

Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 128 min.

Sometimes despite the best of intentions, things just don’t work out. The period drama *Live by Night* is based on a well-regarded novel by Dennis Lehane (Mystic River, Gone Baby Gone and The Drop among many others). The movie has an excellent cast and crew, some very impressive imagery and strong individual moments. Yet, this tale doesn’t end up translating well to the screen. In fact, it’s a bit of a muddle. There’s too much material here and events feel both rushed and slow-moving at the same time.

Set in the Prohibition era of the 1920s, the plot follows outlaw Joe Coughlin (Ben Affleck). He’s a crook, but generally a nice guy with a soft spot for the ladies; in particular, one Emma Gould (Sienna Miller). After pulling various small heists, the city of Boston’s Irish and Italian mobsters attempt to recruit the protagonist. However, conflict arises when Emma’s boyfriend, Irish crew kingpin Albert White (Robert Glenister), learns of her relationship with Coughlin.

As the plot progresses, our hero attempts to make a new life for himself as head of a rum smuggling band in Florida. While there, he plots to build a casino and begins to fall for Graciela (Zoe Saldana), a member of a local Cuban outfit. And even more characters are introduced during the first hour. Specifically, there are subplots involving Coughlin’s dad (Brendan Gleeson), the Tampa police department Chief (Chris Cooper), a prominent Klu Klux Klan member (Matthew Maher), as well as the Chief’s daughter, Loretta (Elle Fanning), who undergoes a radical transformation and becomes an outspoken opponent of Coughlin’s casino.

It’s a lot for any lead character to handle and Coughlin’s measured approach is constantly questioned - basically, he’s told he isn’t cruel or vicious enough to survive in his position. But perhaps Coughlin’s real problem is just keeping track of what’s going on. There are too many subplots here and the film would have been wiser to narrow its focus. For instance, the intriguing Loretta storyline initially shows a lot of promise, but like many other aspect, ends up underdeveloped. One wishes that the two characters had butted heads for longer than they ultimately do.

Essentially, the movie collapses under its own weight. The opening ten or fifteen minutes have so much narration and introduce so many people that it almost feels like a lengthy montage. The dialogue is exposition heavy, giving updates as well as awkwardly explaining away the fates of many persons involved. It leaves little time for everything to gel. And with so many storylines, the pacing also suffers. Coughlin generally tries to use wisdom and reason in his decision making; it makes him a likable enough rogue, but doesn’t make the events themselves tense or dramatic. By the close, the climax makes little impact.

At least this is a pretty looking film. Early sections of the film set in Boston are a bit monochromatic and dull (no doubt shot that way on purpose), but as soon as the characters move to Florida, the visuals really spring to life. There are a couple of quick and dynamic shoot-outs as well, featuring a few memorable images of characters falling from great heights.

In summation, I appreciated the efforts of the cast and crew and enjoyed certain plotlines and performances. However, this adaptation of *Live by Night* is so busy and overstuffed that it never finds its footing. Ultimately, it ends up feeling like a bit of a jumble.

Visit: ***cinemastance.com***

By Glenn Kay
For the Sun