Twitter Thread by Sarah May



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So. I loved #TheDig. Despite being set in the 30's it evoked a lot of my early fieldwork experience in the 80's and some of the things archaeologists were gushing about are still pay of the experience today. And it also evoked the fantasy that I became an archaeologist to chase>

If you just want to enjoy it, and bask in the glow of archaeologists being happy for once, stop reading here >

Because, being aware of that fantasy, I'm also aware of corrosive elements, things that structure how archaeology works, both practically & in the collective imagination which work against that other fantasy, that my work can 'make a difference' contribute to progressive change>

The primary driver of the story is class & it's connection to skill & to land. EP has the right to the land, the choice to dig, the ownership of the artefacts because she is the landowner. We are meant to cheer along when the coroner decides in her favour>

BB is a man of the land, he literally knows the soil of Suffolk by feel. His skill & sense are central to the story. And they are credited with the discovery, which is the most important part of the process, not the analysis, care or interpretation>

In fact, interpretation, is represented through the boy, Robert, and through his loss - of his father, & his impending loss of his mother. With him BB imagines the warrior funeral and the cosmological framing >

1930s archaeology put a lot of weight on classification, so BB's identification of the Merovingian coin is key. It confirms his sense of the date, but also confirms his skill. Thus connects to the story about 'experts'>

The involvement of the British Museum and the academic/professional archaeologists is represented as an imposition on the relationship between EP & BB, landowner & working man >

Although the professional expertise is implied, none is actually shown. We don't see any change in working practice and despite PP finding the first gold, this isn't related to skill. In fact she is mostly portrayed as nervous & bumbling >

There is a secondary story line about sexism, but women represent passion, care, 'feeling' EPs decision to excavate the burial mounds is motivated by her love for her dead husband. Peggy Piggott is shown only for feeling, we never see her prodigious skill>

There's little representation of how any of this relates to British or English national & colonial stories (a little about contrasting Vikings and Anglo-Saxons & the importance of the Roman Villa) and yet these stories built a very specific notion of white heritage >

No one ever considers the ethics of digging up what everyone expects and hopes to be a grave, for no other reason than curiousity. Grief is there: EP visiting her husband's grave, the death of the airman, foreshadowing of WWII death, & EPs own death.

But past death is glory. And a glory that can belong to a present day individual, and be 'gifted' to a nation (for use in an imperial museum) because the more people that can see it the better >

So, in this golden romantic story, that reminds me of why I became an archaeologist what are the elements that I find problematic? 1. The tension between professional/academic & 'community' archaeology is between two enactments of class >

Because the right to dig is held by landowners, the right to know the past is also held by them. They can choose who they work with, what that relationship is and what happens to the results. Community archaeology in the UK is underpinned by this structure of power >

2. This relationship to land, through ownership, through multi-generational embodied knowledge, and through the reinfection of both by digging, is linked to the discovery of past glory which issues l inspires us to imagine futures of continuity >

There's no room here for marginalised pasts, and of course no room for migrant pasts. This past belongs to the land and the land belongs to the landowners, mostly the aristocracy. They search for their forbearers and their treasure >

3. It's all framed by loss. It's an elegiac fantasy. Loss of glory, death, the foreshadowing of the war, the child framed as a figure of loss, grasping for a future which redeems that loss through continuity. >

That all leaves little room for progress, change, dissent, revolution. This archaeology is about keeping people and place linked. The essence of 2Oth century nationalism. To be clear, this is a critique of my own fantasy, not the film, the film just enacts it. Done.