

GOTHIC NATURE



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Plumbing the Depths: *Ozark* as Rural Gothic

(USA: Media Rights Capital, 2017)

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A recent survey conducted by the Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation found that, despite similar occurrence of economic hardship in the last decade as well as a roughly equivalent rate of poverty, rural and urban citizens in the United States have very different perceptions about poverty (DelReal & Clement, 2017). 56% of rural respondents believed the government did more to help people in urban areas than people in the country, while their urban counterparts were most likely to believe the government helped both groups equally. 42% of rural residents (as opposed to just 16% of urbanites) believed immigrants, as a major ‘economic burden’, were part of the problem. For rural dwellers, these beliefs were closely linked to a sense that the urban poor had become overly dependent on federal assistance without ‘paying their dues’, combined with a sense that ruralites are more reliant upon, and more compassionate toward, their neighbors. These perceptions set the stage for an intense political rift, where ideas about wealth, work, and entitlement deeply divide red states from blue cities.

Into this highly charged atmosphere comes Bill Dubuque’s *Ozark*, released on Netflix in July 2017, which brings fast-talking Chicago financial advisor Marty Byrde (Jason Bateman), along with his wife Wendy (Laura Linney) and children, to the far-flung Lake of the Ozarks—a so-called ‘redneck riviera’ nestled in the hills of southern Missouri. Rather than a vacation, the Byrdes, with increasing desperation, seek a way to launder \$8 million in drug money for a powerful Mexican cartel that was double-crossed by Marty’s business partner (now dissolving in a barrel of acid). In their quest, they run afoul of the locals, including the Langmores—a family of small-time crooks nestled in their lakeside trailer compound—and Jacob (Peter Mullan) and Darlene Snell (Lisa Emery), laconic landowners (and self-declared ‘hillbillies’) whose folksy pronouncements on family and principle mask the fact that they control the Lake’s trade in heroin. Along the way, the show surfaces interesting questions about the economic and cultural dynamics of dependence and reward between rural and urban Americans.

The setting is crucial in telling this story. It shares some features of rural gothic convention, including one notable scene in which Marty's bike is nearly run off a heavily forested road by revenge-seeking locals in a pickup truck. But by and large, the landscape of the series is, well, *busier* than you might expect. No wonder: the winding Lake of the Ozarks has 1,150 miles of shoreline (Lake of the Ozarks Convention & Visitor Bureau, 2018) speckled with hotels and vacation homes, and was named the nation's best recreational lake by *USA Today* in 2016 (Holleman, 2016). The series is shot through with glimpses of this tourist economy at work: congested highways and motor courts, a strip club that becomes a key plot point, and powerboats thrumming across the lake to attend the revelry at Party Cove or get to waterborne church services. While this is a far cry from the Cahulawassee wilderness of *Deliverance*, it is still a landscape of deep economic disparity and simmering resentment. The career of hotel housekeeper Ruth Langmore (Julia Garner) demonstrates that the service economy built on Lake tourism is not adequate to keep local families out of poverty—not without a supplement of extralegal activity. As she says to her family upon discovering \$3 million in cartel money while cleaning the Byrdes' room, 'That much cash-money's ill gotten. We got as much right to it as he does'.



The Byrde family observes their new home, the Lake of the Ozarks, from local landmark Lovers Leap. This shot, one of the few actually filmed in Missouri (rather than Georgia), masks the heavy development around much of the lake. (*Ozark*, 2017). Image courtesy of Netflix.

Moreover the Lake's layered history provides a window into longstanding patterns of rural-urban relationships. Between 1929-1931, the Union Electric Company of St. Louis built the Bagnell Dam (then the largest project of its type in the world) bringing electric power—and vacationers—to the newly formed lake shores (Lake of the Ozarks Convention & Visitor

Bureau, 2018). In a story that will be familiar to many Ozarkers, Jacob Snell recalls how ‘they flooded my people out to make way for this lake’. This traumatic displacement continues to haunt him, and, by his own lights at least, provides a justification for the drug empire he and his wife have built, growing and processing their own poppies and distributing heroin through hollowed-out hymnals at a local church (another deliciously gothic touch). But Snell’s character disintegrates when exposed to light: on one hand, his farm redeems his lost heritage while supporting ‘scores of employees’, but on the other, and with a clear reference to the opioid crisis that is ravaging rural America, the Snells’ just desserts are multiplying the power company’s original sin, trapping the Lake community in an endless cycle of addiction, crime, and dependency.

The show’s climactic scene, in which Marty convinces the Snells to partner with cartel deputy Camino Del Rio (Esai Morales) to build a riverboat casino to meet both parties’ money laundering and drug distribution needs, brings these simmering tensions to a gruesome boil. The Snells are initially repelled by Marty’s proposal to flood a Missouri River tributary that flows across their property in order to create a legally viable location for their casino; as Darlene reprimands him, ‘Symbolism matters, Mr. Byrde. Maybe not to people who have no pride, no history. But to us’. (Her words, and her evident disgust toward the Mexican ‘foreigners’ at the table, recall the all-too-prevalent erasure of the history that immigrants bring to the United States when they arrive). They soften when Marty argues that, with the casino’s profits, they can purchase enough land to finally gain leverage with the power company that displaced their grandparents. But the deal—and Del Rio—are quite literally shot to hell when he jokes about going into business with ‘a bunch of rednecks’. A weighty and troubled word, redneck: in an earlier episode, Jacob explains (partly in order to justify a murder he is about to commit) that the difference between being a redneck and a being a hillbilly is the difference between acting out of anger and acting out of principle. The distinction arises once again here, with the Snells unable to concede the sense of pride that buoys their identity.

Ozark seems to want to push this question a little further, to really interrogate what it means to live honorably in an economy that is premised on the exploitation of a place or a people, or what it could look like for a rural community to thrive in a world whose governing relationships are truly globalized. But for the most part, it trucks in the language of rural caricature, rather than character, and presents us with familiar pictures of disempowered locals, be they beer-swilling trailer dwellers or naïve men of God. The show does offer more depth in

the form of its younger characters, particularly Ruth Langmore, whose talent and ambition lead her into a business partnership with the Byrdes that frays ties of kinship, especially with her father, Cade (Trevor Long), who rules the family from behind bars. In his search for less distracted parents, thirteen-year-old Jonah Byrde (Skylar Gaertner) forms a number of meaningful and complex relationships with local folks and gets interested in guns, leading his parents—perhaps ironically, given the level of violence they tolerate in their business partners—to fret. In doing so, both characters challenge stereotypes about poverty, criminality, and violence relating to rural and urban youth, doing more than any other element in the show to suggest that what we deserve is more complicated than where we live. As the second season, premiering in August 2018, promises both Cade’s release from prison and the development of the floating casino, there are choppy waters ahead—but also an opportunity to more thoroughly sound the depths of America’s rural-urban divide.

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