

SHEILA: OUTBACK VENGEANCE

THE LAND MADE HER DANGEROUS

FULL TREATMENT

Written & Adapted by Gregory J. Round

Based on the novel SHEILA | Amazon, 2025

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Director being approached: John Hillcoat

GENRE	Colonial Survival Thriller Australian Gothic
FORMAT	Feature Film Est. 105–115 minutes
SETTING	Colonial Queensland, Australia Late 19th Century
BUDGET	AUD \$3M – \$8M
DIRECTOR	John Hillcoat — approach in progress
PRODUCER	Gregory J. Round EP & Co-Finance being sought
FINANCE	Screen Australia Producer Offset Screen Queensland Co-production eligible
SEQUEL	SHEILA: THE SOMME — script complete

LOGLINE

A fourteen-year-old girl flees a violently abusive father in colonial Queensland, survives the brutal outback alone, uncovers the bodies of murdered children — and is hunted by the very law she turns to for help. Forced into a life of outlawry alongside her uncle and her closest friend, she must decide what justice means when every institution has failed her.

1. OVERVIEW

SHEILA: OUTBACK VENGEANCE is a colonial survival thriller set in the late 19th century Queensland outback. It is the story of a fourteen-year-old girl who flees a violently abusive home and is pulled, by circumstance and conscience, into a world of frontier justice, outlawry, and irreversible loss.

The film is positioned within the tradition of serious Australian colonial cinema — raw, morally uncompromising, physically immersive — but offers something that tradition has largely

withheld: a female protagonist who is not a victim of the story but its moral engine. Sheila Hamilton does not survive despite being a young woman in a brutal world. She survives because she is the most alert intelligence in every situation she enters. That distinction is the film's entire reason for being.

Adapted by Gregory J. Round from his novel of the same name, SHEILA is the first film in a two-part saga. The sequel — SHEILA: THE SOMME — follows the same protagonist as a WWI battlefield nurse on the Western Front, where her colonial past catches up with her across No Man's Land. Both scripts are complete.

2. THE HILLCOAT CONNECTION

The project is being developed with John Hillcoat in mind as director, and the creative argument for that attachment is specific and defensible.

Hillcoat's *The Proposition* (2005) remains the definitive work of colonial Australian cinema. It established a visual and moral grammar for the Queensland frontier — the landscape as active antagonist, institutional authority as structurally corrupt, violence as ambient rather than exceptional, and moral choice as genuinely costly — that SHEILA inhabits directly. These are not surface similarities. They are the deep tissue of both projects.

The Proposition asked: what does the colonial project do to men who cannot be accommodated by it?

SHEILA asks the same question of a woman — a fourteen-year-old girl — whom the colonial project has never once considered accommodating.

SHEILA is not a sequel to *The Proposition*, nor an imitation of it. It is the companion piece that film never had — the same world, the same moral honesty, a different door into the same darkness. The director who made *The Proposition* should make Sheila. That argument is simple, commercially legible, and creatively true.

Beyond *The Proposition*, Hillcoat's body of work — *The Road* (2009), *Lawless* (2012), *Triple 9* (2016) — demonstrates a consistent commitment to morally serious material, physical world-building, and characters navigating impossible choices without institutional support. Every one of those qualities is required by this screenplay.

Hillcoat is Australian-born, which supports co-production qualification and brings existing relationships with Australian funding bodies and international distributors from his prior work. His attachment at any level — confirmed or in-progress — significantly strengthens the finance conversation.

3. TONE & WORLD

The Queensland outback is not a backdrop. It is an active, indifferent force — immense, sun-hammered, and structurally hostile to human survival. The film's visual grammar should reflect this: wide, breathing landscapes that dwarf the human figures moving through them, punctuated by sudden, brutal action that the landscape absorbs without comment.

Tonally the film sits between the moral bleakness of *The Proposition* and the interior emotional precision of *Sweet Country*. It shares *True Grit*'s combination of young female competence and frontier violence, without glamorising either. The violence is systemic, ambient, and costly — never thrilling for its own sake.

The colonial institutional world — police, law, social order — is presented not as cartoonishly evil but as structurally indifferent to anyone outside its protected class. That indifference is more damaging than outright hostility because it cannot be confronted directly. Sheila's repeated collision with that indifference is the spine of the film.

Sound design should carry as much of the world-building as the image. The outback is not silent — it is full of noise that has nothing to do with the humans passing through it. That sonic indifference should be present throughout.

4. CHARACTERS

Sheila Hamilton — Protagonist

Fourteen years old. Blonde, lean, sometimes limping — physical damage written into her body before the story begins. She carries a Remington revolver with the ease of someone who learned to handle it young, for reasons the film makes clear.

Sheila is over-confident in the way only someone who has had to be can be. Her education has been practical and violent. She reads situations — people, terrain, risk — the way other children read books. She notices what others refuse to see and makes choices that cost her, and she does not pretend otherwise.

What makes her extraordinary is not her toughness but her moral intelligence. She is not a fantasy of female empowerment. She is a real girl in an impossible situation who is smarter than the situation, and who pays for that intelligence at every turn. By the film's end she is hardened in ways that cannot be undone. She has also become, in the most unintentional way imaginable, a legend.

The private rhyme she has invented for her horse — I wish I were an eagle, Pie, swimming in the sky — is the film's emotional through-line. It is a child's coping mechanism. By the end it has become something else entirely.

Thomas (Tommy) Carson — Secondary Protagonist

Sheila's closest friend. Sixteen, wiry, brave in the physical sense and reckless in the emotional one. He kills Sheila's father not from pure altruism but from a love that has never learned how to exist without controlling its object. His actions across the film are almost always motivated by genuine feeling, and almost always disastrous in consequence.

Tommy is the film's most dangerous character not because he is violent — though he is — but because he loves Sheila and cannot imagine what that love should look like from her side. He is the most recognisable kind of male character: one who genuinely cannot see the damage he causes to the person he most wants to protect.

His arc in the Queensland film plants the seeds of what he becomes in the sequel. The man who leads a surgeon into a machine gun nest twenty years later on the Western Front is already visible in the boy who kills Sheila's father to save her and then cannot understand why she is not grateful.

Uncle Nick — Key Supporting

Sheila's maternal uncle. A miner, a self-reliant man, and the closest thing to a safe person in Sheila's world — which is to say he is not entirely safe. Nick operates by a frontier pragmatism: do what must be done, protect the people you love, and do not waste time on guilt. He is the film's moral compass, aware that the needle is unreliable.

His death at the Burdekin gorge is the film's emotional ground zero. Everything Sheila does after that moment — including enlisting as a nurse in a war that has nothing to do with her — is downstream of losing Nick.

Sergeant Horton — Supporting

A career policeman who sees Sheila clearly and treats her accordingly — as the most reliable witness he has ever encountered, not as a child to be managed. His death midway through the film removes the one institutional figure who might have protected Sheila, and leaves her entirely outside the law's shelter. His loss is felt for the rest of the film without ever being named directly.

Digger — Supporting

A man of pragmatic morality who operates from the room behind the brothel in Emu Creek and becomes an unlikely ally in Sheila's escape. His death at Vinegar Wash — shot while distracted by Sheila's voice — is one of the film's most quietly devastating moments, and one Sheila never stops carrying. She names him among her losses on the Western Front twenty years later.

5. STRUCTURE

ACT ONE — FLIGHT

We open on Sheila already moving. A solitary rider crossing an immensity of red earth, the horse Piebald her only companion. Voice-over establishes her interior world: a psalm half-remembered from an abusive religious father, a private rhyme she has invented for the horse. She is escaping Brisbane but does not yet know where to.

The discovery of the murdered Aboriginal twins in the opal mine shaft is the inciting incident. It transforms Sheila from a girl running away from something into a girl who has found something that cannot be unfound. Her instinct is to report it. The law's instinct is to use her report against her.

The chain of events that follows — her introduction to Sergeant Horton, McBride's assault, her shooting of McBride in self-defence, Horton's catastrophic wounding, the arrival of Inspector McGuire — systematically removes every institutional protection available to her. By the end of Act One, the law has formally turned against her. She is no longer simply a runaway. She is wanted.

ACT ONE TURNING POINT: The telegram arrives. The law does not want Sheila's testimony. It wants Sheila.

ACT TWO — Bushrangers

The second act is the outlaw life — episodic in structure but building toward a coherent emotional reckoning. Sheila, Nick, Tommy, and eventually Digger operate in the margins of the colonial world: cave hideouts, ambush at Vinegar Wash, the coach robbery, the jailbreak at Emu Creek. Each episode deepens our understanding of what this life costs and who these people are becoming inside it.

The early episodes have a dark energy to them — the gang is competent, alive, and together. The coach robbery sequence is almost playful: Sheila pitching her voice low and boyish, shooting the padlock off the strongbox, carefully sliding the personal letters back inside because

people need their news. There is something in these scenes that resembles freedom. It will not last.

The Steamboat Hijacking

The decision to board a paddle steamer to Townsville — and to rob it en route — is the hinge of Act Two. It is the moment the gang crosses a line they cannot uncross. Robbing a coach is one thing. Taking a passenger vessel at gunpoint, with civilians at the tables and children screaming, is another order of crime entirely.

Nick plans it with characteristic pragmatism: take the wheelhouse, disarm the crew, rob the dining room, force the captain to run the ship aground before Rockhampton, escape into the mangroves. Clean. Nobody has to die. The plan lasts approximately as long as plans do.

When the captain refuses to run the ship aground, Nick shoots the petty officer to force compliance. The captain still refuses. Sheila — without hesitation, without consultation — shoots the captain herself. Nick stares at her. She looks back at him and says flatly that the longer they debate, the more chance Tommy loses control in the dining room. Then she steps to the wheel and announces she can steer the ship herself.

The steamer hits the mangroves at full speed. Wood explodes. Paddles shatter. Passengers are thrown. Children scream. Boilers rupture. The gang escapes into the mud as the ship burns behind them. It is spectacular and it is wrong, and the film does not let either of those things cancel the other out.

This sequence does something essential for the film's moral architecture. It shows Sheila making a choice that cannot be justified by self-defence. She shoots a man to protect a plan. She is becoming something the outlaw life is making her, and she knows it, and she does it anyway. The girl who carefully returned the passengers' letters in the coach robbery is still there. But she is getting harder to find.

Tommy's Outburst — The Cabin Confrontation

On the deck of the steamer, before the hijacking, Tommy is drunk and becoming dangerous. He begins talking too loudly about bushrangers to the merchant's daughter at dinner, enjoying the performance of himself. Nick kicks him under the table. Sheila whispers at him to stop. He does not stop.

Later on deck, drunk and resentful, Tommy says what he has been building toward since Brisbane: that he is tired of pretending. That he wants the world to know what he did. That he killed for her. He looks at Nick and Sheila standing together and says he is done pretending they are all friends.

What follows in Sheila's cabin is the most important scene in the Queensland script. Tommy bursts in drunk and issues an ultimatum: choose. Him or Nick. Right now.

Sheila does not choose. Instead she turns her back to him and lifts her shirt.

Her back is covered in whipping marks. Her father's work. She turns back to Tommy and speaks.

"Yes I wanted him dead. Oh my God I wanted him dead. But I did not ask anyone to do it for me. I was going to do it myself after I found Nick. I wanted to save my mother. Save myself from the torture that his dreams give me."

"You wanted to be my saviour. My hero. But heroes don't demand payment."

Tommy shouts that he loves her. Sheila's answer is the coldest, most precise thing she says in either film: "No. You love the idea of owning me."

Nick draws his gun. Tommy backs down. But the damage is done — not to the friendship, which survives, but to any remaining pretence about what Tommy's love actually is. Sheila has named it. Tommy has heard it named. Neither of them will forget.

This scene is the emotional and thematic core of the entire two-film saga. Everything Thomas does in the WWI film — including leading Anton into a machine gun nest twenty years later — is the same impulse that drives him to burst into Sheila's cabin on the steamer. He has never stopped believing that loving someone gives him the right to decide what happens to them. Sheila has never stopped being unable to leave him entirely, because underneath the possession there is a boy who once crossed a continent on a stolen horse to find her. Both things are true. Neither cancels the other.

Digger, Piebald, and the End of the Idyll

Two losses define the remainder of Act Two and break whatever was left of the gang's momentum. At Vinegar Wash, during a running firefight with McGuire's troopers, Sheila calls out to Digger. He turns toward her voice. The shot that kills him finds him in that moment of distraction. Sheila does not say she feels responsible. She never says it. The film does not need her to.

Piebald's death — found lying in the mud, peppered with spears — is the emotional nadir of the Queensland story. Sheila pressed her forehead to that horse's neck on the railway platform in the first act and made a quiet vow. The loss of Piebald is the loss of the last creature she could protect completely. She beats the ground with her fist and screams into the dark. It is the only time in either film she fully comes apart.

ACT TWO TURNING POINT: Piebald is killed. Nick and Tommy are captured at Great Wall Station. Sheila is alone for the first time with no one left to protect and no one left to protect her.

ACT THREE — CONSEQUENCE

Charters Towers. Sheila, Nick, and Tommy arrive as ordinary travellers and find temporary shelter in the legitimacy of a rented cottage on Gill Street. The tunnel robbery of the Post Office vault — audacious, almost operatic in its engineering ambition — gives the gang breathing room but not safety. Inspector McGuire has been patient. He is now closing in.

The final sequence at the Burdekin River gorge delivers the film's central blow. Nick dies protecting Sheila in the only way he knows how — by giving her time to run. Tommy and Sheila fall together from the cliff into the white roar of the flooded river.

The film ends on a riverbank. Sheila alone, sand-covered, disoriented. She calls Tommy's name into the bush. No answer comes. The river has swept her miles from the gorge. An eagle moves in a slow circle overhead — the same image that opened the film — and then flies on without her.

No restoration. No consolation. No lesson delivered. She has survived everything the colony could throw at her. She stands up. She turns into the bush. The story is not over.

6. THEMES

Survival as Moral Corruption

The film does not ask whether Sheila will survive. It asks what survival will cost her. Every act of violence she commits is defensible in context. None of them are free. The girl who rides into the outback in the opening scene and the woman who stands on the riverbank in the closing image are recognisably the same person. But they are not the same person.

Institutional Indifference

The law in this film is not cartoonishly corrupt. It is structurally indifferent — to children, to women, to anyone without property or standing. That indifference is more corrosive than outright malice because it cannot be fought directly. Sheila's repeated experience of turning to institutions and finding them absent is the film's quiet, persistent argument.

Possessive Love

Tommy's love for Sheila is genuine and catastrophically expressed. The film is not interested in judging him. It is interested in showing, with precision and without sentimentality, what it costs to be loved the way Sheila is loved by Tommy. That cost — unfairly distributed, never acknowledged — is one of the film's most contemporary concerns dressed in 19th century clothing.

The Colonial Silence

The murdered Aboriginal twins are not solved. Black Pinky's motivations are complex and the film does not reduce them. The frontier violence is ambient, structural, and without resolution. The film does not offer a lesson about colonialism. It presents its conditions with honesty and leaves the audience to sit with them. This is the approach Hillcoat took in *The Proposition* and it is the correct approach here.

7. MARKET POSITIONING

SHEILA targets the audience that made *The Proposition*, *Sweet Country*, and *True History of the Kelly Gang* significant both critically and commercially in Australia and internationally. This is an audience with appetite for serious, physically immersive Australian historical drama that does not sanitise its subject matter and does not resolve its moral questions cheaply.

Internationally the film sits in the prestige-commercial crossover space currently occupied by *True Grit* (Coens, 2010), *The Nightingale* (Kent, 2018), and at its more genre-facing edge, *Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2005). All of these films found significant international audiences precisely because they were uncompromising. SHEILA shares that quality.

A Hillcoat attachment transforms the international market conversation entirely. *The Proposition* has a devoted global audience and critical legacy. A follow-up from the same director, set in the same colonial world, would attract immediate attention from international distributors, festival programmers, and streaming platforms.

The Proposition (Hillcoat, 2005)

Sweet Country (Thornton, 2017)

True Grit (Coens, 2010)

The Nightingale (Kent, 2018)

True History of the Kelly Gang (Kurzels, 2019)

Wolf Creek (McLean, 2005)

The existence of a complete sequel — SHEILA: THE SOMME — positions this as a franchise property with long-term value rather than a single title. Both scripts are complete. A distributor or platform acquiring the first film acquires an option on the second.

8. PRODUCTION & FINANCE NOTES

Target budget: AUD \$3M–\$8M. This range reflects the scale required for an authentic period production — outback locations, practical horse sequences, period costume and production design, and the action sequences in the final act — while remaining within the range of mid-tier independent Australian film finance.

Australian Incentives

Primary Queensland locations activate the Screen Queensland Production Attraction Strategy. The production qualifies for the federal Producer Offset at 40% for Australian productions meeting the significant Australian content test. These incentives meaningfully reduce the net budget requirement and strengthen the finance plan.

Co-Production Pathways

The colonial period setting and Commonwealth narrative make the film eligible for formal co-production arrangements with the UK (BFI / BBC Film) and Ireland (Screen Ireland). A UK or Irish co-producer brings access to additional offset incentives and strengthens the international sales position significantly.

Streaming & Pre-Sales

Pre-sale and licensing conversations with platforms demonstrating appetite for prestige Australian content — Netflix, Stan, MUBI, BritBox, and the ABC — represent a credible component of the finance plan. A Hillcoat attachment and a festival strategy targeting Venice, Toronto, or Sundance would substantially strengthen the pre-sale position.

Executive Producer

The writer-producer Gregory J. Round is seeking an Executive Producer with established finance-raising relationships across Australian and international screen funding bodies to lead the funding strategy. The creative package — script, treatment, pitch materials, published source novel, online presence, and director approach in progress — is well developed. The project is ready for a finance conversation.

9. THE TWO-FILM SAGA

SHEILA: OUTBACK VENGEANCE — Colonial Queensland, late 19th century

A fourteen-year-old outlaw becomes the most dangerous woman in colonial Queensland.

SHEILA: THE SOMME — Western Front, 1916

The same woman, twenty years later, conducts unauthorised night rescues in No Man's Land — and discovers that the men from her past have followed her to the other side of the world.

Both scripts are complete. The films work as standalones — each has its own complete dramatic shape and distinct world. They reward an audience that sees both in sequence, with every element of the Queensland film paying off in the WWI story: the rhyme, the horse, the names of the dead, and the question of what Thomas Carson becomes when his love has no outlet left but violence.

A distributor or streaming platform acquiring SHEILA: OUTBACK VENGEANCE is acquiring an option on one of the most unusual WWI films ever scripted — told from the perspective of a

woman who has already survived a colonial frontier and brings that experience to bear on industrial-scale slaughter.

Gregory J. Round — Writer & Producer

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