

## News of the World

“News of the World” is an American [western](#) co-written and directed by [Paul Greengrass](#). It follows a laconic Civil War veteran ([Tom Hanks](#)) who decides to return a young American waif who was been taken hostage by Native Americans as a toddler back to her last remaining family members in West Texas. The film is clearly meant to echo the spirit and flavor of classic American Westerns, like “The Searchers,” (especially) as well as “True Grit” and “Days of Heaven.”

The film is dominated by the figure of Hanks as the Union Army captain named Jefferson Kyle Kidd, who has settled in Texas five years after the War and ekes out a living as a itinerant reader of current newspapers for folks starved of information from the outside world. Fake news, indeed; this is the only news these people get, delivered in dim lecture halls and tacky theaters around the state in Kidd’s gentle but expression-rich cadence.

Roaming the brush-filled countryside outside Wichita Falls one day, he hears heartfelt cries, which turn out to be those of the young Johanna ([Helena Zengel](#)) stolen some six years before, then raised by Kiowa Indians as one of their own. She speaks Kiowa, but has a German tinge to her language lingering over from her birth family. Her remaining kin, an aunt and uncle, live days away, hundreds of miles through the Texas Hill Country. The pair are not well-equipped, and the landscape is harsh, but they struggle on in Kidd’s ramshackle wagon.

The local audiences they play to are generally appreciative and grateful for Kidd’s presentations, but difficulties intrude, such as a trio of lowlifes who want to “buy” the girl, and chase after the two to obtain her, ending in a blistering shootout in a local canyon. One friendly lady saloon owner Gannett (Elizabeth Marvel) is kind to the wanderers before they continue on the road. Joanna eventually even gets into the act and begins to learn some English from the Captain. Eventually, they get past the worst of the hardscrabble plains and reach the farm of Joanna’s kin. Kidd leaves her in their care, but returns to find her bound and tied up like stock. Other calamities occur, like the wrecking of Kidd’s wagon, leaving the pair footbound with no water in the wilderness.

This is new territory for the British Greengrass, who has made memorable films on the Irish troubles (“Bloody Sunday”), in the action genre (three “Jason Bourne” films) and worthy docu-thrillers (“United 93” and “Captain Phillips,” the latter also starring Hanks).

He has clearly studied John Ford’s 1956 epic “The Searchers,” “one of the great Hollywood Westerns. Rather than shoot, however, in Monument Valley or the Four Corners of the Southwest, his vision looks out over the landscape of a

dusty New Mexico, a less picturesque but harshly beautiful terrain. The plot line parrots the original film, with the kidnapping by Indians of a young girl and her embrace of an Indian culture. Even exact details—like the link of a simple doll to the child, her struggles to be understood in a different language, and a late shot of an open cabin door framed by black side panels which directly echoes the Ford film. All these plus the rhythms of the plains on horseback or rustic wagon, plus the reticence of men against the grandeur of landscape evoke the earlier work.

This character of Hanks in “News of the World” is on the crusty, surly side, not the engaging, droll side. While he convinces as a storyteller and a practiced entertainer, the vicissitudes of war and a hard life (he has lost his wife), have left him wary and guarded, quick to smell danger and ambush, to which he is able to react with good sense and tact. Young Helena proves a good foil for him, her plain face and straight blonde bob showing watchfulness and skepticism in her new circumstances. Only at the end, when she has come to assist Kidd in his show, do we see her break out in a rousing smile at the audience’s reaction. Looks like she may be hooked with the show business.

*(The film opened on Christmas Day, is rated “PG-13,” and runs 118 minutes).*

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