character compelling, and we understand why she would take Doyle back, partly out of loneliness and more than a little bit out of fear.

If the movie has a flaw, it's that Doyle has no redeeming qualities; he's rotten from his first line to his last. Though there are moments in which he comes off more pathetic than powerful, it would have been nice to see that further explored. A mean drunk, he seems to know that he repels people, yet is unable to stop it, and doesn't even try. Still, Thornton and Yoakam succeeded for me in bringing out a visceral hatred for this character, and that's certainly worthy of praise.

The cinematography by Barry Markowitz (*All the Pretty Horses*, another Thornton-directed feature) is simple and sparse, just like the movie. There are few stylistic flourishes, such as a visually haunting moment wherein Karl and Frank sit in front of the river at night, reflections from the water playing across their faces as Karl reveals a terrible secret to his new friend. Throughout, *Sling Blade* is a raw slice of powerful filmmaking.

This is a darkly sweet film about an unforgettable character. It's smartly written and directed and was a thrilling start to the career of a talented actor and filmmaker.

8/10 stars.

This film is available on DVD through MeLCat and on the Hoopla app. For more information please contact the Help Desk: 269-781-7821 x.10