

Logan Lucky's criminals and why we root for them

In *Ocean's 11*, the thieves' sheer coolness reeled us in. It's a harder sell when the heroes day-drink themselves to sleep.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue



OCEAN'S 7/11: Brothers Clyde Logan (Adam Driver, left) and Jimmy Logan (Channing Tatum) are featured in the working-class heist film *Logan Lucky*.

Crime pays in pop culture, which means we often find ourselves rooting for the criminals. Ever since Tony Soprano sat down on his therapist's couch, antiheroes have been getting darker. That darkness is usually counterbalanced by our own moral stance: we know we are not supposed to endorse the characters' wicked ways, however much we may be sucked into their complex inner lives.

Two summer pop-culture offerings suggest that some producers think we are ready for something even darker. The comedy *The House* features Will Ferrell and Amy Poehler as middle-class Everyparents. Scott and Kate Johansen open an illegal casino to foot their daughter's college tuition bill. Their hare-brained scheme quickly transforms them into petty tyrants in their small town. The more aggressive and self-serving they become, the more successful. Their marriage is reignited and their sense of purpose returns. They are the big winners in a field of suckers.

The drama *Ozark* follows a wealthy white family that moves from Chicago to Missouri's Lake of the Ozarks to expand its money-laundering operation for a Mexican drug cartel. The series opens with a long voiceover in which Marty (Jason Bateman) bemoans the decline of the American work ethic. We have forgotten hard work and sacrifice for easy credit and high debt, he says. There might be something to chew on here except that all of this is spoken while we watch Marty hauling barrels of illegal money to a hiding spot. That his hard work mantra comes with a high body count doesn't phase him at all.

Both shows trade on a reality-TV ethic of winner takes all. There is no moral ambiguity to make us think, just naked, self-serving greed.

One counter to this dark trend is *Logan Lucky*, directed by Steven Soderbergh. It's a heist movie, so we are still cheering for criminal behavior, but it is positively old-fashioned in its warm-hearted generosity toward its characters and by extension its viewers.

Soderbergh perfected the heist genre with his *Ocean's Eleven* films, in which a crackerjack team of thieves is assembled to pull off a seemingly impossible job. He draws on that same formula in *Logan Lucky*, except the target is not the casino industry but the Charlotte Motor Speedway during one of the biggest NASCAR races of the season. "It's Ocean's 7/11," one character quips.

The team is led by native West Virginians Jimmy and Clyde Logan. Clyde (Adam Driver) is a bartender at a local dive who can mix a martini with one hand (he lost the other on his second Iraq tour). Jimmy (Channing Tatum) is the hometown football hero whose only keepsake of his glory years is a limp left over from a career-ending injury. They enlist local demolition expert and county jailbird Joe Bang (Daniel Craig). Joe insists on bringing in his brothers, Fish (Jack Quaid) and Sam (Brian Gleeson), whose hillbilly bonafides are vouched for in mullets, bad teeth, and love of Jesus.

Jimmy and Clyde first meet Fish and Sam at the county fair. They are bobbing for what look like sweet potatoes, hands tied behind their backs, heads deep in buckets of water. Fish and Sam tell the Logans that they have recently returned to the Lord. They need a moral reason to commit out-and-out robbery. Jimmy and Clyde sell them a tale about sticking it to the grocery store chain that is sponsoring the race they plan to rob—the manager at the local store got “handsy” with their sister. This is good enough for Fish and Sam.

We are meant to laugh at how easily the Lord can be co-opted for a heist. But we need a reason to root for the criminals too. In *Ocean's Eleven*, the sheer coolness of George Clooney and Brad Pitt in well-fitted suits reeled us in. It's a harder sell when the heroes drink themselves to sleep in the middle of the day.

Soderbergh plays on typical coastal elite skepticism toward the intelligence and skills of his characters. Their “rules” for the robbery include things like “Have a back-up plan.” But woven throughout the film are subtle explorations of the unfilled American dream of the working class. Jimmy drives across two state lines to work a construction job at the Speedway, but loses that job to bureaucratic red tape. Clyde can't get a passable artificial hand from the Office of Veteran Affairs. Fish has a degree in computer programming but can't find work anywhere near his family. Hardworking men who want to stay close to their kids and do right by their neighbors might as well rob a big corporate interest, which will recoup the money from the insurance anyway.

The film wears its politics in its heart, not its sleeve. There are no big speeches about economic inequality and the broken social contract. The most radical political position advanced by the film is the simple belief that these men, despite the stereotypes about such yokels, can get the job done. That they are robbing the rich to feed the poor (themselves) only makes us like them more. And though they have to break the rules to survive, they still long to live in a world where social rules bind us together. Since this is no longer a given in national politics or pop culture, it is worth the trip to West Virginia.

A version of this article appears in the October 11 print edition under the title “Rooting for the criminals.”