

The Dry (2020) Connolly

P Michell, 2024

Story follows off-duty Australian federal police detective Aaron Falk (Bana), who is reluctantly dragged back to his fictional hometown of Kiewarra after his childhood friend is found shot, dead along with their wife and son. The current case, and Falk's presence in town, are complicated by his own implication in the death of another friend, Ellie (BeBe Bettencourt), decades earlier.

Skilfully mixes the past traumatic events of twenty years before with the present.

"Everyone in this town has secrets ..."

"Suburbia in the country? Worst of both worlds."

Was among the top ten highest-grossing films of 2020 in Australia with box office of \$20.1M. Brim full of top rated local talent!

By coincidence The Dry II (2024) is being released around this time (Feb 2024).

The film's dialogue is often sparse / 'dry' as per Faulk's character.

'You were never much of a talker ...'

Creative Personnel

Interesting Podcast, with transcript, of Bana & Connolly discussing the film: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/screen-news/2020/12-18-podcast-eric-bana-robert-connolly-the-dry>

Robert Connolly – Director / Scriptwriter / Producer (16 credits)

Multi-talented. 30 years in the business. Known for TV series 'The Slap'. As a producer and executive producer Robert's credits include The Boys, Romulus My Father, The Warriors, Gallipoli (TV series) and Chasing Asylum.

Harry Cripps – Co-Script (13 credits)

Known for this, Penguin Bloom (2020), Back to the Outback (2021)

Stefan Duscio – Cinematographer (45 credits)

Celebrated Australian known for fluid camera movements. Authentic and innovative approach to cinematic naturalism. Won the Golden Tripod for best cinematography for The Dry. Shot hundreds of commercial and music videos. Graduate of RMIT Media Arts. Shot Apple TV Shantaram (2022).

Australian Cinematographer article of filming 'The Dry':

<https://acmag.com.au/2021/03/01/the-dry/>

Eric Bana – Faulk (43 credits)

Successful Oz film star. Began as comedian with Steve Vizard's 'Tonight Live ..', the 'Eric'. First film 'The Castle' (1997). Famous for 'Chopper' (1997). Generally, makes a film a year, spends rest of time with family.

Genevieve O'Reilly - Gretchen (47 credits)

Irish raised in Adelaide . Played Mon Mothma in Star Wars. Dash MacKenzie in Avatar (2004). Graduate of NIDA.

Keir O'Donnell – Raco (74 credits)

Born in Oz, from 8 years, family moved to Massachusetts. Gaelic name rhymes with 'beer'. Known for this, Wedding Crashers (2005), American Sniper (2014), Fargo TV series [5 eps] (2015)

John Polson – Whitlam Actor (37 credits), Producer (13 credits), Director (30 credits)

Though Oz, based in NY. Multi-talented and hard working ...

Known for Swimfan (2002), Hide and Seek (2005), Siam Sunset (1999), Sum of Us (1994), Mission Impossible II (2000). TV production work includes The Mentalist, Law & Order: Organised Crime.

Trivia - Creator of the short movie festival Tropfest in Sydney in 1993. Today, John is the creative director of what is now called Sony Tropfest which has become the world's largest short film festival.

Julia Blake – Barb (78 credits)

Perennial Oz actress with a long career. Known for Patrick (1978), Travelling North (1987).

Long association (70 eps) with Prisoner TV series.

Spent two years overcoming a debilitating eye disorder before being able to return to work as an actress. In the movie [Innocence \(2000\)](#), she played a woman with an eye disorder.

Was married to Terry Norris.

Bruce Spence – Gerry (131 credits)

New Zealander born to winemakers. Moved to Oz when he was 20. Long career inc Road Warrior (191), Star Wars: Ep III (2005), Dimboola (1979), Stoprk (1971).

Worked at the former Pram Factory Playhouse and La Mama in Melbourne. Part of Australian Performing Group. Then moved to Sydney and very successful work there in theatre.

Trivia - Between jobs Bruce works on his own burgeoning garden and as a volunteer at the Royal Botanic Garden, where he and his group propagate plants. He is also currently chair of the NSW Actors' Benevolent Fund. Very tall – 1.98m.

Trivia

Shot in 'Panavision large format' – not unlike 70mm when first released. (See above podcast.)

Shot entirely on location. The first week was in Castlemaine, where they mostly filmed flashbacks. Then they moved to their main base in the Wimmera region, a small town called Warracknabeal, about four hours north-west of Melbourne. The crew shot locations within one or two hours of the main base, their last week of shooting being in and around Melbourne.

Delayed release because of CoVid.

Bana and Connelly share professional work offices.

Now the 14th-highest-grossing Australian film of all time, outpacing The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.

Reviews

[RogerEbert.com](#) - Sheila O'Malley, May 2021.

"The Dry," the film adaptation of Jane Harper's 2016 international bestseller of the same name, opens with aerial shots of the parched land in Kiewarra, a farming community somewhere outside Melbourne. But there's clearly no farming going on in the arid expanse below, with its lifeless stretches of dried brown fields. These shots continue throughout "The Dry," directed by [Robert Connolly](#), grounding "The Dry" in a very specific world, a very specific time. This is a "whodunit," but the atmosphere is not generic in any way, and the immense heat is felt in every scene, where the fields and tinder-box trees look stunted and almost terrified. The same goes for the community huddled in the midst of "the dry." They are all trapped in space and time, not only by the drought, but by two crimes, separated by decades, all of which threatens to set the whole place ablaze.

City detective Aaron Falk ([Eric Bana](#)), who grew up in Kiewarra, returns for the funeral of Luke Hadler, a childhood friend. This funeral is not your run-of-the-mill sad affair: Luke shot his wife Karen and their small son, before shooting himself. Aaron's return to town stirs up memories of a scandal from 20 years ago, when a teenage girl named Ellie drowned under mysterious circumstances, circumstances which implicated both Luke and Aaron. Both boys were suspects in her death, and they lied to the police to cover their tracks. The scandal was so intense that Aaron's family left town and never came back. Aaron walks back into a hurting community, suffering from the drought, and still in a rage about what happened years before.

Aaron's return is greeted with hostility by most town members, particularly Ellie's father ([William Zappa](#)), who blames Aaron for his daughter's death. Luke's parents, however, convince Aaron to stay on to look into the closed case: they believe their son could never have done such a thing, they think there might have been foul play. Against his better judgment, struggling with guilt and ambivalence, Aaron stays. He teams up with Greg Raco, the local police sergeant ([Keir O'Donnell](#)), who is traumatized from discovering the bodies and inexperienced at investigating violent crimes. Still, though, Greg is a good cop, and has strong sense that there was something very "off" about that crime scene.

Intriguing flashbacks, presented in subjective fragments, are sprinkled throughout the film, interrupting Aaron's present-day investigation. Editors [Nick Meyers](#) and [Alexandre de Franceschi](#) have done an artful and sensitive job creating a collage of the activities of the group of four friends—Ellie ([BeBe Bettencourt](#)), Luke ([Sam Corlett](#)), Gretchen ([Claude Scott-Mitchell](#)), and Aaron ([Joe Klocek](#))—leading up to Ellie's death. The flashbacks never show too much, revealing their truths slowly and inadvertently, sometimes jumping backwards or forwards. The approach makes the audience the detective, trying to interpret the information provided. Luke appears to be pursuing Ellie (albeit in a rough-house way), while Aaron has a silent crush on her. Gretchen is a mostly-passive hanger-on. Bana's grim and troubled demeanor shows how haunted he is at every turn by his young self, his young friends, the beautiful laughing doomed Ellie.

As "The Dry" progresses, so, too, do these flashbacks, leading us closer and closer to Ellie's drowning. As seen through the present-day, where suspicion of Aaron still lingers, these flashbacks shed doubt on every single thing not only he says, but everyone else. Aaron reunites with Gretchen ([Genevieve O'Reilly](#)), and they share memories of Luke, of Ellie. Nobody seems to have any clue what set Luke off, why he would kill his family.

"The Dry" is filled with memorable characters: the small-town doctor (Daniel Frederiksen), the harried grade school principal ([John Polson](#)), the taciturn farmer ([James Frecheville](#)) living with his grandmother: all of these people have secrets, but whether or not the secrets have anything to do with the crime is unknown. Aaron must wade through all of it. Part of the joy of "The Dry" is watching this excellent cast in action.

Cinematographer [Stefan Duscio](#) gives us enormous wide shots of the drought-parched land, with the smoke of wildfires billowing up in the distance, or dust devils spiraling their way across dried fields, cars barreling towards town creating huge dusty trails behind them, all of which gives an eerie sense of isolation and struggle. "The Dry" never lets you forget where you are. This is most evident in the scene when Aaron goes back to the river where Ellie drowned. Only, the river has dried up, leaving just a cavern cutting through the dirt.

Bana is wonderful at mixing the confidence of the "big city" cop with the anxiety of a man grappling with his dark past. Whatever his guilt may or may not be in regards to Ellie's death—and the film is a "whodunit" on two separate tracks—he feels inhibited from proclaiming his innocence. There's a sadness in Bana's face, in his posture, a tortured grief and guilt, but overlaying that is the competence and canniness of a cop alert to suspicious behavior and inconsistencies. In its own quiet way, it's a very effective and emotional performance.

The critique of how corporate farming is destroying small farming communities is there, but it's not a plot point or presented as an overt "message." And the overall feeling of helplessness against forces much bigger than the individual is also woven into the atmosphere. It's the texture of these people's lives. "The Dry" does a lot, and it does it very well.

[The Guardian – Walter Marsh, 2020](#)

Released in 2016, Jane Harper's debut novel, *The Dry*, evoked a sense of sundried desperation and El Niño-inspired unease that felt as familiar to many Australian readers as the book's genre trappings (its tagline, "a desperate act in a small town with secrets", could apply to anything from *Twin Peaks* to *Top of the Lake*).

The book hadn't even hit shelves when producer Bruna Papandrea and screenwriter-director Robert Connolly started planning the film. Papandrea is perhaps best known today for adapting Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* for HBO, which [swapped Sydney's northern beaches for affluent, coastal California](#) – but there was no separating *The Dry* from its western Victorian backdrop.

"It just lends itself to mystery and suspense so well because you do have that undercurrent of danger in a lot of locations," Harper says.

Whether set in state forests, coastal communities or great, thirsty expanses of agricultural land, her four novels to date pick up on the [duelling sensibilities of romanticism and dread that have recurred in Australian storytelling](#) since colonisation. *"It's quite easy for things to go wrong quite quickly, which is a real gift for a writer."*

Before making the film, Connolly hit the road with Bana so the pair could immerse themselves in the world of the book. *"You drive one, two, three hours out of Melbourne, and by the time you cross four you're into the Mallee region and the landscape changes*

immensely,” Connolly says. “I fell in love with it; it’s the most beautiful, extraordinary place. But it’s tough ... you feel this muscular, tough lifestyle of the landscape set against its beauty.”

In this tension, Harper’s characters inherit a settler narrative of pioneers carving hard-won homes and livelihoods from an often inhospitable, alien outback. It’s also part of a nation-building mythology that helped launder the realities of dispossession and environmental degradation on unceded country. (The Dry’s story of a complicated small-town homecoming rings very differently to that of [Wiradjuri author’s Tara June Winch’s The Yield](#); in the film, a retired farmer, played by Bruce Spence, laments without irony how the automation of agriculture could all but clear the region of its people and communities – imagine that.)

Like the novel, the film’s slow-burning plot crackles with other 21st century pressures and anxieties that seem ripped straight from a Four Corners report. While the apparent murder-suicide that initially draws Falk back home echoes all-too-common acts of male-perpetrated family violence, Harper’s books are also peppered with corporate crime, revenge porn, gambling addiction, crippling debt, preyed-upon backpackers and toxic masculinity that sweats into hi-vis and private school uniforms alike. Onscreen, Connolly frames Harper’s characters like ants set against the vastness of the landscape – and the scale of their problems.

“Something Eric and I talked a lot about early on was not judging the characters that live in that world,” says Connolly, who also drew inspiration from Roman Polanski’s similarly water-driven whodunnit Chinatown. “There’s a version of these stories that’s like Deliverance – ‘urban character gets stuck in dark, horrific regional place’ – and that wasn’t our intention. We had to look deep into the heart of these damaged characters and the tough luck they’ve had, and find the humanity.”

For Harper, that humanity was grounded in her 13 years as a print journalist. “It gave me a really good ability to listen to people’s stories and try to find a human element behind the headlines.”

Inevitably, the greatest of the pressures facing these characters are drought and fire, both worsened by a changing climate that, counter to the denial of federal ministers in Akubra-and-moleskin cosplay, is evident on the land. Like its source novel, The Dry ties into [a wave of recent local literature from Alice Bishop’s A Constant Hum to Jennifer Mills’ Dyschronia](#) that reflect upon the impact of ecological disaster on small communities.

“When I moved back to Australia in 2008 I got sent on a fire safety course as a reporter, so I could be safe in the event that I would have to go out and cover a bushfire,” Harper says. “I was stunned by what I saw and learned – I’d never seen that portrayal of fire. How quickly it goes from OK to deadly in the space of minutes, that’s always stayed with me.”

Connolly says: *“The big image of the film is Aaron standing in a river that’s now completely dry and remembering himself 25 years ago, swimming with his friends. It’s kind of devastating imagery.”*

“Climate change and its impact on the land were present with us all the time,” he adds. “We were filming out in a part of Australia that is doing it really tough. Beulah, the town [on the poster], [has drinking water issues](#). It’s ever present. Farmers are growing different grains than they used to because there’s not enough water, they’re adapting.”

Much has changed since filming was completed in 2019. After the carnage of last summer's bushfires, Australia is now entering [a typically wetter \(if still record-breaking\) La Niña period](#). Worldwide protests [have seen the very nature of the cop-centric crime drama reappraised](#). And now *The Dry* hits cinemas during a [different kind of dry spell](#), as one of few new releases on what is typically one of Hollywood's biggest days of the year.

"We really tried to make this kind of, we call it, 'hyper-Australian' cinema," Connolly says. "A big Australian film: big landscapes, big stories, [music](#), stars – one that brings Australian audiences to the cinema to watch."

A year of lockdowns might also grant the film an edge neither Harper or Connolly could have scripted: only in 2020 could 117 minutes of a maskless Eric Bana freely travelling around the Victorian countryside also qualify as escapist fantasy.