

# 'Blow the Man Down': Film Review | Tribeca 2019

By Caryn James

Margo Martindale runs a brothel and two sisters cover up a killing in this droll mystery set in a Maine fishing town.



Jeong "JP" Park

There is no sign reading "Bed, Breakfast and Brothel" outside the so-called inn run by Margo Martindale's character in *Blow the Man Down*. No need, because everyone in the tiny Maine seaside town of Easter Cove knows. Danielle Krudy and Bridget Savage Cole's clever, suspenseful and at times darkly comic first feature might have been called "Blow the Lid Off," as the town's quaint, picture-perfect surface gives way to revelations of a seamy past and current secrets. This atmospheric, expertly crafted little New England noir has droll dialogue, a female empowerment theme and a sly use of crime elements. A harpoon through the neck might not be the obvious way to kill somebody, but Easter Cove is a fishing town and people use what's at hand.

The film opens with a fisherman singing a sea shanty, soon joined by a line of fisher-singers. When the camera lingers on one of them vaping, we get a clue that

this is not a retro excursion into a place lost in time, but a knowing take on small-town mysteries.

The story centers on two very different sisters, whom we meet on the day of their mother's funeral. Priscilla Connolly (Sophie Lowe) is the rational good girl, determined to keep the family's fish store going. Mary Beth (Morgan Saylor), the adventurous one, stayed around to help during their mother's illness but now can't wait to get out of town.

The Connolly sisters are surrounded by their mother's best friends, a trio deftly played by June Squibb, Annette O'Toole and Marceline Hugot. They are caring and respectable older ladies, and also a cabal that holds some power, mysterious at first, over the brothel and its owner, their old friend Enid (Martindale).

On the night of the funeral, Mary Beth heads to a bar and goes home with a guy whom she soon realizes is bad news. There's a gun in his car, and blood in the trunk. When he attacks her, he ends up dead. That sets off the real plot: the sisters' cover-up. Mary Beth has defended herself against a rapist, but even practical Priscilla thinks that getting rid of the body is a better option than taking a chance that the police will be fine with that.

Krudy and Cole adroitly play with genre elements, walking the line between dry wit and genuine suspense. They are knowing about the tropes they use, including a missing knife that could be used as evidence, and the dilemma of fitting a corpse into a cooler that's just a little too small. And while the directors wink at these tricks, the actors, including the trio of snoopy town matriarchs, stay perfectly in tune with the serious suspense plot.

Saylor and Lowe not only make us believe they are sisters, but also fit perfectly into the straight-faced mode that keeps the film from tilting into satire; they deliver the wryest dialogue with conviction. When Mary Beth discovers a sack of cash, Priscilla worries, "Someone's gonna miss this," and her sister answers, "Yeah, but he's dead."

The creep who attacked Mary Beth is not the only corpse. The body of a woman working for Enid floats up from the sea, shot in the head, so there is plenty of suspicion to go around. Gayle Rankin (Sheila the She Wolf on *GLOW*) gives a sharp, vivid performance as another of Enid's employees. She is both tough and pitiable, and increasingly skeptical about Enid. Martindale is gloriously evil and imperious as the madam, whose connection to the respectable women in town is ultimately revealed. Will Brittain plays the cute local cop who has a crush on

Priscilla, but is not blind to the fact that her story about the night of the funeral doesn't quite add up.

At the Tribeca Film Festival, Krudy and Cole won the award for best screenplay in a U.S. narrative feature, and their script is indeed a jewel, right down to the way the older women pass the sisters on the street and say "Hello, Connollys." Todd Banhazl received a special jury mention for his cinematography, which captures the misty look of the coast, and the frigid town where the snow never seems to melt and the roads are constantly wet. Jasmine Balou Jones' precise production design is responsible for much of the authentic, hemmed-in small-town feel. The Connollys' house is loaded with touches of clutter in the kitchen. Enid's brothel is an example of faded respectability, the yellow flowered wallpaper showing its age.

Krudy and Cole never lean too hard on the theme of women looking out for each other, but that idea forms the underpinning of the entire project, from its writing and directing team to the story's superbly droll ending. *Blow the Man Down* is both a shanty that recurs in the film and, it turns out, quite an apt title.