

*Reviews (Films / Documentaries / TV Shows / Podcasts)*

*Elvis* [film].

Directed by Baz Luhrmann. 2022.

Warner Bros. Pictures; Bazmark Films; The Jackal Group. 159 minutes.

*Elvis*, the 2022 film from director Baz Luhrmann tracing the life of pop-culture icon Elvis Presley (1935–1977), can only be described as a whirlwind. Starring Austin Butler in the title role, its dizzying montages whisk viewers through the entirety of Elvis's life in just over two and a half hours. Following a destitute childhood in rural Mississippi, Elvis spends his juvenile years in Memphis, Tennessee, frequenting Beale Street, an area teeming with Black life and culture in the 1950s. Audiences travel through Elvis's rise to rock'n'roll stardom in the 1950s, watching him shimmy and thrust in his signature style to the delight of screaming fans. After a brief tour of his 1960s Hollywood career, viewers eventually arrive at his final residency among the bright neon lights of 1970s Las Vegas. Elvis's infamous manager, Colonel Tom Parker (starring Tom Hanks), narrates the tale from his own deathbed, years after Elvis's passing, regaling listeners with tale after tale of the pair's most profitable triumphs. While the film celebrates Elvis's vibrant life and legacy, capturing his zeal for music and enthralling stage presence, it also interrogates Parker's role in building and eventually tarnishing that legacy. The film ultimately suggests that Elvis Presley was turned into a commodity, continuously packaged and repackaged by Parker, and sold to an eager public, all at the expense of the artist's humanity.

The film begins with Parker's sudden collapse sometime in the 1990s, around twenty years after Elvis's death. Chaotic flashes of Las Vegas, roulette wheels, and newspaper headlines invite viewers into Parker's troubled mind, while the disembodied voice of an anonymous newscaster recounts numerous claims against Parker, from mismanaging Elvis's finances to causing the artist's death. A frail Parker abruptly leaps from a hospital bed to refute these claims and transports the audience back to 1955. Parker, who was managing country singer Hank Snow at the time, is camped with a traveling carnival along the Texas/Arkansas border when he hears a hot new record sweeping the South, "That's All Right," recorded by a young up-and-comer from Sun Records. Hank Snow discerns "Negro rhythms" (07:36) throughout the song, and when his teenage son dramatically reveals that the artist—Elvis Presley—is white, Parker's eyes widen as he considers the incredible money-making potential of a white singer with Black musical roots.

Later that same day, a nervous young Elvis prepares backstage for his first performance on the Louisiana Hayride show. Encircled by his bandmates and family, he shakes out his nerves while his mother (starring Helen Thomson) softly sings a hymn, "I'll Fly Away." Parker then begins to narrate Elvis's family background, and the audience enters the dusty Mississippi town where the star

spent his childhood. A sandy-haired, preteen Elvis (starring Chaydon Jay) hides outside a dilapidated wooden building, spying as Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup moodily strums a guitar and sings “That’s All Right” in a bluesy falsetto with couples nearby dancing to the convulsing rhythm. Suddenly, a new sound in the distance pulls Elvis away. Dashing to a nearby tent, he enters a religious service where a rapturous congregation sings “I’ll Fly Away.” Overcome by the blues and gospel rhythms, young Elvis’s body begins to quake, and back on the Louisiana Hayride stage, grown Elvis in an oversized pink and black suit starts to sing. As his performance builds, Elvis’s body moves, his legs and hips shaking along with the beat. The teenage girls in the audience, and even some older women, lose control, letting out involuntary shrieks in response to the performer’s immodest movements. The song ends with screaming female fans crowding the stage, ripping Elvis’s jacket away as he rushes offstage.

The film goes on to depict Elvis’s early partnership with Parker, touring across the Southern U.S. with Hank Snow and drawing crowds of excited young women. Eventually, Parker parts ways with Snow to exclusively represent Elvis. Parker draws Elvis away from Sun Records to a contract with national label RCA and convinces the artist’s reluctant parents to sign on by forming “Elvis Presley Enterprises,” with Elvis’s father (starring Richard Roxburgh) as business manager. Relishing the incredible success of his first RCA recordings, Elvis soon purchases a pink Cadillac for his mother and a two-story colonial-revival home on the estate that will eventually become Graceland. Elvis’s growing fame garners him an invitation to perform on *The Milton Berle Show*, where his suggestive dancing draws the ire of U.S. Senator James Eastland from Mississippi. While Eastland was indeed a critic of Elvis, in the film he takes on a more prominent role, representing the cumulative moral panic over Elvis’s risqué creative choices. The film depicts Colonel Parker acceding to pressure from Senator Eastland and subsequently forcing Elvis to clean up his act – but after finding himself stuffed into a tailcoat singing “Hound Dog” to an actual basset hound in a top hat on *The Allen Show*, Elvis flies into a rage. After exchanging harsh words with a gaggle of friends and family members (commonly called the “Memphis Mafia”) hanging around Graceland, Elvis heads to Club Handy on Beale Street where he complains to his friend B. B. King about the powers seeking to stifle his artistic expressions. But when the frustrated artist voices his fears that his dancing will land him in jail, King laughs and explains, “They might put me in jail for walking across the street, but you’re a famous white boy. Too many people are making too much money off you to put you in jail.” (49:44)

Elvis Presley was not actually close friends with B. B. King, but in the film, King’s words bolster Elvis’s confidence. In a highly dramatized recreation of his 1956 performance at Memphis’s Russwood Park, Elvis decides to forego Colonel Parker’s advice and suggestively dances his way through a carnal rendition of “Trouble” before members of law enforcement unceremoniously drag him off the stage and into the back of a police car. Interestingly, Senator Eastland features

prominently in these scenes, leading a pro-segregationist rally a few miles from the park. Shots of Elvis warming up the crowd before his defiant performance are interspersed with clips of the senator decrying the spread of “Africanized culture” (54:57), a juxtaposition that casts Elvis’s gyrating hips as an act of rebellion, somehow integral to the fight for racial integration and equality. While *Eastland* did, in fact, hold a rally nearby on the same day as Elvis’s concert, Elvis was not actually detained for dancing, and the ensuing riot portrayed in the film—led by hysterical fans—did not occur. However, this fictionalized climax effectively sets up the film’s next major plot point: Elvis’s 1957 draft notice and his 1958 enlistment in the U.S. Army, which the film paints as a convenient solution to his exaggerated legal woes.

After a highly publicized haircut, Elvis leaves for basic training only to return home shortly thereafter to mourn the death of his mother. He then ships off to Germany, where he meets his future wife, Priscilla. He returns home to the United States just as the 1960s begin, and a stylized musical sequence on a tour bus introduces a new iteration of the Memphis Mafia, made up of family members, friends, and advisors in Elvis’s inner circle. The artist’s novel career ambition also takes center stage: acting. The tour bus montage continues throughout the 1960s, with cheerful clips showing Elvis and Priscilla welcoming their daughter, Lisa Marie, while Colonel Parker arranges for Elvis to take Hollywood by storm, but after numerous films, Elvis’s acting career starts to sour as he (and audiences) tire of his two-dimensional roles. As video clips of the decade play in the background, from *The Beatles* to a Saturn V rocket launch, Elvis watches the nation move forward, seemingly leaving him behind. Suddenly, a gunshot rings out, marking the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and bringing Elvis to a complete halt. Still reeling from the news, Elvis partners with director Steve Binder (starring Dacre Montgomery) and record producer Bones Howe (starring Gareth Davies) to revitalize his image through an upcoming Christmas television special orchestrated by Parker. But while filming the special—an energetic sequence of musical numbers featuring kung-fu choreography, gospel singers, risqué female dancers, and Elvis in an iconic black leather jumpsuit—another gunshot rings out, this time signaling the 1968 assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. In response, Binder and Elvis add a new finale to the special, a soulful ballad in which the artist searches for answers and mourns along with a hurting nation. Even Parker, who vehemently disliked Binder’s and Howe’s artistic direction, is moved by the number, and the television broadcast is an immediate hit.

Elvis hopes to take this newfound momentum on an international tour, but here, Colonel Parker’s manipulation of the artist becomes undeniably apparent. Illegally living in the United States under an assumed identity, Parker cannot leave the country—and with a mountain of gambling debts, he fears losing Elvis, his cash cow. Feigning worry over financial risks and security threats, Parker convinces Elvis to remain stateside, putting on a new performance at a Las Vegas hotel and embarking on a fifteen-city U.S. tour. In exchange for Elvis’s five-year

residency, Parker negotiates for the hotel owner to subsidize his (i.e., Parker's) personal gambling habit. Elvis thus remains in Las Vegas for the remainder of his career, growing increasingly unhappy, while Parker enlists the services of Dr. George "Nick" Nichopoulos (starring Tony Nixon) to care for the deteriorating artist by pumping him full of medication. Although, in reality, Parker's true identity did not surface until after Elvis's death, the film lets Elvis in on the secret—and in response, an angry, slurring Elvis fires Parker onstage during a performance, only to reluctantly reconcile after discovering he cannot sever financial ties with him. Resigned to his lot in Las Vegas with the duplicitous Parker, a final scene shows Elvis conversing with his now ex-wife on an airplane runway after visiting his daughter. Priscilla pleads with Elvis to seek help for his drug dependency as the singer laments, "Nobody's gonna remember me. I never did anything lasting." He brushes off Priscilla's encouragement, confessing, "I'm all out of dreams." (2:21:35) After Elvis bids Priscilla goodbye, a montage of news coverage from 1977 announces the famed singer's death at age 42 from a heart attack at his Memphis home. The film concludes with archival footage showing a momentous outpouring of public grief after this loss.

Sticklers for historical accuracy may balk at *Elvis*, as the film undoubtedly exaggerates and fabricates some aspects of Elvis Presley's story in the name of good storytelling. Still, Baz Luhrmann's interpretation arguably maintains emotional and thematic accuracy, effectively communicating the overall trajectory of the artist's life and career. *Elvis* joins several recent biopics about twentieth-century musical artists, including Freddie Mercury (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, 2018), Elton John (*Rocketman*, 2019), and Aretha Franklin (*Respect*, 2021), but Luhrmann's glitzy aesthetic lends itself well to Elvis Presley's dazzling persona, making *Elvis* a stylistic standout. The film features a distinctly "Baz Luhrmann" soundtrack, blending old sounds with the new à la the director's other films *Moulin Rouge* (2001) or *The Great Gatsby* (2013). Classic Elvis tracks—mostly sung by Butler, with some snippets of Presley's recorded voice blended in—were remixed to suit the emotional atmosphere of each scene, from booming bass lines to an ethereal echoing effect distorting the singers' vocals. "Can't Help Falling in Love" was rerecorded by Kacey Musgraves, serving as the auditory backdrop for Elvis's and Priscilla's first kiss. New tracks were commissioned for the film as well, such as Denzel Curry's rap that accompanies an angsty Elvis on a drive through Memphis, and artists like Doja Cat, Eminem, and CeeLo Green also lent their talents to the film's soundtrack. Some viewers may not enjoy the liberties Luhrmann takes with Elvis's music, but the director's creative decisions—from the soundtrack to the occasional departures from historical fact—compellingly tie together the emotional threads of Elvis's life story.

It is worth highlighting that *Elvis* consciously and constantly draws attention to the Black musical artists who influenced Presley's work, even pointing out songs that originated with Black artists before they became Elvis's greatest hits, beginning with "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right." In another notable

example, Elvis hears Big Mama Thornton (starring Shonka Dukureh) singing his future hit “Hound Dog” while visiting Beale Street early in the film. Still, the film perhaps fails to fully reckon with the implications of a white singer gaining fame for borrowing from Black musical styles, casting Elvis’s embrace of Black music as complimentary with only minimal references to the barriers faced by Black artists in Elvis’s era. But in a biographical drama about such a beloved performer, this acknowledgement is still a welcome addition. Overall, *Elvis* tells an enthralling story about a pop culture icon’s struggle to maintain his humanity and artistic identity, while an exploitative manager—and perhaps an exploitative culture—gradually breaks his spirit. While *Elvis* will be of particular interest to scholars studying popular culture in either the twentieth century or the present day, all who consider themselves students of history or culture will undoubtedly find something to capture their attention in this film.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Melissa B. Garrison of Torrance, California, earned a B.A. in American Studies (2016) at Brigham Young University. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in American Studies at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).*

*The Last Duel* [film].

Directed by Ridley Scott. 2021.

Scott Free Productions; Pearl Street Films; TSG Entertainment. 153 minutes.

You have come home from a brutal war, ill and physically spent. You are trying to provide for your family, yet are bankrupt even after years of attempting to gain a more favorable standing in life. Now, upon your return, you must travel a considerable distance yet again to claim the wages for which you have spilled your blood. While you are practically at your breaking point, you find your beloved wife in shambles and hysterically describing how the man you once considered your greatest friend raped her while you were away at war. This is *The Last Duel*, a film adapted from the 2004 book of the same title by Eric Jager, an American literary critic and medievalist at the University of California, Los Angeles. Jager was brought on to provide feedback on the film’s script and consulted its team on historical accuracy. *The Last Duel* takes place in France during the Caroline War (1369–1389), the second part of the Hundred Years’ War between England and France. It is director Ridley Scott’s twenty-sixth film and the first of two released in 2021 (the second being *House of Gucci*). Scott is no stranger to the ancient and medieval world, to fantasy, and to the epic genre, as evidenced by some of his previous films, such as *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *Robin Hood* (2010), and—perhaps his most famous and critically acclaimed contribution to the genre—*Gladiator* (2000). Considering his cinematographic achievements to date, I would say that *The Last Duel* most resembles *Gladiator* thematically and *Kingdom of Heaven* visually and historically. If one took the medieval period of *Kingdom of Heaven* and combined it with *Gladiator*’s themes of violence, masculinity, and revenge, one would have *The Last Duel*. With regard to its storytelling, the film is a medieval European version of the Japanese film

*Rashomon* (1950) in which the characters' stories are presented separately and are contradictory to one another. *The Last Duel* presents three different accounts, one by Jean de Carrouges (starring Matt Damon), one by his former friend Jacques Le Gris (starring Adam Driver), and one by Jean's wife Marguerite (starring Jodie Comer). Ben Affleck joins the cast as Count Pierre d'Alençon. What starts as a tale of fraternity and aspiration quickly turns into one of treachery, conspiracy, and revenge.

The film opens on the battlefield during the 1370 siege of the city of Limoges with the English and French engaged in war. Bodies lay across the field indiscriminately, some of them decapitated. While this is realistic, Scott might also be alluding to *Gladiator* as that film, too, opens with two opposing armies facing each other on the battlefield. Jean de Carrouges and Jacques Le Gris are in the mud, fending off the enemy and looking out for each other. After some time, the English retreat, whereupon Jean decides to lead a spontaneous charge against the fleeing English despite Jacques's urging in favor of caution. The men return from their campaign to a hero's welcome and celebrate with the others in a like-mannered fashion. Eventually, they meet up with Count Pierre d'Alençon who had been appointed Jean's overlord by King Charles VI of France (or, as some referred to him later, "The Mad"). Jean and Jacques swear allegiance to Pierre, and the snowball that will eventually result in their duel begins to roll. There is a certain "prince and pauper" undertone when Jacques is placed in charge of collecting war levies and comes to Jean to collect. Jean, given his current financial situation, cannot pay, and thus he asks Jacques to petition for leniency on his behalf. As Jean continues to be down on his luck, Jacques's life could not be any better. Upon discovering that Jacques is well-read and knowledgeable in accounting, Pierre elevates him to a position at his court. As the saying goes, it is not money or status that changes a person; it only amplifies who they already are.

In Jacques's case, this certainly rings true as he becomes an accomplice in Pierre's frequent debaucheries including (on Pierre's part) adultery and sexual assault. At one point, Pierre seizes a girl against her will and wrestles her into submission, arguing that this is something she had wanted, and Jacques follows suit. The focus then returns to Jean who is taking an interest in the lovely Marguerite de Thibouville. After a courting period, Jean meets with Marguerite's father Robert to discuss the dowry. Robert, a nobleman, owns many valuable estates, including the one Jean desires most, namely, Annou-le-Facoun, located in northwestern France. After much debate, Robert concedes the property as a portion of the dowry. Jean and Marguerite are married in a beautiful ceremony, and everything seems to be going Jean's way for once. He is happily married, and his socio-economic status is bound to be on the upswing, or so it would seem.

Meanwhile, under duress to settle an outstanding tax debt, Robert has been forced to surrender the coveted Annou-le-Faucon to Pierre who, adding insult to injury, gifts it to Jacques. Enraged, Jean first attempts to go to Pierre to settle his claim but is promptly brushed aside. Now furious, Jean takes the matter to King

Charles himself, only to find himself dismissed yet again. After learning of this, Pierre takes his revenge by appointing Jacques as captain of the Carrouges family estate following the death of Jean's father, thus robbing Jean of his birthright – the ultimate insult. Jean and Marguerite have been unsuccessful in conceiving a child during this time, which puts further strain on Jean who, in addition to losing his birthright, might now also lose his legacy. Jean harbors rage and hurt toward Jacques who, in his eyes, did not defend him as a friend and former comrade, nor did he utilize his connection with Pierre to alleviate Jean's situation. Alas, the two meet at a celebration and, upon kissing each other on the cheek, declare to all present that the feud between them is now dissolved, which is met with thunderous applause. As the festivities go on, Marguerite and her friends catch Jacques's eye who has been observing them for some time. Despite Jacques's reputation as a womanizer, Marguerite approaches him to gain his favor, and the two strike up a conversation about books. Marguerite compliments Jacques's knowledge of literature and reveals that Jean is not interested in books. Jacques interprets this as Marguerite being somehow unsatisfied or unfulfilled in her marriage to Jean, and the seed of adultery is planted in his heart.

The film's defining moment arrives when Jean returns home from a failed military campaign in Scotland. Although he has been knighted for his efforts, he is still bankrupt and therefore must leave for Paris to collect his wages, leaving Marguerite by herself to attend to their estate. Jacques intrudes on the home and assaults Marguerite, a barbaric act shown in both her and Jacques's subsequent accounts of the story. After his return, Jean finds out what has happened and immediately proceeds to pursue legal action. Since the courts fail to act, Jean takes the matter to the king himself, and an ecclesiastical court interrogates Marguerite to see whether she has been truthful, as "a woman who didn't enjoy it can't conceive." The king then decides to grant Jean's request for a judicial duel, and the two men enter the arena. In the end, Jean pins Jacques to the ground, demanding that he confess, and finally ends Jacques's life by kneeling his blade into Jacques's throat. Marguerite is declared innocent due to her husband's victory, and the two live out the rest of their days, parenting their children until Jean's eventual death fighting in the 1396 Crusade of Nicopolis.

Considering the film's star talent, I would recommend it to anyone who enjoys the acting of Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Adam Driver. I would especially recommend it to anyone who loves medieval times, revenge stories, great fight choreography, and films with some grounding in actual past events. However, I would not recommend this film to anyone sensitive to the theme of sexual assault as it is featured prominently on several occasions. While I appreciated the film when it first came out, I felt that many of the scenes involving Pierre could have been cut as they gave him and Jacques the appearance of fraternity brothers as opposed to powerful members of the French aristocracy. In addition, I wish the film would provide more information about the "aftermath," following the duel itself. Eric Jager's book covers this rather well by describing Jean's and

Marguerite's firstborn son and how he grew up to realize that Jacques might be his real father. The book also states that this trial was widely covered during its time and for centuries after, with people even disputing the outcome and arguing in favor of Jacques's innocence. At the end of the day, it is a Ridley Scott film, so at the very least you know that it will be good, if not great.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Jacob Nikolson of San Marcos, California, earned a B.S. in Business Administration (2020) at California State University, San Marcos. He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the History Student Association (HSA) and the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for volume 50 (2023) of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History."*

*Stuff the British Stole [podcast].*

*Hosted by Marc Fennell. 2020 to present.*

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Podcasts. 10 episodes (28-38 minutes each).

Dressed in all black, a yellow tote bag slung over one shoulder, the woman walks briskly along a nondescript city street, her phone held up, recording her journey. She beams at the camera before asking in a gleeful voice, "You know how – when you get robbed – you never see your stuff again? Well, apparently, there's a place in London where you can go and see all the stuff that's been taken." The camera angle shifts to reveal a stately building, Ionic columns lining the entryway. "So we just got to the British Museum," she deadpans before the screen goes dark. At first glance, @lostwithlucy's video is just another social media post, but it raises an excellent point. Many of the collections housed in the British Museum and other such institutions across the United Kingdom (and the western world) are subjects of contentious debates. For numerous ethnic groups and entire countries, the items found in these exhibitions are antiquities pilfered by invading forces and a reminder of the destruction wrought by the British Empire. Books like Sharon Waxman's *Loot: The Battle Over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World* (2008) and Geoffrey Robertson's *Who Owns History? Elgin's Loot and the Case for Returning Plundered Treasures* (2019) have previously addressed the conflict over who should own the great works of ancient art, examining the implications of preservation and the demands for restitution. *Stuff the British Stole*, a podcast hosted by Marc Fennell, is a welcome addition to the subject as it provides insight into the less-than-straightforward history of why certain objects are found in British museums, delving into the complex history of colonialism and the debates surrounding the return of artifacts to their places of origin.

*Stuff the British Stole* is the brainchild of its host Marc Fennell, a Walkley Award-winning journalist, author, documentary-maker, television presenter, and podcaster from Australia. It is produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (season one and two) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) (season two). Fennell has generated several other podcasts, including *It Burns*, a documentary on the scandalous race to breed the world's



hottest chili, and *Nut Job*, an investigative series on California's million-dollar nut heists. Based on his catalogue of work, it is clear that Fennell has a flair for storytelling, delving into unusual but compelling narratives that few others have examined. It is his family background, solidly based in the history of the British Empire, that has inspired him to create *Stuff the British Stole*: Fennell labels himself a "genetic potluck" to explain his varied ethnic background with family roots in Singapore, India, and Ireland. In each episode, Fennell selects a single artifact and guides the audience through its turbulent and often tragic journey to its current location. Through interviews with experts, historians, and people from the affected communities, Fennell reveals the "not-so-polite history" behind the objects, emphasizing the lasting damage of these thefts. While each item provides insight into larger stories of imperialism and colonialism, the podcast itself goes beyond simply examining the past; rather, it also reflects on the world of today, making sense of the repercussions of history.

The inaugural episode, "A Tiger and a Scream," delves into the story of how a mechanical toy, *Tipu's Tiger*, ended up in London's Victoria and Albert Museum. Every day, visitors stream past what Fennell describes as an "almost life-sized soldier with the dilated pupils of a career stoner lying supine as a wild orange tiger plunges its fangs deep into the side of his neck." (01:55) The automaton consists of a life-size wooden tiger mauling a life-size wooden European man dressed in the uniform of the East India Company. Mechanisms inside the tiger's and man's respective bodies cause one hand of the man to move and the man himself to wail while the tiger emits grunting sounds. This mechanical toy was created for Tipu Sultan, otherwise known as the Tiger of Mysore, an eighteenth-century ruler of the kingdom of Mysore in South India. A fierce fighter, Tipu Sultan opposed British colonial forces until his death (1799) in battle during the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. Upon his death, British forces looted the stronghold of Seringapatam, stealing the wooden figure and bringing it to the London Zoo. From there it bounced between archives and museums before permanently landing in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection.

Tipu Sultan's legacy is as complicated as the story of how his automaton made its way to England. Tipu was demonized by the British as a fearful dictator, a villain who needed to be stopped, and his involvement in massacres and slavery is undeniable. Fennell does not shy away from presenting critical perspectives on the matter, and he features a diverse cast of voices such as Maya Jasanoff, a professor at Harvard University; Zareer Masani, an author of several texts on Indian nationalism; Shashi Tharoor, an author and Indian member of parliament (MP); and Alice Procter, an art historian. Procter's inclusion provides an interesting analytical point of view, which is necessary to address the complex history of British colonialism. She acts as a sort of undercover historian, offering unofficial (and originally secret) guided tours of British museums as a means of discussing the uncomfortable side of history, "specifically about the stuff that people don't want to talk about, which is colonial history. The kind of darkest parts

of empire and imperialism [...] the objects on display that have really violent histories” that no one mentions. (08:01) A recurring theme across the podcast is the concept of what it means for an item to have a “contested history.” As Procter points out, “a lot of museums use [the] term of “contested histories” as this way of glossing over what’s actually being contested, which is that – nine times out of ten – they were stolen in very violent circumstances or taken as part of looting after conflict.” (08:10) *Stuff the British Stole* sets out to address the deficits left by the polite plaques that litter museums to offer a window into the violent and tragic pasts of artifacts and lends insight into their theft.

Fennell includes stories from a wide swath of countries impacted by British colonialism. Episode four of season one, “The Headhunter,” dives into the history of *tā moko* and *mokomokai*, which became a highly coveted memento across Britain in the nineteenth century. To begin the episode, Fennell interviews Roki Maika, a tattoo artist who practices *tā moko*, a form of traditional *Māori* tattooing which communicates a person’s story and connects them to their ancestry through intensely detailed and stylized curves and patterns. The tattoos may appear anywhere on the body, but the face is the most significant location. Traditionally, after someone with facial *tā moko* had passed, their body would be decapitated and their head preserved through a process in which “it would be steamed, smoked, dried, and then sealed with shark oil.” (08:35) Such heads, referred to as *mokomokai*, were created for two reasons: as trophies of war and as a means of memorializing revered loved ones. When Captain James Cook, the British explorer, landed in New Zealand in 1770 aboard *The Endeavor*, the *mokomokai* became a point of curiosity and soon sparked a dangerous trade centered on exchanging heads for muskets, which fueled bloody tribal warfare. Soon, *mokomokai* were scattered across the Western world, finding a home on people’s mantles, between the shelves of medical institutions, and in British museum collections. Now, in the twenty-first century, the government of New Zealand is working to track down and repatriate the *mokomokai*.

The voices of *Māori* are heard throughout the episode, expressing the importance of the *mokomokai* to their culture and the pain felt by the people due to their theft. Te Herekikie, a member of the Te Papa Repatriation Unit, explains that “there have been over one thousand ancestors taken from our country. We’ve been able to achieve six hundred of those coming home. The job isn’t completed until all our ancestors come home. I’m connected to every ancestor that comes home because they are me, and I am them.” (27:16) There is a promise in Te Herekikie’s voice. It is an incredibly different experience to hear him say these words versus reading them in an article. As an auditory medium, *Stuff the British Stole* underscores the emotional nature of the stories told throughout the podcast. Something must also be said for Fennell’s ability to conduct an interview. His skills are outstanding as he draws out information. From that, he crafts an enthralling narrative arc that guides the audience through a range of emotions and thoughts.

*Stuff the British Stole* is an exceptional podcast that succeeds beyond measure in entertaining its audience. I would recommend it to friends and family members who have even the smallest passing interest in history. A person does not need an in-depth knowledge of British colonial history to comprehend the subjects being examined and discussed. Each episode of *Stuff the British Stole* confines itself to a single story, typically running around twenty-eight to thirty-eight minutes. At the time of writing this review, there were ten total episodes across two seasons, and a television show based on the podcast was in production and scheduled to begin airing in late 2022. In addition to the artifacts discussed above, the episodes produced so far address bronzes from Benin, puppies from Imperial China, a Gweagal shield from Australia, the Motunui Epa panels from New Zealand, the Parthenon Marbles from Greece, the Mount Keefe Chalice from Ireland, the remains of the so-called “Hottentot Venus” (Sarah/Saartje Baartman) from South Africa, and a dodo skull from Mauritius. As both writer and narrator, Fennell recognizes how to construct a compelling narrative that presents complex histories in an understandable and accessible manner. The sound engineering and editing are excellent, accentuating the superb storytelling. Truly, this podcast is worth the time, and I cannot recommend it enough. If *Stuff the British Stole* catches your attention, then *Sidedoor*, the official podcast of the Smithsonian, should be added to your list of must-listen-to podcasts. In a similar manner, *Sidedoor* combines narrative storytelling with interviews from prominent historians, artists, biologists, archaeologists, and other experts in the field to relay the stories of items found in the Smithsonian’s vaults. Whether you are a serious historian or a commuter needing to fill the silence of an hour, *Stuff the British Stole* is the perfect podcast.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Rachel Jensen of Buena Park, California, earned a B.A. in History and English (2015) at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where she was a member of the Iota-Epsilon Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society) and the Nu-Phi Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (English Honor Society). She earned a Single Subject Teaching Credential in Social Science and English (2017) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). She is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF, where she is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). She also served as an editor for volume 50 (2023) of “The Welebaethan: A Journal of History.”*

*Vinland Saga: Season 1 [TV series].*

*Directed by Shūhei Yabuta. 2019.*

Wit Studio, Inc.; Netflix. 24 episodes (25–29 minutes).

Sagas are grandiose stories—based on ancient oral traditions—of the amazing feats and accomplishments of legendary Norse heroes. One of these tales, the *Vinland Saga*, has recently been adapted into a TV series via the Japanese medium of anime. Directed by Shūhei Yabuta, it is an on-screen adaptation of Nordic lore, myths, and legends regarding the famous medieval Icelandic explorers. The first season reviewed here is set in the early eleventh century and follows a young warrior named Thorfinn on his journey to avenge the death of his father by

defeating the latter's killer in a duel. However, it must be noted that setting sail and embarking to Vinland does not yet happen in this first part of the series. Rather, the first season's arc primarily focuses on the events and experiences that dramatically change and shape Thorfinn.

The first four episodes serve as a prologue to showcase Thorfinn's early childhood, but they mainly demonstrate the moral compass by which Thorfinn's father lives. The opening scene reveals a young Thors Snorrsson, Thorfinn's father and an astounding warrior, as he dispatches groups of enemies with ease. Despite his skill and triumph, he abruptly flees the battle, leaving behind his former life as an exalted Norse warrior, a Jomsviking. It is revealed that, ever since the birth of his first child, Thors has begun to feel uneasy in the face of death and started to get scared of battle. These transformative sentiments lead him to turn to a philosophy of nonviolence, and he forswears harming anyone ever again.

However, fifteen years later, his past continues to haunt him, as the Jomsvikings have discovered that he is living in Iceland and demand that he join their upcoming war against England. Despite his resolution of nonviolence, Thors is forced to comply, as they threaten to annihilate his village and its people. Unbeknownst to this threat, the village is filled with excitement because such is the Viking way. The young men are eager, as they will finally have a chance to prove to themselves and their village that they are warriors. Together with the other boys, six-year-old Thorfinn is especially excited as he hopes to cement himself as a great warrior like his father. When Thors learns of his son's aspirations, he confronts him, cautioning him that no one has any enemies and that it is not acceptable to hurt anyone. Haunted by the trauma and the weight of guilt he has incurred from inflicting pain upon others, Thors seeks to prevent Thorfinn from experiencing that same guilt. He forbids Thorfinn from traveling with him, but Thorfinn sneaks onto his father's boat, revealing himself only when they are past the point of safely returning home.

The audience is then introduced to the leading antagonist, Askeladd, as he is being hired by the Jomsvikings to kill Thors for his insubordination fifteen years earlier. Askeladd is the charismatic leader of a band of Danish mercenaries who will ambush Thors's party as they are traveling. Thors defeats wave after wave of Danish forces with his bare hands, thus allowing him to kill none of them. He eventually challenges Askeladd to a duel to prevent a further escalation of violence. Thors handily defeats Askeladd but refuses to kill him, which Askeladd cunningly takes to his advantage, forcing Thors to surrender his life to save the lives of his men and his son. This causes a dramatic change in Thorfinn as he becomes filled with hatred and rage. In that moment, he pledges to kill Askeladd to avenge his father.

The events following the death of Thors are the focus of the remainder of the anime, with Thorfinn living the kind of life his father had desperately sought to keep away from him. Moving forward, Thorfinn will experience a life that is relentlessly violent and unforgivingly tragic. The most prominent example of this

is the episode *The Journey Begins*, which exhibits the loss of Thorfinn's innocence and his descent into violence as he grows up pursuing Askeladd's group to avenge his father. The young Thorfinn joins battle campaigns and even works for Askeladd to be rewarded with duels against him. This episode particularly demonstrates Thorfinn's commitment to revenge. After skirmishes with English forces, Thorfinn is injured as he attempts to scout an English village. As he is found injured by a stream, he is taken in and shown forgiveness by an English woman who protects and cares for him while English soldiers are searching for him. Thorfinn inevitably betrays this woman's trust and signals the Vikings to begin their plunder and destruction of the village. Clearly saddened by his own decision, he nonetheless participates in the raid.

Despite all the gruesome violence and brutality it has to offer, *Vinland Saga* still manages to sustain its beautiful underlying story of humanity and the search for what it means to be a true warrior. This is showcased through the amazing character exploration and development. What makes the characters in this series so great is that all of them are conflicted with regard to their own identity or purpose. In an interview, the author of the *Vinland Saga* manga, Makoto Yukimura, explains how he has sought to portray individuals confronting violence. His concept is clearly reflected by the characters themselves as they live during a time of barbarity and cruelty. For instance, Thorfinn has reached such a point of obsession with revenge that he will stop at nothing to achieve his goal. This is characterized by the approach he takes when trying to earn duels from Askeladd. He chooses to confront violence with violence. On the other hand, Thors is haunted by the trauma of inflicting violence. He is someone who has the supreme capacity for violence but chooses not to use it in order to seek redemption from his past; he has chosen to counter violence with unyielding peace.

In terms of the relationships between characters, Askeladd and Thorfinn have the most interesting connection. In fact, their relationship adds a layer of depth to the story, as they develop a pseudo mentor-student connection and even, to a certain extent, a father-son relationship. Thorfinn is forced to learn from his own father's murderer how to survive in a ruthlessly violent environment. Much like a father, Askeladd does not internalize the anger and contempt that Thorfinn expresses toward him but rather attempts to counsel him to help him grow and develop. In Thors's absence, Askeladd essentially raises and mentors Thorfinn during his developmental years. Throughout the rest of the season, he almost gives the impression that he wants Thorfinn to succeed in his quest for revenge.

As an animated series, *Vinland Saga* takes immense liberties with regard to production value and design, offering a no-holds-barred approach when it comes to theatrics as everything is amplified to the next level of spectacle, especially given the monumental amount of action. Hyperbolic feats of strength and agility are on full display as our beloved heroes somersault onto fortress walls, cleave their enemies in half, and carry longships overhead with their bare hands whilst running full-sprint. For an anime, this level of action is considered typical or even

tame. Furthermore, the animation itself is a masterpiece. Critical moments and action scenes are stunningly and beautifully animated. The director and producers are able to fully realize their visions of depicting full-scale battle scenes, dynamic and fluid duels, and unique character expressions and emotions. Such an astounding level of work is scarcely found in any other form of “historical” anime.

*Vinland Saga*'s telling of a story based on Nordic folklore and legends through a Japanese medium is truly remarkable. In terms of historical accuracy and realism, the anime does fall short, but it also does not detract from or ruin the experience. In the abovementioned interview, Yukimura states that focusing on pure historical realism often creates a certain distance from entertainment. By deviating from such realism and paying attention to viewer satisfaction, Yukimura has created incredible scenes and events. It is abundantly clear that he has done extensive research to use Viking lore in order to maintain a high level of historical authenticity. There are many connections to the original sagas that find their way into the anime. However, at times, it is the author's choice to tell the story his own way. For instance, in the original sagas, particularly the *Saga of the Greenlanders* and the *Saga of Erik the Red*, the character that Thorfinn is based on, Thorfinn Karlsefni receives no references to his childhood. Other characters, such as Askeladd, do not appear in any of these sagas as well. The only trace of Askeladd is under the name of Askeladden in Norwegian folklore.

The first season of *Vinland Saga* is a masterwork of historical fiction. With the release of the second season in January 2023, there is no better time to start watching the *Vinland Saga* unfold than right now. Casual viewers without much preliminary knowledge of Nordic and Viking history will nonetheless be entertained by *Vinland Saga*'s action-packed battle scenes, tear-jerking emotional encounters, and jaw-dropping plot twists. Viking-history buffs who have been enjoying the vast array of recent “Norse” TV series on Netflix and elsewhere, but have never watched an anime, will likely be enthralled by the “historic” moments and bits of Nordic folklore woven throughout *Vinland Saga* and will probably be fascinated by the sheer scale of what a Japanese anime is able to achieve in terms of story development, animation, and design.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Wesley Ha of Temple City, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

*The Woman King* [film].

Directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. 2022.

TriStar Pictures; Welle Entertainment; JuVee Productions; et al. 135 minutes.

Arguably one of Viola Davis's most notable cultural films (next to *The Help*), *The Woman King* provides a jaw-dropping experience. From the realistic fight scenes to the inspirational speeches delivered by the main characters, it was hard for me to turn away from the silver screen. *The Woman King* is a testimony to the limitless potential of our community: regardless of race, creed, or gender, we are all capable of what we put our minds to. Throughout the film, there is a wide range of actions

taken by the main characters that serve to inspire those who watch, whilst maintaining reasonable references to past events.

To express somewhat chronologically my emotions and reactions throughout the film, I turn to the opening scene's high level of intricate detail and my corresponding level of elation. In the film's first ten minutes, the brute force and technical demonstration of martial arts gives way to the resounding knowledge in the community that the "woman king" will not just match but outperform traditional kings. In my experience with history, kings and queens usually "fight" with pen, paper, and seal. In *The Woman King*, the sweat and blood of battle, often associated with "manliness," is that of females. Izogie (starring Lashana Lynch), a character who embodies all the features of a 1980s Marines drill sergeant, receives plenty of screen time. Her savagery in battle earns her the reputation of a fearsome, honorable, and ruthless warrior, which is why her death (addressed later in this review) is not just shocking but emotionally distressing to the audience.

*The Woman King* touches on the political and social dynamics in Africa during its colonial history, including gender roles and issues pertaining to both the African and global slave trade. Shortly after the film's 1823 opening battle scene, the "Agojie" warriors, an all-female combat unit led by General Nanisca (starring Viola Davis), along with the Dahomey women they have just rescued from Oyo slavers, are seen marching back to a large welcoming ceremony where community members are not allowed to make eye contact with the Agojie out of respect. This relatively simple detail really connects the women's fighting superiority to their political and hierarchical status among their male counterparts. To this day, not looking someone in the eyes remains a sign of reverence or fear in some communities. Igozie represents this theme of female power in a scene that depicts a show of strength between the two prominent branches of the Dahomey army, namely, the Agojie and the unnamed male force. In this scene, Izogie is positioned roughly five feet from a member of the male contingent. A spear is placed between them, and the person who can apply the most forward pressure is to be declared the winner. After a painful twelve seconds, Izogie, representing the strength of the Agojie, takes a step forward as the spear's sharp end makes its way through her shoulder, its other end simultaneously moving toward the man. When the man, reluctantly yet swiftly, removes the spear from his shoulder, his facial expression almost resembles that of a young child forced to yell "Uncle" when their older sibling has them pinned in a helpless position. I simply had to clap in my reclining chair in the movie theater as I had just witnessed something that has never been so accurately shown on the silver screen before. *The Woman King* features many such moments that elicit similar emotional responses, especially those involving the main protagonist, General Nanisca.

Nanisca and her "abandoned" daughter Nawi (starring Thuso Mbedu) represent the film's compassionate aspect. There is a scene in which, after an intense training session of the new Agojie recruits, Nanisca realizes—with the assistance of her trusted friend Amenza (starring Sheila Atim)—that the recruit

who is at the top of the class is, in fact, her long-lost daughter. That Nanisca, when she was a younger, lower-ranking member of the Agojie, had abandoned her child is explained as a consequence of the norm that the Agojie are not permitted to have families or bear children, due to the assumption that love causes weakness. As a member of the audience, it was never clear to me why the Agojie were not allowed to have children or marry, whereas their militant male counterparts could experience both. To me, this felt like a lop-sided policy in which women had the “short end of the stick.” Throughout the film’s second half, we witness Nawi struggling with this policy as she makes eye contact with male members of the community and eventually falls in love with Malik (starring Jordan Bolger). Jordan Bolger brilliantly portrays this complicated, complex, and conflicted young man of Dahomey blood who has recently come to Africa aboard a Portuguese ship. The reason for this is revealed when he shares with Nawi that his Dahomey mother had been carried off to Brazil as a slave, but had always dreamt of her son being able to see her beautiful African homeland. While Malik intrigues both the audience and Nawi, she heeds the warning from her commanding officer Nanisca to obey the policy of abandoning her desire for a family, let alone a relationship.

Toward the end, there is a rescue mission that, unfortunately, costs Izogie, the most aggressive and resilient of the Agojie warriors, her life when she is killed by a gunshot. However, Izogie’s bravery tattooed her name on my mind for the remaining portion of the film. In fact, all of the film’s main characters earn unique places of their own, usually identified by their actions rather than mere words. Despite directly disobeying the king’s order not to conduct the rescue mission, Nanisca is awarded the ceremonial title of “woman king.” Nanisca’s bravery and leadership earn her this title, but at that moment, when she seemingly has it all, her mind wanders back to thoughts of her daughter whom she had abandoned as a child to earn this crown. The film’s most wholesome moment comes when Nawi approaches Nanisca, her mother, at the festival and asks for a dance. This symbolizes the slow beginnings of a, hopefully, blossoming relationship between mother and daughter, but it also represents that the wounds inflicted on Nawi psychologically, thinking that she was unwanted, are obstacles she still has to face; however...not tonight.

The brilliance of Dana Stevens’s screenplay is obvious, but this film, along with others released in recent years, proves that all aspects—including props and thorough historical research—contribute to the excellence of the final product. The film’s executive costume designer Gersha Phillips went all out in her creative choices to consider historical depictions. The socio-cultural research conducted to bring *The Woman King*’s story to life accounts for the film’s authentic feel. Many people do not really know what, who, or how Africans worshiped prior to their indoctrination by European settlers; therefore, it was a strategically sound plan to include some worship scenes in the film. After watching *The Woman King*, I felt compelled to conduct some of my own research into the film’s African communities in order to assess the film’s artistic and cultural contributions. It is



clear that *The Woman King* holds considerable sentimental value, not only as a demonstration of female power and African culture as a whole but also as an inspirational tribute to African American ancestry.

Another powerful component is the film's perfect placement of sound effects as well as its use of cultural music, particularly songs. The music, scored by renowned Jazz trumpeter and composer Terence Oliver Blanchard and celebrated with a "best-original-score-in-a-feature-film" win at the 2022 "Hollywood Music in Media Awards, sets the mood for the various fight scenes, and it is truly "jump-out-of-your-seat" stirring. To me, the most beautiful example from the film's soundtrack is a cultural chant sung by the warriors (01:21:00). In addition, *The Woman King's* closing credits feature Jessie Wilson's Grammy-nominated song "Keep Rising" (featuring Angélique Kidjo), which has you enraptured until the very end.

As an African American historian, I am deeply grateful for and thoroughly impressed by this film. After watching the previews, I had not been thoroughly intrigued, but now, knowing the full story and how it all plays out, it would have been a shame to not have seen *The Woman King* in a movie theater. Coincidentally – although I am sure this was not a coincidence to its protagonist – the film's September 2022 release occurred only a few months after the publication of Viola Davis's autobiography, *Finding Me: A Memoir* (April 2022), underscoring this artist's tremendous versatility, strength, and creativity.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Marcus Arnwine of La Palma, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).*