

**STRANGERLAND PRESS**

# Sundance: 'Strangerland' Director Signs With Gersh (Exclusive)



Kim Farrant

Courtesy of Gersh

- Kim Farrant's feature debut, a World Cinema Dramatic selection, stars Nicole Kidman and Joseph Fiennes.

by Rebecca Sun

1/21/2015 1:19pm PST

*Strangerland* director **Kim Farrant** has signed with Gersh, *The Hollywood Reporter* has learned.

The former actress is making her feature debut at Sundance with the drama, which stars **Nicole Kidman** and **Joseph Fiennes** as a couple whose teenage children suddenly disappear from their remote Australian desert town. **Hugo Weaving** also stars as a local cop leading the search. The film will compete in the festival's World Cinema Dramatic category.

# 10 Sundance Directors to Watch Includes Spike Lee Protege, 'Yes Man' Writers, 'Martha Marcy' Producer

**MOVIES** | By [Jeff Sneider](#) on January 21, 2015 @ 1:36 pm [Follow @theinsneider](#)  
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#### “Bachelorette” filmmaker Leslye Headland returns to Sundance with a higher profile this time

Filmmaking careers are born at Sundance, as evidenced by directors Kevin Smith ([“Clerks”](#)), J.C. Chandor ([“Margin Call”](#)) and Damien Chazelle (“Whiplash”). This year’s festival features plenty of returning artists as well as new voices with something fresh to say. [TheWrap](#) talked to buyers and sellers before whittling down this list of 10 buzzworthy filmmakers on the eve of Sundance. Something tells us we’ll be hearing about them for years to come.

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**Nikole Beckwith, “Stockholm, Pennsylvania”** – Beckwith is one of several promising female filmmakers at Sundance this year. Her movie focuses on the strained bond between a mother (Cynthia Nixon) and her daughter (Saoirse Ronan), who returns home after many years in captivity. Beckwith also wrote the Black List script, making her a dual threat behind the camera.



**Robert Eggers, “The Witch”** – Eggers displays a masterful sense of control in this creepy period piece set in New England in 1630. The deliberately-paced story follows a family that turns on each other following a newborn’s disappearance, and yes, there’s a witch involved. Eggers offers striking visuals and elicits a strong performance from his young star, Anya Taylor-Joy.



**Kim Farrant, “Strangerland”** – Farrant may be a veteran filmmaker but this tale of a missing child represents her best shot to date at reaching a wide audience. The gut-wrenching drama stars [Nicole Kidman](#) and Joseph Fiennes as an Australian couple whose children disappear. We’ve seen several male directors tackle similar stories in recent years but “Strangerland” could be unique in a female filmmaker’s hands.



**Corin Hardy, “The Hallow”** – Hardy is an up-and-coming filmmaker with visual style to spare. Not only has he been compared to [Guillermo del Toro](#), but Hollywood has already set its sights on him as the next big thing, as he beat out more experienced competition for Relativity’s reboot of “The Crow.” His first film is a harrowing survival tale that concerns a family who unwittingly disturb a horde of demonic forces in a remote wilderness — which sounds perfect for Sundance.



**Leslye Headland, “Sleeping With Other People”** – Headland may be the highest-profile filmmaker on this list thanks to the impressive VOD success of “Bachelorette.” She reunites with Gary Sanchez producers [Will Ferrell](#), [Adam McKay](#) and Jessica Elbaum on this romantic comedy starring Jason Sudeikis, Alison Brie and Adam Scott. Headland has been honing her comedic voice over the years and is becoming a force to be reckoned with.

**Also Read: [Sundance: First Look at Cynthia Nixon in Josh Mond’s Directorial Debut ‘James White’ \(Photo\)](#)**



**Justin Kelly, “I Am Michael”** – With the help of James Franco and Zachary Quinto, Kelly explores the role religion plays in sexuality in this indie drama, which will surely generate discussion in Park City. Kelly’s lyrical direction serves as a nice compliment to the complex material, and he gets admirable performances out of his actors while leaving them room to improvise and experiment.





**Michael Larnell, “Cronies”** – Larnell is a protege of Spike Lee, who executive produced this black-and-white coming-of-age movie that recalls the spirit of Lee’s own debut “She’s Gotta Have It.” Sundance has given us Ryan Coogler and Justin Simien in recent years, and while “Cronies” isn’t as polished as [“Fruitvale Station”](#) or “Dear White People,” Larnell could find himself on a similar trajectory as those talented African-American filmmakers.



**John Maclean, “Slow West”** – Yippee ki yay, anyone with a name like that belongs on a list like this. The Scottish filmmaker makes his Sundance debut with this old-school Western, which represented a passion project for its star Michael Fassbender. The film was produced by See-Saw Films, which often exhibits good taste, and we see no reason the company won’t continue its hot streak here.

**Also Read:** [Sundance Parties 2015: The 10 Hottest Invites \(Updating\)](#)



**Andrew Mogel & Jarrad Paul, “The D Train”** – Comedic directing duos are all the rage these days between “The LEGO Movie’s” Phil Lord & Chris Miller and the “Crazy Stupid Love” team of Glenn Ficarra & John Requa, and these guys could be next in line. They co-wrote the Jim Carrey movie “Yes Man” as well as Jonah Hill’s animated series “Allen Gregory,” and they’ve contributed to countless other scripts. “D Train” finds Jack Black desperate to convince James Marsden to attend their high school reunion, and it’s billed as a comedy with both laughs and heart.



**Josh Mond, “James White”** – Mond is no stranger to Sundance, having produced “Martha Marcy May Marlene,” “Afterschool” and “Simon Killer,” but this represents his first time behind the camera. Mond is a principal of Borderline Films along with fellow NYU grads Antonio Campos and Sean Durkin, and the trio take turns directing while the other two produce. “James White” is incredibly personal for Mond, and we suspect strong reviews for this drama.

**BONUS FILMMAKERS:** Craig Zobel and Kyle Patrick Alvarez are no strangers to Sundance thanks to **“Compliance”** and “C.O.G.” but both directors are poised to make a jump with their respective follow-ups “Z for Zachariah” and “The Stanford Prison Experiment.” Both directors return to Park City flanked by their starry casts (Margot Robbie, Chris Pine and Chiwetel Ejiofor in “Zachariah”; Billy Crudup and Ezra Miller in “Prison”) so while they may not catch anyone by surprise this time, both are bound to have people talking.





## Sundance Women Directors: Meet Kim Farrant - 'Strangerland'



By Becca Rose | Women and Hollywood January 22, 2015 at 5:41PM



Sundance Institute 'Strangerland'

Kim Farrant's *Naked on the Inside* sold to major networks worldwide and her award winning short films *The Secret Side of Me*, *Alias*, *Sammy Blue*, *Beloved* and *Bombshell* have screened at Cannes, New York, London & Toronto and more. ([Kim Farrant's official site](#))

*Strangerland* will premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival on January 23.

**W&H: Please give us your description of the film playing.**

KF: It's about a couple, the Parkers (Nicole Kidman and Joseph Fiennes), who move to a remote Australian desert town and pretty soon after that, their two teenage kids go missing -- just before a massive dust storm hits. With the town suddenly shrouded in dust, the townsfolk band together to search for the children -- lead by local cop David Rae (Hugo Weaving). As the search continues, Rae begins to unravel the family's secrets as to why they so abruptly left the previous town. Suspicion is cast, rumors spread and hysteria sees people turn on each other, including the Parkers. With scorching temperatures rising and time running out to find the kids before they perish, the Parkers are pushed to the edge as they struggle to cope with the terrifying uncertainty of their children's fate.

**W&H: What drew you to this story?**

KF: I wanted to explore what behaviors we go into when life sideswipes us and we find ourselves completely up against it. Do we drink, take drugs, gamble, avoid, deny, blame others, become violent, act out sexually? And even more taboo than that, I wanted to explore how and when women act out sexually, something that often seems more acceptable in Western society for men to do rather than women.

I also wanted to show the parallel between the incredibly powerful force of female sexuality and that of nature (hence the term mother nature). I also saw in the story a wonderful opportunity to illustrate that sometimes something beautiful can come from tragedy, the blessings in a crisis.

**W&H: What was the biggest challenge in making the film?**

KF: Getting the film financed. People found the script confronting; I think it scared them and attracted them at the same time because it was tapping into the shadow side of female sexuality and what happens when primal needs don't get met within a relationship.

**W&H: What do you want people to think about when they are leaving the theatre?**

KF: How they act out in times of crisis. What patterns of behavior do they go into? How do they cope with extreme emotional pain and uncertainty? Ultimately, I want them to consider being more compassionate towards themselves and others in how we all deal with the more punishing times in our lives.

**W&H: What advice do you have for other female directors?**

KF: To be completely true to themselves and their inner knowing. I made a commitment to myself when making the film, to stay connected to my feelings and to my instincts, and to reside in, and direct from, my big, wild heart. Not just function in my head.

I checked in with myself at the start of each day and end of each day (and when I had a moment at lunch) to make sure that I was still feeling connected to my vision and that I

was expressing everything I needed to say on an interpersonal level with everyone I was working with. Cast and crews on film sets are dealing with huge amounts of pressure and everyone is trying to do their best and not fuck up, so emotions run high and I had to really be diligent in continually communicating anything that wasn't working for me, be it creativity or personally, so that there was no tension on my set. I believe a good vibe on any production all starts with the director.

I never want to be one of those women who buys into a paradigm that it's a man's world and that you have to cut off your womanliness to make it. To the contrary, I stayed grounded in my feminine self and lead from there. What does my feminine self mean to me? Well, I think all men and women have feminine qualities but for me it means being able to feel and sense things deeply. So if I was moved by a performance, I let myself cry. If I felt angry, I tried to name it honestly, without dumping or blaming, so that issues could be discussed openly. I can't direct if I'm shut down trying to protect myself. How can I tune into an actor's performance if I'm not 100% open and receptive?

I also think it's really important for me to be connected to my body, so I went running each morning before shooting or I'd swim after wrap. Not only did it mean I was very fit and could run half a mile out in the desert at the drop of a hat when the Motorolas weren't working to talk to an actor who was alone out in the bush, but it also meant that my body instincts were alive and operating at an optimum level so I could respond from my gut instincts. I also sometimes would put on really loud music at the houses we were staying in and just have a dance or have a whacked out old scream at the ceiling. I shake off the day -- dance is my medicine.

Another thing I'd suggest is to treat everything an actor or a crew member gives as an offering of their creativity, whether the idea works for the production or the story or helps me work out what doesn't. It's a gift from them and needs to be acknowledged. And therefore I always attempt to thank people, no matter how big or small the offering. And give them positive feedback about their work when credit is due. I don't like to withhold from people. Why do that? People love to be acknowledged and I find they worked harder because of it. And one of the best ways I could acknowledge the amazing work of my cast and crew was to pay out of my own pocket for three wonderful massage therapists Gina Chick, Susan Walstab and chiropractor Dr Randall Farrant, to massage the cast and crew during the shoot. They lapped it up and I gave this gift to myself too. Self-care is really a must for me. How can I give to others if I don't nourish myself first?

**W&H: What's the biggest misconception about you and your work?**

KF: Me - that I must be square because I don't drink alcohol or do drugs. The Australian crew were a bit shocked that I didn't drink and to see I was the first person cutting loose on the dance floor at the wrap party and the last to leave. Alcohol and drugs give me headaches, make me depressed the next day and clog my creative channel, so I don't do either and haven't for a long time.

My work - I have encountered misconceptions about being a female director. For example, when I was preparing for my big pitch to our Australian funding body to green light the film, I decided to go out and buy myself a new outfit for the meeting. A male friend came shopping with me and he was going around the store pulling all these hokey women's business shirts and trousers off the racks and handing them to me. I kept looking at them saying, "Er... No... No... No..." Finally I found a pretty and flattering dress I loved and put it on and said, "What do you think?" And he handed me another formal business shirt and pants and said, "I think you need to show them that you can lead a bunch of 120 people on your set, mostly of whom will be men." And I said, "What, you think I need to look more like a man to do that?" and he said, "Well, it will help prove to them that you can direct." To which I gagged and replied, "I don't need to cut off my femininity or my sexuality in order to direct." And I bought the dress, wore it to the meeting, felt awesome, pitched like it was my last day on earth and we got the funding.

**W&H: How did you get your film funded? (Is it a studio film, a crowd sourced film, somewhere in between?) Share some insights into how you got the film made.**

KF: Besides my foxy dress, government funding agencies in Australia -- Screen Australia and Screen NSW, The Irish Film Board, local distribution by Transmission, International Sales agents Wild Bunch, and International investors Worldview.

I love to pitch so I pitched the film at several markets -- Cannes, Berlin, Rotterdam, Dublin, Screen Producers Association Australia and then to sales agents around the world, often by myself, sometimes with Fiona Seres the original writer and sometimes with the producers Macdara Kelleher and Naomi Wenck. I am also a co-producer on the film so I think that helps as a director to be involved in the who is going to back your film so that you know who you are engaging with creatively and financially.

I also needed to show that I was ready and able to direct a feature. I'd made network one hour TV shows and lots of short dramas, and long form documentaries, but I needed something more current and a longer format drama. So I wrote and directed and self and crowd funded a half hour drama and used that as part of our submission for funding and that really helped show the funding bodies how I had grown as a director over the years of developing the project.

The other thing that really helped was making not just my directors vision book but making visual slide shows to music and I also shot some scenes from the film with other actors which I used in submissions.

**W&H: Name your favorite woman-directed film and why.**

KF: Susanne Bier - *Open Hearts*, *In a Better World*, *After the Wedding* and the original Danish version of *Brothers*. Bier gets such depth and brutal honesty in the performances

she elicits from actors. Her films have such pure integrity and show both the ugliest and most beautiful sides of human nature. She is probably my favorite female director.

Andrea Arnold - *Wasp*, *Red Road*, *Fish Tank*. What incredible films! I'm such a huge fan of Arnold and her films have such guts and strong female characters that desperately want things and go all out to get them. She is not afraid and this translates to her actors. She also so accurately represents the worlds of her characters through detailed design and her shooting styles and collaboration with the uber talented DOP Robbie Ryan.

Jane Campion - I loved *Sweetie* and *The Piano* and *In The Cut* and her short films *Peel* and *A Girls Own Story*. She writes and directs such strongly defiant women, explores being female in a multidimensional way, and she is not afraid to explore women's sexual needs.

Claire Denis - *Beau Travail* is one of my favorite films. I love how she explores feminine qualities in men in that film, in a sensuous, sculpturesque way and I respect her for her darkness and willingness to show the incredibly messy and darker side of human relationships, illustrated in her sibling love flick *Nenette and Boni*.

VOGUE

# 20 Films We're Psyched to See at Sundance

JANUARY 22, 2015 4:50 PM by [JULIE BRAMOWITZ](#)

For dedicated moviegoers, 2015 doesn't officially start until the Sundance Film Festival kicks off in Park City. Though the indie fest just turned 30, Sundance has fended off upstarts like Tribeca and SXSW to remain the most exciting cinematic showcase for homegrown talent, as well as the clearest indicator of where American film is headed next—remember it was only twelve months ago when **Damien Chazelle** premiered *Whiplash*, which is now up for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. This year's program—which runs from today through February 1—is as wide-ranging as ever, presenting 123 feature and documentary films. Which up-and-comer is poised to become the next **Richard Linklater**? To be determined. But for now, here are 20 films we're excited to catch at Sundance 2015.

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*Strangerland*

Missing children are also a part of **Kim Farrant's** *Strangerland*, an Australian thriller with **Nicole Kidman** and **Joseph Fiennes** as the bewildered parents whose son and daughter mysteriously disappear in a remote desert town.





# Sundance Review: STRANGERLAND and the Dust of Despair

January 25, 2015 By Bears Fonte



Every major Australian feature has to have either Nicole Kidman, Geoffrey Rush

or Hugo Weaving, STRANGERLAND has two of them, so I figured I was in for a treat. Everyone knows if you try to run from your problems they always catch up. This dictum is well illustrated in another Sundance film IT FOLLOWS ([I interviewed writer/director David Robert Mitchell during Fantastic Fest](#)).

Sundance world cinema selection premiere Strangerland tells a similar story, but one where the danger is far more grounded in this world.

Joseph Fiennes plays Matthew Parker, a pharmacist who has moved his family to a run down town in the Australian Outback to escape the past. No one particularly likes it there, especially Tommy, his son who has taken to walking at night when he can't sleep. Daughter Lily seems to be the primary reason for the move as she had an affair with her teacher. When the two children wander off into the night, Parker is not too keen to make the town aware of their troubles.

As the Lily promiscuity becomes more apparent, fingers start to point: Catherine Parker (Fiennes's wife played by Nicole Kidman) points to the simple Bertie who painted their house and was the subject of Lily's secret love collages, Matthew Parker points to his wife (he actually tells her "well, she didn't get it from me"), and Detective Davis Rae (Hugo Weaving) points to Matthew Parker, especially when it comes out that he beat Lily's teacher nearly to death. As the search continues, the Parker marriage crumbles and they take the town with it.



STRANGERLAND works because all the parts seem selected to have the greatest impact. The depth of the relationship between Fiennes and Kidman gives them plenty of great moments, and when Weaving makes it a triangle, the film soars. It is a true honor to watch such phenomenal actors work their craft and the film is filled with more buried drama than a Sam Shepard play.

If that wasn't enough, the setting provides a landscape of despair to torture the characters. As the town scours the desolate countryside for signs of the children, the barren cliff walls and dry dust mock their quest. I've often remarked that so many post-apocalyptic films utilize the outback as their location because it has that naturally beautiful yet completely inhospitable look. It is so effective then to see it in a contemporary piece, where it can represent the apocalypse of all hope. The town plays as a border town, one last stop before entering the unknown, as the children disappear into the empty beyond.

The most frightening moment of the film, and one that stands out as the most original, is the onset of the dust storm, a virtual wall of sand that rolls over the town. The Parkers are driving through the town looking for their children when a tidal wave of dust engulfs the car. Their search continues in the unbreathable air, and they can barely open their eyes.



Director Kim Farrant fills her first feature with spectacular tension and gripping drama and really commands the screen with a perfectly crafted film. The cinematography is great, but always in service of telling the story, even when the vistas get overwhelming.

Each performance shines, and it especially nice to see a film that could have just been a simple end of a marriage kitchen sink drama layered with a mystery and some great action moments. In fact, it is the most complete film I've seen at Sundance so far. If I have to be critical, I would say the ending, which is a bit of a non-ending, is somewhat disappointing. Not that it is unexpected, and in a story like this, the open-ended feeling adds to the unknown quality of life, the theme of rescuing your family from the brink of desolation. I just wished they had tied up one story line, at least in terms of how the family will proceed. I won't say more than that, because I don't want to ruin how the film plays out, so you know I think its good.

It sounds like STRANGERLAND is about to be picked up by Alchemy for 1.5 million and a multi-city theatrical US release, so that's good news, you should be able to see this film sooner rather than later. Be sure to follow me on twitter @bearsfonte for my film by film reaction of this year's festival.

# ***Sundance: Alchemy Buys Nicole Kidman's 'Strangerland'***



JANUARY 27, 2015 | 11:19AM PT

**Dave McNary**

Film Reporter [@Variety DMcNary](#)

[Alchemy](#) has acquired all North American rights to director Kim Farrant's drama "Strangerland," starring [Nicole Kidman](#), Joseph Fiennes and Hugo Weaving. The film premiered in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition on Friday. Alchemy is planning a multiplatform release later this year.

The film centers on a couple that has recently transplanted to a remote Australian desert town. Their lives are flung into crisis when their two teenage kids mysteriously disappear as a massive dust storm hits.

"Strangerland" is written by Fiona Seres and Michael Kinirons and based on a story by Seres. [Producers](#) are Macdara Kelleher and Naomi Wenck; executive producers are Molly Conners, Maria Cestone, Sarah E. Johnson, Adriana L. Randall, Andrew Mackie and Richard Payten.

It's the second acquisition for Alchemy since it rebranded itself earlier this month and ditched the Millennium Entertainment label. On Jan. 13, Alchemy announced it had acquired the crime thriller "[Kidnapping Mr. Heineken](#)," starring Anthony Hopkins, Jim Sturgess, Sam Worthington and Ryan Kwanten, and set a March 6 release date. Alchemy's Jeff Deutchman negotiated the deal with CAA on behalf of the filmmakers. Wild Bunch is handling foreign sales, with Transmission distributing in Australia and New Zealand.



**NEW YORK POST**

# 12 films that made bank at Sundance

By [Kyle Smith](#)

January 29, 2015 | 8:34pm



Tony Revolori, Kiersey Clemons and Shameik Mookre in "Dope." Photo: David Moir

Enthusiastic audiences at this year's Sundance Film Festival led to major deals for at least four much-liked pictures, all of them selling for more than any movie last year.

The tear-jerker "Brooklyn," the contemporary urban drug comedy "Dope," the tragicomic "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" and the screwball buddy comedy "Mistress America" all fetched large sums by the standards of Sundance, where last year's priciest acquisition, "The Skeleton Twins," sold for only \$3.5 million (and grossed only \$5 million when it was released).

“Brooklyn,” an old-fashioned love triangle with a touching lead performance by Saoirse Ronan as a 1950s Irish immigrant torn between a boy back home and the man she meets in New York City, went for a huge \$9 million to Fox Searchlight, which also bought “Me and Earl.”



Saoirse Ronan and Emory Cohen in “Brooklyn.” Photo: Kerry Brown

In that film, a teen and a friend with whom he makes silly parodies of classic films befriend a classmate with leukemia. Searchlight evidently hopes to market the movie, which sold in the mid-sevens figures, to fans of last year’s similar “The Fault in Our Stars.”

Searchlight reeled in yet another big fish with \$6.5 million for Noah Baumbach’s New York comedy “Mistress America,” about a shy Barnard student (Lola Kirke) who gets caught up in the madcap schemes of her hilarious future sister-in-law (Greta Gerwig).

“Dope,” about a nerdy black teen in rough Inglewood, Calif., who aspires to get into Harvard but instead has to get rid of the cache of drugs he finds in his backpack, sold for \$7 million to Open Road Films.

Sex comedies made a major impact this year, notably “The Overnight,” a comic odyssey about two Los Angeles couples (Adam Scott and Taylor Schilling, Jason Schwartzman and Judith Godrèche) getting to know each other a little too well; “The Bronze,” about a slutty ex-Olympic gymnast (Melissa Rauch) who has a gold medal-worthy sex scene; “The D Train,” a high school reunion comedy with Jack Black and James Marsden; and “The Diary of a Teenage Girl,” in which a budding

comic-book artist (Bel Powley) has an affair with her mother's boyfriend (Alexander Skarsgård).



Lily Tomlin and Julia Garner in "Grandma." Photo: Aaron Epstein

Among the other pictures snapped up by eager distributors were "Grandma," starring Lily Tomlin as a crusty old lady on a road trip with her teen granddaughter; "The Witch," an arty horror movie set in 1630s New England; the Nicole Kidman drama "Strangerland," about a couple who lose their children in the outback; and the acclaimed two-hander "The End of the Tour," about a Rolling Stone journalist's (Jesse Eisenberg) five days of traveling with the novelist David Foster Wallace (Jason Segel), whose life would end in suicide 12 years later.

# Weaving and Kidman add star power to Kim Farrant's *Strangerland*

□ *Michael Bodey*

□ THE AUSTRALIAN



Kim Farrant's debut feature, *Strangerland*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Picture: Simon Bullard.

## Things are not always what they seem in the new Australian feature film *Strangerland*.

On screen, the narrative about a couple transplanted to the (fictional) Australian country town of Nathgari and subsequently thrown into crisis when their teenage children disappear, throws many feints and dummies in its whodunnit conceit.

Off screen, *Strangerland* appears to be a star vehicle for Nicole Kidman, who plays Catherine Parker, the mother dealing with her pain in unexpected ways.

But debut feature director Kim Farrant says she and the film's original writer, Fiona Seres, conceived the screenplay as a vehicle for some of Hugo Weaving's under-appreciated qualities. He was their only casting priority, to play the country cop compromised by the unfolding mystery in the small town.

Farrant worked with Weaving on her second short film (*No One To Blame*) and Seres knew him well. His policeman character, David Rae, would need to offer a contrast with Catherine's emotionally shut-down husband, Matthew (Joseph Fiennes), with an intuitive warmth.

"Knowing him as a person, we both realised this part of him doesn't get seen on screen," Farrant says. "Hugo's often portrayed on screen as this villain, a cold, aloof man and he's actually very sensual and beautiful and loving and sensitive, so it was: 'Yes, let's cast him!'"

Everyone else in the film revolved around him rather than the normal practice of pivoting around the lead character, which in this film is Kidman's Catherine. "He has

incredible depth and when you look at him on screen you read years of enduring life in him,” Farrant adds. “For this character that was perfect [because] as a cop he’d seen a lot of shit go down and been living in a series of country towns and people can get quite hard in isolated rural landscapes.”

The story behind Kidman’s return home for her second independent Australian film in a relatively short period (after 2013’s *The Railway Man*) is testament to the international breadth of this country’s actors. Weaving and Kidman share an American agent, who suggested she read the *Strangerland* script. Kidman loved it and wanted to participate, so Farrant flew to the star’s Nashville home “to make sure we were on the same page”.

“And it was really lovely to hear from her why she wanted to do it, because it’s such a demanding role and such a vulnerable character that I wanted to make sure she was really up for it,” Farrant says. “And she was. I was pretty lucky. Blessed.”

Kidman never phones in a performance, and Catherine demands a lot of her, particularly as Fiennes’s performance sets up a brick wall.

Farrant, who has numerous shorts, a couple of acclaimed documentaries (including *Naked on the Inside*) and episodic network television (*Rush*) to her credit, has high praise for Kidman.

“She’s so incredibly hardworking, thorough — she knew the script back to front and we had these robust, fantastic debates about what was happening to the character,” the filmmaker recalls.

“She was very open to trying stuff and in the edit she’s a director’s dream because she gives you so many options, just slight variations in where you can take it, so she’s a true artist in that way.”

Kidman lets it all out in another raw performance to add to an always risky and eventful career. Catherine deals with her worry and grief about her missing son and daughter, and the small town’s gazing eyes, by reverting to a former sexual self that had been suppressed by her husband.

Catherine appears to have always been a volatile and flirty woman; the reaction from some viewers to this aspect of character frustrates the director.

“That was interesting because I think there’s a judgment around a woman or a character that is sexualised,” she says, smiling. “Apparently it’s OK for (Michael) Fassbender to sexualise his behaviour in *Shame* but if a woman sexualises, *well...*”

The film emerged from Farrant’s experience as a 22-year-old when her father died. Interestingly, it mirrors the reaction of director Jonathan Teplitzky to his partner’s death, as dramatised in his underrated Australian film *Burning Man* (2011).

Farrant remains curious about the period during which she was living by herself in New York and “how I coped or didn’t cope with that depth of grief”. She found herself wanting contact, to be held or touched, although she “ended up sexualising that experience of grief” through a few intimate encounters. She wanted anything other than to “feel that tragic well of grief”.

“And then I was shocked at myself,” she says. “Why would you do that — with only a couple of people — when you’re so fragile and so vulnerable right now and yet you put yourself in a situation with a total stranger?”

“Years later, reflecting on it, I was still fascinated about why I did it, and saw it in other people and was fascinated by this need to connect or make love or f..k or whatever in the face of loss and uncertainty.”

Teplitzky was similarly moved. He realised later that when something so fundamental disappears, one can’t help but think life’s normal rules no longer apply. The reaction to loss is quite often illogical or destructive.

Farrant agrees. “When you feel like the ground’s moved from under you, you feel like you have no control any more, there’s nothing you can hold on ... sex can make you temporarily feel like you’re in control.”

She was intrigued by the notion of how people deal with crises and feeling out of control. In her case, she grasped on to sex, but for others it can be alcohol, drugs, work, food or violence.

“Whatever it is, we all have our ways of coping, but I felt a lot of shame around how I coped or acted out and [did not] cope,” Farrant says. “I was like: ‘Really? Am I the only person who feels like this?’ ”

Apparently not, although the film has been a long haul to progress from that original question to a fully formed story that, to be fair, plays both as a simple whodunnit and as an emotional character study. The director says it has been 13 years since she first tossed around the idea of using her experience as a potential narrative. Consequently, she was overjoyed, crying and screaming, when she learned the film had been accepted to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

The film had taken many turns along the way. For instance, Seres couldn’t continue working on her screenplay when her career took off due to her TV work here on *Love My Way*, which took her to Britain to write the miniseries *The Silence* and telemovie *The Lady Vanishes*.

She has also been working with Steven Spielberg in the US. And after a chance meeting at a film festival, Farrant received the backing of the Irish Film Board and later the assistance of Irish screenwriter Michael Kinirons and Australian producer Naomi Wenck.

And Sundance seemed a fitting venue for a cross-cultural rural Australian story.



"It was the most perfect opportunity because it's got actors in it who have crossed the American divide, and it felt like even more of an appropriate home than did Cannes," she says

"In a way the film has a few more French qualities in being ambiguous and a little sparse in the writing and there's subtlety to it [but] it has a cast [that] is predominantly known in America. And setting a film in the middle of the desert and screening it in the middle of the snow was fun," Farrant says, smiling.

Filming in Canowindra, the NSW town near Cowra (it was also filmed in Broken Hill, Silverton and Mundi Mundi), under the gaze of curious locals wasn't always easy, however. One crucial and bracing scene, in which a broken Catherine walks down the middle of the town's main street, could hardly be filmed in seclusion.

"It was my first drama feature and we had a crew of 85 and maybe 20 extras and then 100-150 town members just watching every scene I was directing," Farrant recalls.

"And they were intense, emotional scenes with an Academy Award-winning actor. That was full on trying to block them out of my vision and knowing the most important thing was the moment and knowing where the character was going in that scene.

"It was difficult. but also the town was incredibly supportive and excited we were there."

What the locals will make of the end product remains to be seen. *Strangerland* is not always the Australian film it seems. Cinema embraces ambiguity but will everyday Australians?

"To make a film in this landscape where everyone, or a lot of films, want a result or ending, [and to not have one] was very deliberate for us," Tarrant says.

"We're leaving you with a sense of [choice]. You decide what happens."  
***Strangerland*** is screening nationally.

Hugo Weaving and Nicole Kidman in Kim Farrant's outback thriller *Strangerland*.

## Nicole Kidman heads to the Outback for *Strangerland*



Joseph Fiennes and Nicole Kidman in *Strangerland*. Source: Supplied

The Australian Outback has been depicted regularly in films as a source of menace, and not only in serial killer movies such as *Wolf Creek*. Time and again filmmakers have suggested that, for those Australians who live around the coastline, there's something to be feared about the mysterious interior. *Wake in Fright*, *Walkabout*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *BeDevil*, *Long Weekend*, *Razorback*, *Mystery Road*: these are just some of the feature films that have explored a strange and — for the outsider — sometimes scary landscape, far from the cities.

The latest film to fall into this category is the aptly titled *Strangerland*, which is set in the fictitious town of Nathgary (population 1848), a community located close to spectacular desert landscapes of rocky red hills and canyons — a landscape photographed around Broken Hill,

though the scenes set in Nathgarry itself were filmed in the NSW western town of Canowindra, which is nowhere near the Outback.

*Strangerland* is, not surprisingly, about strangers in town. The Parker family — Catherine (played by Nicole Kidman), Matthew (Joseph Fiennes) and their two children, teenaged Lily (Maddison Brown) and younger Tommy (Nicholas Hamilton) — is a relatively new arrival. Matthew is a pharmacist and it seems that he and Catherine decided to move to this relatively isolated place because of the behaviour of Lily in the previous (unnamed) town in which they lived; Lily, we learn, had become sexually involved with one of her teachers.

None of the Parkers is happy in Nathgarry. Matthew, though kept busy at work, is edgy while Catherine constantly complains about the town she says she hates. Lily is bored and relieves her boredom by hanging out, in the scantiest of clothing, with the kids who inhabit the town's skate park, while her younger brother — ordered not to let his sister out of his sight by his father — complains about this “shithole of a town”. He blames Lily for everything (“It's all your fault we're here”), but it's hinted that Lily's behaviour isn't the only reason for the family's exile.

Matthew reminds his wife that their daughter is “almost as out of control as you were”, to which Catherine reminds him that, after all, he married her. The early scenes of the film, scripted by Michael Kinirons and Fiona Seres and directed by first-time feature director Kim Farrant, are strong in depicting the place and its people and establishing an unsettling mood that suggests from the first moment that something bad is going to happen. When it does, though, it's unexpected: one night, with an all-enveloping dust storm imminent, Lily and Tommy walk out of the house and disappear. Matthew watches them go but does nothing to stop them. Why?

This is one of many unanswered questions in the film, though it's not entirely accurate to say the questions aren't addressed in one form or another. I was reminded of the Michelangelo Antonioni masterpiece *L'avventura* (1960) in which, after establishing the characters in the first half of the film, the director focuses on a search for a character who has gone missing in the second half. I'm not suggesting *Strangerland* is on the same level as *L'avventura* but it is a

strangely compelling and intriguing work in which the location — handsomely photographed by PJ Dillon — plays a crucial role.

For her debut feature, Farrant has been fortunate to work with a splendid cast. Kidman, who last played an Australian in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* five years ago, brings depth to the troubled character of Catherine, reminding us that she frequently has chosen challenging and offbeat roles during her interesting career. Hugo Weaving, as the local cop in charge of investigating the disappearances, is in excellent form, as is British actor Fiennes as the troubled Matthew.

*Strangerland* may possibly be too mysterious to be a major success, but this immaculately made movie goes a long way towards reminding us why a vibrant local film industry is so essential for the nation as a whole. Its intelligently drawn characters, with all their aspirations and all their failings, are a part of this Australian landscape, though in many ways they have a recognisable universality. Like the character played by Gary Bond in *Wake in Fright*, they're unsettled by the extreme conditions they find in this small outback community, where danger lurks just beyond the town limits.

An even more extreme example of a film that fakes its location setting is *Slow West*, a British-New Zealand co-production set in the American west but filmed almost entirely in New Zealand. The title in this case is misleading and probably off-putting; there's nothing slow about the pace of the film. Scottish writer-director John Maclean — a former musician — wastes no time establishing the character of Jay Cavendish (Kodi Smit-McPhee), a teenager who has journeyed from his home in Scotland in search of Rose, his sweetheart, from whom he was separated in tragic circumstances (which will be revealed in flashback). Jay is a babe in the woods, a naive innocent ill-equipped for his mission as he travels alone through the dangerous landscape of mid-19th century Colorado; alone, that is, until he encounters Silas Selleck (Michael Fassbender), a lone gunman who offers to act as the boy's guide and protector for a price. What Jay doesn't realise is that Selleck has another agenda, but, in the meantime there's plenty of danger lurking from hostile Native Americans and a gang of cutthroats led by Payne, a role in which Ben Mendelsohn revels in another of his gallery of likable villains.

You easily could be fooled into thinking the New Zealand landscapes through which these characters travel really are Colorado, and after a while it doesn't really matter, so gripping is this relatively simple story and the way in which Maclean tells it. Robbie Ryan's camerawork is a major contribution to the film's success, but what elevates *Slow West* from the average western (not that, sadly, we see too many of them these days) are the ironic and unexpected twists and turns to what is really a classic formula.

The drama builds to an almost unbearably tense climax, set in a remote cabin in the middle of a cornfield. Here, Maclean demonstrates that he's a fine action director, able to choreograph scenes of gunplay as well as the best of them.

Smit-McPhee, the former child actor who came to prominence in the Australian feature *Romulus, My Father* (2007), is impressive as the stubborn and resourceful protagonist whose determination to locate and to marry his sweetheart is one of the few noble motivations to be found in this untrustworthy environment.

He makes a good foil for Fassbender, whose iconic gunfighter is a worthy descendant of actors such as John Wayne or James Stewart who played - similar roles in another era.

**Strangerland** (MA15+)

4 stars



If you couldn't tell from the reactions on social media, It was a very good year in Park City (well, at least on the narrative side). The 2015 [Sundance Film Festival](#) featured a dramatic competition with far fewer bad eggs than usual, a NEXT slate which once again got people excited, a number of the non-competitive premieres that surprised (we're looking at you "Brooklyn"), two closing night films that were reportedly pretty good (a *rare* occurrence for any film festival) and acclaimed movies that landed distribution deals which you'll be talking about all year long.

While we endeavored to post as many individual reviews as possible the intensity of Sundance often makes it quite difficult to review everything. Especially, when you've seen 23 1/2 movies over 8 days.\* Therefore, this post will include a number of capsule reviews for films HitFix has not individually reviewed, my thoughts on films Drew McWeeny and Dan Fienberg may have taken a crack at and links to the complete reviews filed over the festival. Basically, it's a one-stop shop for all the major independent releases you'll be seeing in your local multiplex or art house theater over the next 12 months.

#### **["Strangerland"](#)**

**Grade:** B-

**Lowdown:** Kim Farrant's directorial debut finds Nicole Kidman and Joseph Fiennes as two parents trying to adjust to a recent move to a small town in the Australian outback. One night their sexually rebellious teenage daughter Lily (Maddison Brown) and introverted 12-year-old son Tommy (Nicholas Hamilton) head out for a walk in the desert and - surprise - don't come back. Admirably, Farrant and screenwriters Michael Kinirons and Fiona Seres are much more interested in the impact this event has on Kidman's somewhat repressed character than the inevitable search itself. Kidman is quite good here. In fact, it might be one of her finer performances this decade. The problem, arguably, is that Farrant is too precious with the material. She attempts to throw layers upon layers of artistic significance to the story which drag out the proceedings (ooh, another moody aerial shot over the desert). The result is a drama with impressive performances across the board (including Hugo Weaving as the equivalent of a local Sheriff) that simply leaves you wanting at the end.

Read more at <http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/sundance-reviews-results-nasty-baby-strangerland-and-more#4GO5xDZKgv1xUJiT.99>



SUNDANCE 2015

# 10 FILMS THAT COULD BE THE NEW *BOYHOOD*

Expect a booming sales market as new buyers such as Amazon and possibly TriStar clamor for everything from Nicole Kidman in a dust storm to Robert Redford hiking in a 'geriatric *Wild*' **BY** Tatiana Siegel

ARE YOU READY FOR SOME HOT DEALS IN THE COLD SNOW?

Heading into the Sundance Film Festival, sales agents and distributors agree that the 2015 incarnation will be a seller's market, with prices expected to hit dizzying heights. In fact, Fox Searchlight set the tone by nabbing worldwide rights to Noah Baumbach's *Mistress America* ahead of the festival, a deal that sources peg at nearly \$7 million. Supply is limited, and demand is at an all-time high thanks to such new distributors as Bleecker Street, Broad Green Pictures and a still-unofficial-but-very-real Relativity specialty label as well as nontraditional outlets such as Amazon Studios and WWE Studios, both of which will be eager to buy at the festival. "New players in the marketplace will keep prices up for domestic," says Lia Buman, president of acquisitions at Focus Features, which picked up Zach Braff's *Wish I Was Here* last year. "And the Sundance films are in line with what they're looking for." The Weinstein Co., which was fairly inactive last year, is expected to be on the prowl. There's also speculation that Robert Simonds' new studio STX Entertainment will be on hand looking for films with wide-release potential. Ditto for Tom Rothman's TriStar Productions. Buyers also are expected to be more aggressive given that no one wants a repeat of 2014, when *Boyhood* wasn't deemed commercial enough. (IFC Films, which financed the Oscar frontrunner, wound up releasing the film itself by default.) "Every buyer is motivated by the fear of passing on the big thing, and last year, every major label had a shot at *Boyhood*," says one top sales agent. "We will feel the reverberations of that this year." The documentary space is poised to be competitive, with hungry outlets — both small- and big-screen — vying for the buzzworthy titles. "It used to be just HBO and PBS," says Vinnie Malhotra, senior vp at CNN, which bought *Blackfish* at Sundance two years ago and *Dinosaur 13* last year. "Now, it's also Netflix, Showtime, CNN, all the indie labels." As for finding his next *Whiplash* or crowd-pleasing documentary like *Searching for Sugar Man*, Sony Pictures Classics co-president Tom Bernard says it's impossible to pinpoint ahead of the festival. "You really can't draw a map of what you're going to see and what you're going to buy," he says. "A lot of the movies we buy were not on our radar at all going in."



1. Redford (left) and Nolle hike the Appalachian Trail in *A Walk in the Woods*.  
2. Joseph Fiennes and Kidman in the Australian Outback-set thriller *Strangerland*.  
3. Reynolds (right) stars in Mississippi grind *Grind*.  
4. Brie and Sudek in the sex addict dramedy *Sleeping with Other People*.

## THE BRONZE

(WME Global)

**DIRECTOR** Bryan Buckley

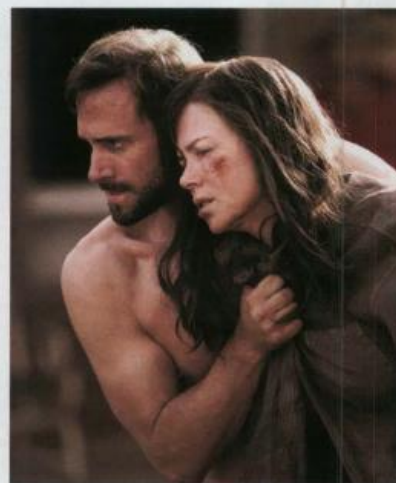
**BUZZ** Buyers are clamoring for a look at the opening-night film, a raunchy comedy about a washed-up former Olympic **gymnast** who lives in her father's basement. The film features a star-making turn by actress Melissa Rauch, who co-wrote.

## THE D TRAIN

(UTA/WME Global)

**DIRECTORS** Jarrod Paul, Andrew Mogel

**BUZZ** Former producing partners Jack Black and Mike White reteam for a comedy about an insecure man facing his 20th high-school reunion. Still, it's not all laughs as Black's performance hits dramatic notes rarely seen from the comedian.





**THE HALLOW**

(ICM/WME Global)

**DIRECTOR** Corin Hardy

**BUZZ** This supernatural horror film, which screens in the increasingly fertile Midnight section, is seen by buyers as having franchise potential. Hardy, who is signed to direct *The Crow* remake for Relativity, is generating a lot of buzz.

**LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT** (WME Global)

**DIRECTOR** Rodrigo Garcia

**BUZZ** Ewan McGregor plays Jesus (and the devil) in this Biblical drama that already has word-of-mouth spreading in the faith-based community. Gravity cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki shot the indie epic.



ME AND EARL AND  
THE DYING GIRL

(NYME Global)

**DIRECTOR** Alfonso Gomez-Rejon  
**BUZZ** Buyers are calling the tearjerker from Emmy-nominated Gomez-Rejon (*American Horror Story*) a cross between *The Spectacular Now* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. Jesse Andrews' *Black List* script chronicles the relationship between a high school outcast and the girl with terminal leukemia he befriends.



**MISSISSIPPI GRIND**  
(WME Global)

**DIRECTORS** Ryan Fleck,  
Anna Boden

**BUFF** Fleck, who directed Ryan Gosling to a best actor Oscar nomination in *Half Nelson*, and Boden tackle the world of poker. Ryan Reynolds' performance is said to be so strong that no one will remember Jake Gyllenhaal originally was set to star.

## SLEEPING WITH

OTHER PEOPLE (CAA)

**DIRECTOR** Leslye Headland

**BUZZ** Buyers are calling this comedy from *Bachelorette's* Headland the film with the greatest commercial potential. Her script about sex addicts retools the traditional romantic comedy, but much will depend on the chemistry between stars Alison Brie and Jason Sudeikis.

STOCKHOLM,  
PENNSYLVANIA  
(CAA/ICM)

**DIRECTOR** Nikole Beckwith

**Buzz** Beckwith wrote and directed the drama about a young woman (Saoirse Ronan) who is reunited with her parents after having been abducted 17 years earlier. Cynthia Nixon, who also is drawing interest for her performance in the festival's *James White*, plays the distraught mother.

STRANGERLAND  
(CAA)

**DIRECTOR** Kim Farrant

**BUZZ** Nicole Kidman stars in this World Competition entry as a mother whose two teenage kids go missing just before a massive dust storm hits their Australian Outback town. Buyers will pounce if the film's thriller element is strong.

**A WALK IN THE WOODS** (WME Global)

**DIRECTOR** Ken Kwapis

**BUZZ** Dubbed the geriatric Wild, the film stars Sundance founder Robert Redford as an aging travel writer who sets out to hike the 2,100-mile-long Appalachian Trail with a long-estranged high school buddy (Nick Nolte). Buyers see the film, which also stars Emma Thompson, as having added value given that it appeals to the underserved older audience at the box office.

## ... And 5 Sleepers That Could Surprise

It wouldn't be Sundance without two coming-of-age dramas, sex addicts and David Foster Wallace



☒ **The Diary of a Teenage Girl** (UTA)

Marielle Heller wrote and directed the coming-of-age story about a sexually precocious teen (Bel Powley) living in San Francisco in the 1970s. Can she pull off the tricky hybrid of live action and animation?



**X Dope**  
AIME Global

Another coming-of-age story, this one set in a gang-infested neighborhood in Inglewood. Writer-director Rick Famuyiwa tackles the story of a high school geek (Shameik Moore) trying to get into Harvard while dodging drug dealers and other obstacles.



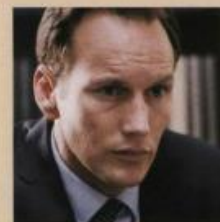
**X The End of the Tour (LITA/WME)**

Set in 1996, James Ponsoldt's fact-based drama captures the five-day interview between *Rolling Stone* reporter David Lipsky (Jesse Eisenberg) and late author David Foster Wallace (Jason Segel).



~~X~~ **The Overnight**  
(ICM)

Buyers are expecting quirky (but how quirky?) in this Patrick Brice-directed film about a young Los Angeles couple who spend a bizarre evening with the parents of their son's new friend. Adam Scott and Taylor Schilling star.



**X Zipper**  
(CAA/Cinetic)

With shades of Eliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner, this drama centers on a federal prosecutor and devoted family man (Patrick Wilson) whose political future is in jeopardy thanks to his burgeoning sex addiction.

WOLFE FROM HALLS, INMATE STRANGLAND BOSS PICTURES, BARRER PICTURE PRODUCTIONS, GRAVE WITH NAME UNKNOWN, PEOPLE'S CHOICE, IF YOU VOICE US, THE HONORABLE JURY (THE SCOTTED HONORARY) FOR SUCH HONORARY TOWNSHIP CLARIFIED BY BACKLOG, JONES ANTONIO CADAC, HONORABLE.



# Sydney Film Festival 2015: Nicole Kidman shines as a sexually repressed mother in Strangerland

Date

June 5, 2015



Joseph Fiennes and Nicole Kidman play a couple whose teenage children go missing

Reviewer rating:



## SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL COMPETITION REVIEW

### STRANGERLAND

Directed by Kim Farrant

Written by Fiona Seres and Michael Kinirons

111 minutes, not yet rated

Nicole Kidman is the sexually repressed mother of two troubled teenagers in the atmospheric Australian drama *Strangerland*.

In the debut film for director Kim Farrant, the Oscar winner plays Catherine Parker, who is unhappily married to a stitched-up English pharmacist, Matthew (Joseph Fiennes), in a fictional outback town called Nathgari.

They are parents to Lily (Maddison Brown), a sexually precocious 15-year-old, and younger brother Tommy (Nicholas Hamilton), who goes walking at night.

Having moved after intimations of trouble in another town, no-one in the family is happy in baking heat on the edge of a desert.

But when Lily and Tom disappear one night, their parents are plunged into a crisis that tests their relationship.

As local cop Rae (Hugo Weaving) investigates, the suspects including a young blonde skateboarder Steve (Sean Keenan) and Aboriginal handyman Burtie (Meyne Wyatt) who is brain-damaged from a car accident. The town suspects the parents are involved.

It's a mystery made more complex by Lily's sexual adventurousness in the town before she went missing.

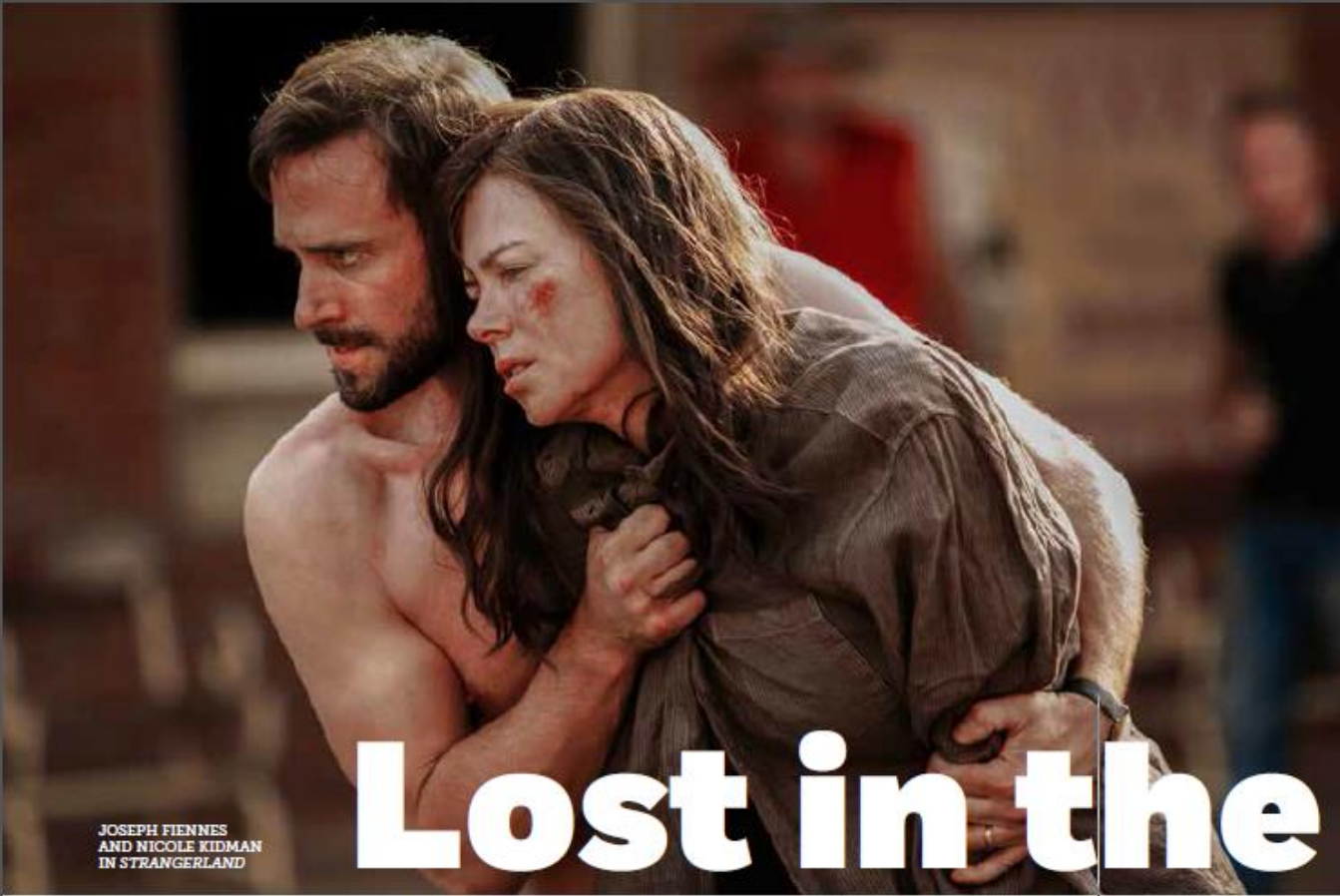
A film that was 13 years in the making before the world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January taps into the mythic history of children going missing in the desert but resists conventional formulas.

Farrant is more interested in the impact of the crisis on Christine and Matthew - the way trauma drives them to a primal state and brings out the repressed emotions that have undermined the marriage.

With a gutsy, raw performance, Kidman dominates the drama as a mother whose trauma brings out her own frustrated sexuality.

It's an enigmatic film, set in a beautifully shot desert landscape that seems stark, infinite and unknowable, that deliberately leaves audiences with uneasy questions and hints at a deeper theme about female desire and the connection between grief and sex.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/sydney-film-festival-2015-nicole-kidman-shines-as-a-sexually-repressed-mother-in-strangerland-20150606-ghhsng.html#ixzz3dODJa92y>



JOSEPH FIENNES  
AND NICOLE KIDMAN  
IN *STRANGERLAND*

# Lost in the

**KIM FARRANT'S DEBUT FEATURE FILM USES VETERAN AUSTRALIAN ACTORS AND EERIE OUTBACK LANDSCAPES TO EXPLORE THE MOST CHILLING LOSS.**

THIRTEEN YEARS in the making, *Strangerland* tells the deeply enigmatic story of Catherine (Nicole Kidman) and Matthew Parker (Joseph Fiennes), who relocate to a dusty outback town where they struggle to fit in. When their teenage daughter and son disappear on the eve of a dust storm, town detective David Rae (Hugo Weaving) leads an investigation that soon takes on a forlorn tone in the brutal environment.

The set-up sounds like a routine procedural, but director Kim Farrant, helming her first feature after directing well-received documentaries and television shows, has something more mysterious in store.

*Strangerland* is ultimately less interested in explaining the disappearance than exploring how these characters work through grief. The event brings buried secrets, including

the reason for the family's abrupt move to the outback, bubbling violently to the surface. "The key thing we were interested in exploring is what happens to us as human beings when we're plunged into real crisis," Farrant says.

The film may not be directly autobiographical, but it's intensely personal for Farrant, inspired in part by her feelings of grief when she lost her father when she was only 22. "I had this experience of acting out in a sexual way that really surprised me," she says. "I found myself wanting to connect, wanting to touch and sexualise in a way that really shocked me."

Farrant charts emotionally complex territory, as sexuality also becomes the main outlet for the grief-stricken Catherine – a release from her feelings of torment and regret, which are intensified when the town's locals turn

their suspicious gaze toward her. The personal nature of the material proved to be fertile and interesting ground.

"I think all art is cathartic," she explains. "I think it's very hard to make any real, true art where you're letting go and not have any kind of emotional release or growth from that process."

Part of that process included eliciting a powerfully raw performance from Nicole Kidman, appearing in her first independent Australian film since Phillip Noyce's 1989 thriller *Dead Calm*. Farrant describes directing Kidman as "an amazing experience" and says she was hugely committed to her role, often remaining in character on set.

"She's incredibly hard-working...she knows the script and characters back to front. She's made over 60 films, so she's incredibly professional and knows how the whole machine of making a film





# Desert

works, but she's also fabulously in the moment and very giving."

Working with such an experienced star on your first feature may be a daunting prospect for many, but Farrant believes her background as a trained actor was invaluable in being able to relate to, and improvise with, her performers. "If there's any advice I would give to any young directors, it's to do some training as an actor, however much you can."

As the film progresses and the investigation becomes more desperate, Catherine becomes drawn to the detective and isolated from her emotionally distant and increasingly volatile husband. It's a development that brings Kidman's chemistry with Weaving to the fore, which Farrant says shows a less-seen side of the veteran actor.

"I always wanted someone for the character of David Rae who was very embodied and sensual, intuitive and in touch with their feelings as a man...

He's incredibly loving and sensitive and deeply feeling, so I wanted to bring that out."

As well as working as an actor's piece, *Strangerland* is a film of cavernous gorges, empty plains and oppressive heat, making use of its eerie outback setting in a way that references landmarks of Australian cinema like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) or *Wake in Fright* (1971).

Shot with stark beauty by Irishman PJ Dillon, Farrant agrees the imposing backdrop added another layer of uncertainty and pressure to the story, which sees the transplanted family at odds with their physical environment. Filmed largely in the far west of New South Wales, reconnaissance visits to the region were hugely important. Farrant got a feeling for how "overwhelming" nature can be, and what it was really like to be lost out in the desert.

The film proved a hit in official competition at Sundance, where

Farrant experienced a whirlwind of press junkets and networking. The buzz around her has been fruitful: she's already attached to two other film projects as well as a pair of TV shows.

While *Strangerland* promises to be the first of many features for Farrant, it seems likely it will always hold a special place in her body of work, not just as her debut feature, but as a film of haunting power and rare intensity.

Reflecting on the research she did into the parents of missing children, she said the thing that struck her most was that, in many cases, people will never know what happened to their children – they're forever left in limbo.

It's this haunting sense of loss that seeps into the film: "We wanted to leave the audience feeling very much what it's like to be one of those parents."

by **Daniel Herborn**

» *Strangerland* is in cinemas now.

SCREENHUB

# Reviewers take the Fury Road to Strangerland and back

FRIDAY 12 JUNE, 2015

It takes a poet and a teacher to really get hold of Fury Road's story world. And a bunch of old-fashioned dismissocrats to sneer..

*Image: Buster Keaton in Speak Easily, from a [Robert Ebert article](#) in the Wall Street Journal.*

Art is primal, and that is the point. In film and television, a large group of talented people assemble to create a world that engages our deepest needs. We get together in an ancient ritual, and share the same internal experience. That very process makes us human.

In many ways, the success of a film is marked by the way we talk about it. We get to articulate our own experience, and absorb other people's point of view. A review - at the very least - has to go beyond showing off and bullying other people. It is not a place for mockery and status games. 'This is how I respond - what about you? Did you see something different?'

*Strangerland* has just opened in Australia. It is not an conventional genre film, it doesn't have legions of fanbois to back it, and a vast marketing apparatus, so it is defenceless before the kind of reviewing which so frustrates the Australian industry.

This is what [Leigh Paatsch](#) has to say in The Daily Telegraph:

'Overall, *Strangerland* tries too hard to maintain a mystique that only makes an already oblique screenplay all the more impenetrable.

If you really must, be both very forgiving and very patient.'

And [Paul Byrnes](#) in the SMH: 'If ever there was an Australian film struggling to get out from under the burden of its manifold meanings and themes, this is it. It's a pity, because there is a lot of talent on show.



Farrant does a fine job with the sense of dread, and the performances. Weaving gives a superb grounded weight to his portrait of a cop trying to be the voice of reason. Kidman's pain is palpable, bound up with self-doubt and blazing anger. Fiennes makes the least likeable character understandable, even pitiable. The desert is a mysterious and malevolent force here, rather than just a hard place. That idea is as old as the desert itself in Australian movies, but to suggest the land takes revenge on the innocent is worse than preposterous.'

Luke Buckmaster has been writing an excellent series reappraising older Australian films, but they get much more empathy than [he finds](#) for *Strangerland*. 'Onscreen Kidman and Fiennes form a passion-deprived, near sterile chemistry, as flat as desert terrain. Their characters eye each other off as if they know nothing about each other: again, arguably a correlation to the film's title and again, not a very compelling one.'

[Brian Moylan](#) in The Guardian provided the Sundance review, and began by saying 'I'm going to admit this straight out of the gate: I don't think I understood *Strangerland*.' And ultimately - 'The problem is, for all of the striving at depth, it ultimately doesn't make much sense. It's like trying to use the stars to navigate out of the desert. All the flecks of light are there, but without a compass to point north, the audience is left wandering aimlessly, hoping to be found.'

The comments are really worth reading. Beyond the sneering at Nicole Kidman, two of the eight are open-hearted about engaging with the film. 'Despite its flaws, this movie gave me a lot to think about.' Exactly.

[CJ Johnson](#), on the ABC, is startlingly positive in this context. 'Strangerland is a terrific beast: it's got a foot in each of the commercial and arthouse camps, and is entertaining in both. It knows exactly what it's doing at each and every turn. It is assured, confident and well constructed. It is also gripping, thrilling, creepy and exciting. See it.' It is worth noting that CJ is also a director with a strong bent towards performance.

I don't want to take this discussion too far. There are times in *Strangerland* where I am taken right out of the narrative in ways which the filmmakers absolutely don't intend; reviewers are responsible to the audience and they find similar problems. But there is much more to the film than its irritations, and if you respect the attempt, you can discover it is coherent if you are open to its deep psychology. It is primally and

primordially about sex. About the need for contact and intimacy. Just touch me..

*Fury Road* stands before us as a Major Cultural Beast. Maybe \$200m worth of road movie, and a standout bad-ass piece of ultraviolent circus mayhem. Nearly everyone seems to notice that it is not quite like a conventional male adolescent superman fantasy, while the entertainment editors feast on the wealth of production stories about the standout bad-ass filmmaking deep in the Namibian Desert.

The Guardian, sensibly clustering its limited resources where it matters, is running on themes, one of which is *Mad Max: Fury Road*. It has seen the opportunity to have the fun it can't have with the politics of climate change. [Ben Wikie](#) talks about Australian Gothic and landscape and cars; [Noah Berlatsky](#) sees it as a Women In Prison film; [Jessica Valenti](#) falls zestfully on its sexual politics and the pathetic backlash; [Paul Mason](#) looks at dystopian cinema.

In a way, writers are given permission to run these light-hearted riffs into serious ideas because the film is a piece of pop culture. Its energy is infectious. A hugely anticipated film with an audience of millions in a genre we all think we know and understand is a wonderful tool for an editor. It would be pretty great if the same mercy could be extended to *Strangerland*, which has lots of starting points in landscape, identities, parents and children, primal needs and the crippling power of repression.

The latest entry into the serious game of parsing *Fury Road* comes from Bonny Cassidy, a poet who teaches creative writing at RMIT. [Her long piece](#) in The Conversation is too fiddly to repeat on ScreenHub, but it is well worth reading: 'Given its layered mise en scene and performative script, George Miller's Mad Max: Fury Road deserves to be read as a stirring and provocative poem.' The conceit enables her to pay more attention to the language and the rhythm of the film and to point to its wider cultural connections.

It also reminds us that we don't really truly actually need to be so endlessly LITERAL. The comments neatly illustrate the strands I am discussing, freed from the constraints of professional responsibility. In *Strangerland*, Kim Farrant needs a ghastly domestic tragedy to crack the masks, in real life it just takes the opportunity to vent on the net.

I saw *Fury Road* and *Strangerland* relatively close to each other. Despite

the kinetic furiosity, the Miller picture dropped me right out of the fantasy several times, mostly when it slowed down. It is very asexual, despite the vast emphasis on gender, and rarely gives any character an interior life. *Strangerland* is all about our deep needs and sexual identities, which takes it far away from our cinematic tradition.

*Fury Road* is like a roller coaster built by old Lefties. It roars through important issues, and gives us lots of thrills, and I loved all of it. But I got off, took a few deep breaths, and wandered off for coffee. Fine. I'll recommend it to my friends.

I am left to wonder which of these films is actually the most daring.

*Strangerland* had me worried for days, as the images and feelings of deep hunger circulated in my memory, reminding me who I am and who I cared for in the film, and why. That's what it is about, isn't it? The whole mad enterprise of making art in film?

Helping us to be human.

STRANGERLAND is an upcoming arthouse Australian thriller seeing Nicole Kidman going back to her roots and what she is best at, raw, powerful art-house performances that push the boundaries. In this she teams up with Hugo Weaving and Joseph Fiennes in an incredibly powerful debut feature film from director, Kim Farrant. STRANGERLAND was official selection for **Sundance**, will be screening at the **Sydney Film Festival** and has a one week season ONLY from next Thursday 11th to 17th June, in Australia, at **Palace Cinemas** (oodly excluding Sydney, but we get it at **SFF**). The good news is that thanks to the fine folks at **TM Publicity** and **Transmission Films** I have 10x double passes to give away. Make sure you can get to a **Palace Cinema** (excluding Sydney) between the 11th and 17th and enter away. I will be sending tickets out on the 9th so enter quickly. All the best.....JK.



STRANGERLAND | SALTY POPCORN MOVIE REVIEW | MOVIE POSTER IMAGE

**BY JASON KING**

New to the remote Australian desert town of Nathgari, the Parker family is thrown into crisis when Catherine (Nicole Kidman) and Matthew (Joseph Fiennes) discover that their two teenage kids, Tommy (Nicholas Hamilton) and Lily (Maddison Brown), have mysteriously disappeared just before a massive dust storm hits the town. With Nathgari now eerily smothered in red dust and darkness, the locals join the search led by local cop David Rae (Hugo Weaving). With temperatures rising, and the chances of survival plummeting with each passing day, Catherine and Matthew find themselves pushed to the brink as they struggle to survive the uncertainty of their children's fate.

The film is spectacular, hands down I do believe this will be my favourite Australian movie of 2015 and comes across as this year's **THE ROVER**. It is easily one of Kidman's best performances from an incredible career and she eats the screen in this one. Also seeing her and Weaving act together is like seeing Blanchett and Rush, it is a perfect fit and two actors who not only know each other so well but are so comfortable acting together it is almost natural.



STRANGERLAND | SALTY POPCORN MOVIE REVIEW | MATTHEW (FIENNES) AND CATHERINE PARKER (KIDMAN) CONSOLE EACH OTHER

Dealing with grief is a terrible thing to go through, dealing with that grief with the knowledge that your children may or may not be dead and you don't know where they are, and you can't do anything is enough to drive anyone insane. In a small town in the middle of the desert when you know there is a survival clock is beyond horrendous. I don't want to imagine.

For the Parkers, it is incredibly difficult, they moved to Nathgari for the sole purpose of getting away from attention. Attention brought about by their daughter, and I have no shame in saying it, a truly slutty, horny teenager who is bored as hell in this small town and has a beautiful body and longs for attention. But Lily is her mother's daughter, and Catherine, is the older version of Lily. Catherine needs attention, she is lonely, her husband has withdrawn away from her and to be honest, they were never right for each other. She was a party girl, he was a nerd, she was completely extroverted, him introverted and pompous. In Nathgari she is bored, and depressed, and she lacks little in the way of feelings and she needs and longs for sex to fill a desire and to allow her to feel something. Lily is basically the same but going through her late teen years and also believing she is invincible and knows more than her parents. Lily is infuriating, I would allow the slapping of children in her case. Tommy is younger and half mother / half father, I found Tommy to be the most grounded and least affected by their family situation and someone adapting better but slower, but he also has his own issue and night-wanders through the town.



## STRANGERLAND | SALTY POPCORN MOVIE REVIEW | MATTHEW (FIENNES) AND CATHERINE PARKER (KIDMAN)

The film presents as a murder/ disappearance mystery/ psychological thriller, in a small town there can only be a few suspects and the entire town is affected by this tragedy. The film is near on perfect for me. As I said earlier Kidman's performance is just sublime, she gets bloody raw in this movie and goes for it, she appears more comfortable away from the Hollywood studios. Weaving is always amazing, I just love the guy, and his small town cop, thoroughly enjoyable. I did not like Fiennes or his character and am uncertain if this is due to his bad casting or because it was so good I just loathed the character, the chemistry between him and Kidman was hideous, but at this stage of their marriage it should be. I never thought they belonged together. Brown was fine as slutty Lily and Hamilton was superb as Tommy, I loved his character and his lack of connection later in the movie was strong, the compassion and empathy I had for this kid was more powerful than my thoughts for the rest of the family, Lily was a stupid brat, couldn't care less, she was in no way innocent, but Tommy, pure innocence that got hurt, unfair in every way. Expect to see more of him soon, currently filming CAPTAIN FANTASTIC with Viggo!! The one thing that keeps going over and over in my mind, did he tell the truth or did he save his mum's sanity?



### STRANGERLAND | SALTY POPCORN MOVIE REVIEW | TOMMY (NICHOLAS HAMILTON)

The film captures small town Australian desert/ country life perfectly, the dust storm was a bonus and the isolation was uncomfortable. Farrant's direction was a triumph and P.J. Dillon's cinematography is a marvel that is matched by the fine wine of Keefus Ciancia's music that smothers the movie in long drawn out tension oozing in melancholy and desperation.

My gripes are two; firstly, already mentioned is my indecision of Fiennes, but this is not his movie, it is Kidman's, and she bloody owns it. But lastly, the ending with Kidman, I got her going out to nature to face the demon, to be where her kids could be but the entry back into town was not what I was expecting, it was mostly unnecessary and felt like it was meant to be this epic insanity from fucking nature cinematic orgasm but it wasn't and while sad for the character I felt the film let down by this. I know Kidman gave it (literally) her all for this scene and kudos to her for doing it but it lacked the gravitas I believed it desired.

Regardless of the flaws the film has way more merits, it plays like a long strummed piano wire and the tension is wonderful.

