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A MARTIN SCORSESE PICTURE
KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON

Greed, power and poisoned love…

Scorsese's new film delves into the dark heart of US history to reveal one of the nation's most shocking mass murders, writes **Adam Smith**

William "King" Hale, played by Robert De Niro

Watch reel ▷

Ernest Burkhart, played by Leonardo DiCaprio

Watch reel ▷

Mollie Kyle is played by Lily Gladstone

Watch reel ▷

FBI agent Tom White is played by Jesse Plemons

An epic tale of greed, corruption and murder, set against the unforgiving landscape of the American West, Martin Scorsese's Killers of the Flower Moon is one of the most eagerly anticipated movies of the year.

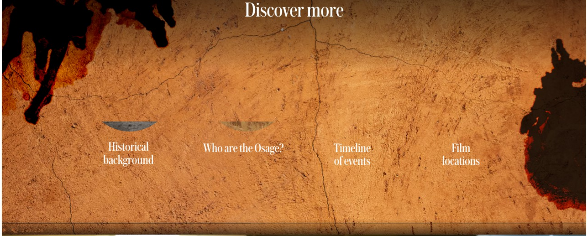
Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro and Lily Gladstone, it is based on David Grann's best-selling book, *Killers of the Flower Moon: Oil, Money, Murder and the Birth of the FBI*. Scorsese and Eric Roth's powerful adaptation tells the true story of the 'Reign of Terror', a shameful period in American history that saw dozens of members of the Osage tribe of Native Americans murdered by white men for their newly acquired oil wealth.

The killings continued for years until newly appointed FBI head, J Edgar Hoover, sent agent and former Texas Ranger Tom White (played by Jesse Plemons) to Osage territory to investigate.

What White uncovered was one of the most shocking crimes in American history. And, with the case being the first homicide successfully investigated by the agency, White's painstaking work would help birth the modern FBI.

The gripping story's themes of the jealousy, greed and evil that men are capable of are ones director Martin Scorsese has always been drawn to, with films such as *Goodfellas*, *Casino* and *The Wolf Of Wall Street*. So when frequent collaborator DiCaprio brought the Osage's story to the director's attention, he immediately saw the possibilities of adapting the book for the big screen.

Discover more



Historical background

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Film locations

> “I always wanted to make a Western, but never did,” says Scorsese. “Those films nourished me as a filmmaker, but they also inspired me to go deeper into the real history.”

Scorsese on set with the central characters – the relationship between Mollie and Ernest is at the heart of the director’s telling
| CREDIT: Courtesy of Apple

“I always wanted to make a Western, but never did,” says Scorsese. “Those films nourished me as a filmmaker, but they also inspired me to go deeper into the real history. [Grann’s book] delineated an extraordinary tragedy in American history, one that I knew nothing about. And I was excited to be reuniting with Leo to bring this story to the screen.”

Killers of the Flower Moon also unites two of the director’s most trusted and versatile leading men – De Niro and DiCaprio – in one of his films for the very first time.

DiCaprio plays Ernest Burkhart, an itinerant worker who marries Mollie (Lily Gladstone) an Osage tribeswoman. And even as Mollie begins to suspect that her husband might be involved in the killings, the couple remain in love.

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De Niro, whose creative partnership with Scorsese goes back to 1973's *Mean Streets*, plays the role of William Hale, the mercurial businessman who sees himself as a friend of the Osage people, but who is the architect of a diabolical plan to kill them and steal their money.

"You don't always know the motivations of a character," De Niro says. "Sometimes characters don't even know themselves. What Hale did was so awful, but I feel that he did love the Osage, or thought he loved them."

Killers of the Flower Moon premiered at Cannes Film Festival in May, receiving both a nine-minute standing ovation and a rapturous reception from the critics. The film has since been awarded five-star reviews from publications including *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* with Gladstone's quiet yet riveting performance as Mollie particularly garnering praise.

William Belleau (who plays Henry Roan), De Niro and Scorsese
| CREDIT: Courtesy of Apple

> "It's this insanely bizarre love story," says DiCaprio of his character's relationship with his wife. "It's hard to fathom in a lot of ways. How this woman is struck by someone who is so duplicitous. But it was true."

THE TELEGRAPH

★★★★★

> "An enormous, extravagant Western about the Osage Indian murders of the 1920s... It brings together Scorsese's two leading men, Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro, for the first time ever on screen in one of his films – which only intensifies the sense that what you're watching is of tectonic import."

Killers of the Flower Moon | Official Trailer 2 (2023 Movie)
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MAP OF
INDIAN TERRITORY
AND
OKLAHOMA
1890
RED RIVER
RAILROADS - INDIAN TERRITORY

The historic background: Oklahoma, oil and avaricious wolves

The newly formed state of Oklahoma is the backdrop to this brutal real-life story

Oklahoma, historically, is the leftovers. In a succession of wars, treaties and land purchases, what is now Oklahoma was passed between the French, Spanish and United States, with nobody ever really having any plans for it.

As white settlers expanded through the US, Native American tribes were pushed from their homelands – sometimes by force, sometimes through one-sided negotiations. As recompense, the tribes were given new lands west of the Mississippi in a vast area known as the Indian Territory.

As the settlers discovered that some land in the Indian Territory was rather fertile, the boundaries of the Indian Territory shrank. The remnants were eventually shunted together, becoming the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

A sprinkling of oil was enough to turn the leftovers into a very tasty main dish, however. Oil was first discovered here in the 19th century, but by the 1920s it was clear that vast oil fields lay under Oklahoma.

Oil fields in Osage circa 1918-1919
| CREDIT: Alamy

The resultant boom is the setting for *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Several packs of avaricious wolves, sensing riches, descended on Oklahoma, determined to secure drilling rights on the oil-rich land, and extract what they could.

Like gold rush towns before it, Oklahoma became a place of boom, with infrastructure and law enforcement struggling to keep up with the massive influx of people. The fledgling state brimmed with opportunity and the resulting corruption. The black gold would eventually give Oklahoma a stable backbone industry and ability to stand on its own two feet.

For the Osage Nation, however, oil came mixed with blood, while for many white settlers, the Osage were an impediment to riches.

The newcomers tried to get at Osage oil rights and revenues through intermarriage, murder and lobbying for paternalistic guardianship laws. Amid an often malicious whirlwind, the Osage Nation had to plot an uneasy path between cooperation, coexistence and retaining what was rightfully theirs.

Who are the Osage?

The Osage Nation is a Native American People, currently based in north-eastern Oklahoma, although originally from the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys.

The Osage land in Oklahoma was decent for ranching, but not much else, until large oil deposits were discovered. The Osage suddenly became known in the US media as the richest people in the world, with plentiful stories of lavish European holidays and flash car purchases.

The Osage Nation was one of the few Native American Nations to purchase its own land, which it did from the Cherokee Nation, which gave it a stronger negotiating hand for the Osage Allotment Act of 1906. Land was allotted to individual Nation members, but mineral rights were communal, and oil profits distributed on a headright system designed to split the wealth equally.

These headrights could not be bought or sold, but they could be inherited – and not just by the Osage. This led to what was known as the Reign of Terror, with more than 60 members of the Osage Nation murdered in 13 years.

Of the murders that led to a conviction, the motive was marrying into the family, then removing the competing claims to the inheritance.

In 1921, the US Congress imposed a guardianship system on the Osage, with many full-blood Osage deemed legally incompetent to manage their own financial affairs. Theoretically upstanding white guardians were appointed from the local community, leading to ample opportunities for widespread embezzlement at the Osage's expense.

Mollie Kyle and her sisters, who all found great wealth due to oil rights
| CREDIT: Courtesy of Apple

As it happened… A timeline of the Reign of Terror

1865

The Osage, forced from their reservation in Kansas by an influx of settlers, sign a treaty to buy 1.5 million hectares in what was then called 'Indian Territory' (later part of Oklahoma).

1897

Oil is discovered on the Osage reservation. The Oklahoma oil rush begins. By the 1920s the Osage have become among the wealthiest people on Earth.

1906

Congress passes the Osage Allotment Act, which splits any oil profits equally among the tribe's members. Crucially these 'headrights' can be inherited, even by non-Osage.

1917

Ernest Burkhart, an itinerant worker originally from Texas, marries Osage woman Mollie Kyle.

1921 (May)

Anna Brown, older sister of Mollie Burkhart, disappears. Her body is found a week later in a shallow ravine. She has been shot.

1921 (July)

Mollie Burkhart's mother, Lizzie Q, dies of a suspicious wasting disease. She has been living with her daughter and Ernest Burkhart.

1921 (May)

The body of Charles Whitehorn, an Osage, is discovered near an oil derrick. He has been shot twice. The bullets match the one that killed Anna Brown.

1922

Mollie Burkhart's health deteriorates. A local doctor suspects she is being poisoned.

1922-23

The murders continue. They include Henry Roan (shot), William Stepson (poisoned) and Molly's sister Rita, her husband and the family servant (blown up).

1923

By the end of 1923, at least 18 people have been killed. The Osage Tribal Council appeals to the FBI for help. J Edgar Hoover sends an agent who reports the crimes as 'unsolvable'. The killings continue.

1925

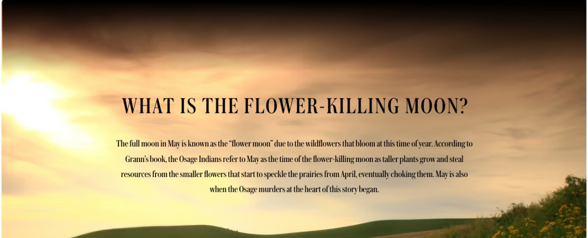
Suspicion soon falls on local businessman William Hale. A plot to systematically murder Osage families, concentrating their wealth and then finally stealing it, is suspected.

1925

Hoover finally appoints former Texas Ranger Tom White to head the Bureau's inquiries. White takes control of the investigation at the Bureau's Oklahoma offices.

1926-1928

The slew of crimes is gradually uncovered…



WHAT IS THE FLOWER-KILLING MOON?

The full moon in May is known as the "flower moon" due to the wildflowers that bloom at this time of year. According to Grann's book, the Osage Indians refer to May as the time of the flower-killing moon as taller plants grow and steal resources from the smaller flowers that start to speckle the prairies from April, eventually choking them. May is also when the Osage murders at the heart of this story began.

The coyotes circle

When the Osage became the richest people on Earth many opportunists were drawn to Oklahoma with ill intentions

William Hale,
played by Robert De Niro

[redacted]

"A man who seemed to have come out of nowhere," is how author David Grann describes William Hale. He had arrived in Osage territory two decades before what would become known as the 'Reign of Terror', brandishing a battered bible and calling himself 'reverend'. In the following years, he slowly bought up land, finally amassing a significant fortune. An avuncular figure, he was liked by whites and Osage alike. He was a generous benefactor of local hospitals and schools. They called him 'the king of Osage Hills'. And he was the architect behind one of the most shocking mass murders in American history.

Ernest Burkhart,
played by Leonardo DiCaprio

[redacted]

Ernest Burkhart had grown up in poverty in rural Texas at the turn of the century. As a boy he had been enchanted by tales of the Osage Hills, which he imagined as one of the few remnants of the Old West. He followed his uncle, William Hale, to Oklahoma where he worked odd jobs, including as a chauffeur, which is how he met an Osage tribeswoman, Mollie. He learnt the Osage language, cared for Mollie when her diabetes flared up, and despite the joking of his friends, who called him "squaw man", married her in 1917. Four years later Mollie's sister, Anna was murdered and the Reign of Terror had begun.

Quiet strength: Lily Gladstone and Jesse Plemons enthral in their roles

'A beacon of storytelling'

Lily Gladstone was on the verge of giving up full-time acting in order to pursue her passion for protecting American indigenous bees when the call came from Martin Scorsese that he wanted to cast her as the central character Mollie Burkhart, an Osage woman whose family was persecuted in the Reign of Terror.

It was the bees' loss, but the role came with a responsibility to Native American history that the 37-year-old actress felt keenly.

"One of the biggest responsibilities I felt about this role was I had to occupy the space of Mollie," she says. "And though I'm not from the Osage I have access points, being Blackfoot Nimiipuu and growing up on the Blackfeet reservation. But Indian country is an incredibly diverse place. It's not my community, but I had to carry it as if it were."

Gladstone grew up on the Blackfeet reservation in Northeastern Montana (and is descended from the first cousin of British Prime Minister William Gladstone). She studied acting and directing as well as Native American studies at Montana University. Her breakthrough role was as The Rancher in Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women* (2016) and she worked with the director again on 2019's *First Cow*.

"She brought so much depth and awareness to Mollie that wasn't there before… She was such an incredibly open and courageous partner," says DiCaprio. "Even though she's not Osage, Lily immersed herself in that culture. We really looked to her as a beacon in the storytelling as well. She was definitely a muse to the both of us, Marty and myself, in making this movie."

> "She brought so much depth and awareness to Mollie that wasn't there before… She was such an incredibly open and courageous partner,"
>
> LEONARDO DICAPRIO

> "When I found out it was Tom White, it felt like every sort of holiday rolled into one"
>
> JESSE PLEMONS

'A gift of a role'

"When I found out it was Tom White, it felt like every sort of holiday rolled into one," says Jesse Plemons of being cast as the upstanding FBI agent in Scorcese's latest movie. "The guy, at least the way he comes across in the book, he's a superhero of morality. The guy is just a fucking beacon of justice."

Plemons plays the role of the upstanding agent who helped solve the plot behind the serial murders with a quiet strength. Fans of American TV sports drama *Friday Night Lights* will remember Plemons as nerdy freshman and comic relief Landry Clarke. Born 2 April 1988 in Dallas, Texas he worked as a child actor in the likes of *Finding North* (1998) and *Varsity Blues* (1999) before being cast in the Emmy-winning show in 2006.

His film career includes roles in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master* (2012), Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies* (2015) and Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019).

In 2021 he starred opposite Kirsten Dunst (whom he married the following year) in Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. He will next be seen in Yorgos Lathimos's *AND*.

The Reign of Terror and the birth of the FBI

A young J Edgar Hoover pictured in 1924, when he was director of the FBI
| CREDIT: Alamy

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was barely 10 years old by the time the killings started in the Osage Hills. But the fledgling agency was already mired in scandal. It had rapidly become as corrupt as any of the criminals it supposedly investigated.

In 1924 J Edgar Hoover had been appointed head of the Bureau, and he spotted an opportunity to rescue its reputation (and burnish his own) by investigating the killings in Oklahoma. Hoover needed a win to prove that the agency could successfully detect and prosecute serious crimes, and that the country needed a national police force.

He sent Tom White, an agent who embodied some of the virtues of the new kind of investigator Hoover wanted (clean, sober, well-spoken), but he also had the old-school lawman smarts that came from his background as a Texas Ranger. White was incorruptible, and his investigation was patient and detailed. It led to the convictions of at least some of the killers.

For Hoover, it was a triumph. The FBI had shown with its first major homicide case that a modern investigative agency was a boon to the nation – and he launched a media blitz boasting of its achievements.

But justice for the Osage came at a price. Literally. After the case was concluded Hoover sent the tribe a bill for $20,000 for services rendered.

The real-life locations

Shooting the film on location in Oklahoma, on the Osage reservation and within the towns and communities where the Reign of Terror took place, was crucial to the film-making process. Here are some of the places where the story played out...

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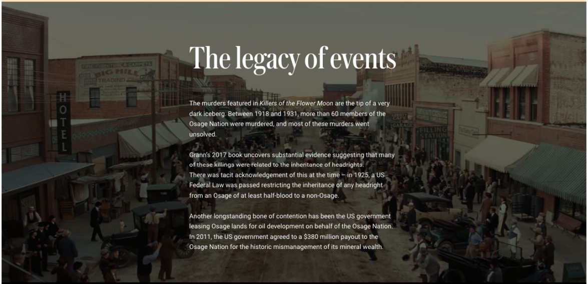
Independence, Kansas

The city that grew on the traditional lands of the Osage in Kansas. The childhood home of Laura Ingalls Wilder is a few miles to the south – *The Little House on the Prairie* was set on Osage land.

Independence Kansas field view oil pump | CREDIT: Getty



The legacy of events

The murders featured in *Killers of the Flower Moon* are the tip of a very dark iceberg. Between 1918 and 1931, more than 60 members of the Osage Nation were murdered, and most of these murders went unsolved.

Grann's 2017 book uncovers substantial evidence suggesting that many of these killings were related to the inheritance of headrights. There was tacit acknowledgement of this at the time – in 1925, a US Federal Law was passed restricting the inheritance of any headright from an Osage of at least half-blood to a non-Osage.

Another longstanding bone of contention has been the US government leasing Osage lands for oil development on behalf of the Osage Nation. In 2011, the US government agreed to a $380 million payout to the Osage Nation for the historic mismanagement of its mineral wealth.

Killers of the Flower Moon is in cinemas and IMAX from **20 October.**

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Produced by: Telegraph Media Group
Words: Adam Smith and David Whitley, Project Manager: Michelle Birbeck, Commissioning editor: Rachel Truman, Sub editor: Tim Cumming, Picture editor: Cat Costelloe, Designer: Victoria Griffiths and Victoria Ireland, Web editor: Natalie Wain, Film Photography: Courtesy of Apple, Images: Alamy, Getty, Shutterstock

Captured by FireShot Pro: 22 October 2023, 12:49:55
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