
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

All That Sins is Not Golden

Kathleen Antonia Tarr · Tuesday, June 30th, 2026

Slaying the Vultures ... erm Vampires ... Hunting Ryan Coogler's *Sinners*

(This piece will make a lot more sense if you to have seen the 2025 film Sinners which if you haven't omg you really betta get to seeing it!)

When I was a kid catching sense in the Chicago area, my family frequented the untitled Picasso sculpture downtown we named *Freddie the Fox*. I don't know Freddie's origin story—that is, how we came to name him—but to us, he is never *untitled*. He's Freddie ... and he's a Fox. Still, we would never suggest others must name or even view Foxy Freddie as we did. That would be ridiculous. It's a Picasso. It's art. If others see “untitled” then so be it. Same if they see a woman or a cobra. That interpretations sometimes dramatically differ can be revelatory. They really say more about the interpreter than the piece itself. It says something about me and my family that we saw a fox we named Freddie. What is says ... I dunno.

At the same time, interpretation should not make room for falsehoods. If Picasso said *untitled* is not a fox, then that is as definitive as Freddie not being a hologram or a painting. Toni Morrison is rumored to have said when asked how she weaves so much into her stories, “I just write.” She leaves it to the interpreters to find symbolism. However, *Beloved* doesn't take place in 2005. Morrison's characters aren't South American. The novel is not a RomCom. These are not up for interpretation, and anyone asserting such would be laughed out of any book club let alone literature summit. Yet, as *Sinners* leaves award season with fewer Oscars than it should have received (!), the vultures have started circling.



Literal vultures appear in multiple *Sinners* scenes and can be interpreted as foreshadowing death, but the metaphorical ones are also in the air, waiting to pick poor *Sinners* clean. Perhaps more akin to vampires, some interpreters are trying to crowd the soul of the film, leaving it stuck, obscured, never to again feel the warmth of a sunrise.

Okay, maybe I'm borrowing from the character Annie too much. Don't be surprised. I have watched *Sinners* in every theater format, from IMAX 70mm to aspect ratio 1.43:1, and probably 100 times on small and smaller screens, including in Spanish, BASL (Black American Sign Language), and during certain bouts of insomnia, audio only (thank you, Bluetooth sleep mask!). Gaia knows I want to see it [on the screen at Millenium Park!](#)

Know, too, that I am one of those abnormies who could tell you the license plate number of the twins' car after the first viewing (1932 Mississippi plate 295•847 ... the truck 327•672). Make no mistake; I don't have eidetic memory or hyperthymesia. For example, I didn't remember Pullman train number 2541 the first time. Still, over the years, friends have leveraged my attention to detail as a party trick (*Kathleen, what was the license plate of the car Nino chased in Amélie?*). All this to say, I get it that given the number of times I've seen *Sinners*, I'm an unforeseen threat if

someone (with a fragile ego) asserts something that just isn't correct.

Such occurred at a recent conference. I ended up attending a panel by accident, staying put when I read *Sinners* in the program as one speaker's topic. Ultimately, I really couldn't tell you their point, something about the film being interpreted through a well-studied historical era. The number of erroneous details about the film distracted me from whatever the argument was supposed to be.



The character Mary tells Stack in one of the Club Juke scenes that she didn't want to be white. She also tells Sammie that her maternal grandfather was half-Black. In an odd twist to the [One Drop Rule](#), the panelist proclaims Mary is "biracial." Then, although Grace Chow's meltdown hearing hubby vampire Bo's voice echoing "pick poor Robin clean" leads her to invite the vampires in (they need an invitation—sometimes—but apparently not from property owners), according to this conference presentation, the remaining group of humans of which Grace is a part—including the three extras I hardly noticed until many views down the road—decide together to fight the vampires then and there. *What?!* When I asked the panelist during Q&A why they thought that is what happened, they said because the humans circled up to eat garlic. "Actually, no, that was in order to find out if any of them were vampires because they hadn't realized yet that the man they just dragged outside wasn't dead in a pool of blood, just passed out in a puddle of red wine."

The panel's moderator tried to defuse by claiming that Grace was the only character with family in town so to some degree the panelist's take made sense (no, it didn't), but that assertion isn't true either. The Chows had a daughter who Grace worried about when Bo turned and shared his memories with all the other vampires, and yes, lead vamp Remmick threatened little Lisa specifically. However, Sammie's father, Jedidiah, and mother, Ruth, along with his siblings were also at risk. We never learn the extras' stories or why their characters aren't paid more attention to during the heightened tensions of preventing a vampire invasion (if I were friends with everyone but them, "They did it!"), but one can presume they also had family and loved ones in town. Surely someone cared about Cornbread's pregnant wife, Therise.

The panelist also claimed the vampires singing "Rocky Road to Dublin" was an attempt to lure the surviving humans out of Club Juke. No. Neither were Smoke and Stack watching Sammie Moore perform "I Lied To You" from the balcony. They weren't on the second floor at all or even just watching; they were dancing among the crowd with their respective loves, Annie and Mary. There is no excuse for getting so many details wrong (well, AI is an excuse, but it's not a good one). The panelist also asserted Smoke and Stack both died by vampires that night in Club Juke when, in fact, Smoke doesn't die until daylight during the shootout with the Klan (I nod to Dave Chappelle about his Show's sketch "[The Time Haters](#)" when I say that I'm okay with every movie countering Ku Klux Klan violence by those characters getting shot).

The panelist further claimed that the character Pearline was just Sammie's sexual escapade, cast simply as an object. Nah, see, you're not gonna defame a Black filmmaker on my watch. "When Buddy Guy plays Sammie at the end of the film, his club is literally named *Pearline's*." Pearline saved Sammie's life, and she paid for it with her own. Knowing her fate after being bitten by Remmick, she pushes Sammie away, tells him to go. Moments later from the pond, Sammie witnesses vampire Pearline howl on the banks in shared vampire agony after he breaks off his guitar in Remmick's head—a similar approach to Smoke's killing of the rattle snake during the truck uncovering earlier in the film—before seeing her catch aflame in the light of the sun and try

to crawl away but succumb to combustion. “Pearline is not a minor character, not for Sammie anyway. She was the love of his life, interwoven with the horror that paralyzes him once a week.”

By the way, when a [thespian learns how to play the guitar](#) for a role and performs the birth of post-traumatic stress disorder so well, why is anyone else winning awards over him? Miles Caton deserved more flowers. Oh, and that song “Golden” should never have won an Academy Award over the genius fugue of musical genres in “[I Lied To You.](#)” I enjoyed *KPop Demon Hunters*, but I could have written and recorded “Golden” within 48 hours, and that alone for me means it isn’t Oscar worthy ... but that’s my interpretation.

None of my layered grievances that *I* think are worth complaining about argue that anyone has to absorb *Sinners* as I do. It is one of my all-time favorite films *because* it fits so many of my moods, but those feelings may not be shared: melancholy about PTSD, interest in 1930s Southern history through a non-colonizer lens, aglow because of Black love, resilience, and community. I get something new out of *Sinners* each time I see it ... including questions.

Is there intentional metaphor in the colors blue and red, angel and devil? Do Smoke (blue) and Stack (red) serve as angel and devil on Sammie’s metaphorical shoulders? Is Sammie looking out across the cotton fields to the big open sky at the beginning of the best *day* of his life purposely between blueish exterior paint and a reddish open barn door? Are the government names of Smoke and Stack, Elijah and Elias, knowingly that of [one singular Biblical prophet](#)?



Is Jedidiah’s sermon quoting 1 Corinthians 10:13 about temptation ultimately about Sammie having “seen enough of this place” and resisting eternal “life” as a vampire? Is the reference to Charley Patton’s guitar something most audiences get? Am I the only one who doesn’t know Patton as the *Father of the Delta Blues* who died two years after the main *Sinners* story takes place? Why wasn’t the reference instead to [Robert Johnson](#), another Delta blues musician but one rumored to have made a deal with the Devil in Clarksdale, Mississippi—where our story takes place—to become a master musician? Is Sammie Moore drawn to take back that myth by demonstrating that, yes, a Black musician can be that talented without mystical intervention?

Is there commentary in Grace and Bo Chow deciding to leave Black folks when the going gets tough and that doing so results in their ultimate demise, taking the very Black people who were trying to protect them down with them? Why is Smoke so hostile about Sammie’s dream of

heading North to be a musician that he would point a gun at him? What is it about Mound Bayou and the “proper Black folks” that Smoke so desperately wants Sammie to choose? Is it an imagining of what his own life could have been, something he could have had for himself had the town’s mayor not prohibited the runaway twins from staying because of who their father was, *evil that no way wasn’t passed down to them?*

Why isn’t Smoke more concerned about the deep gashes on Sammie’s face when he checks him for bites in the pond? How does he know Sammie is not about to turn? Am I the only person who thinks it’s funny when *SmokeStack* asks where Remmick’s vampire trio walked from “just down the road” and they answer “North Carolina” (honestly, how does that not motivate an 800-mile scoff or two from any of the main characters)? I also chuckle when Smoke returns seven (not so lucky) years later to *Bo Chow & Co. Delta Grocery & Market* and hires Grace to make a sign for Club Juke, and Bo reveals the only paint color they have is red (a la Stack). Smoke (blue) counters the agreed upon \$15 with (unlucky?) \$13. Hilarious (even more than “we cousins”).

As *the* former Skadden Fellow who introduced veterans disability/VA benefits representation to “[the legal Peace Corps](#),” I am particularly invested in the PTSD lens. Smoke shakes as he remembers his yesterday October 15th, before the vampire attack that resulted in his darling Annie’s death at his and his twin’s hands. He then decides to get rid of his mojo bag, “I have seen enough of this place” before Old Sammie says it.

Smoke and Stack share the terrible history of Elias having been knocked out during one their daddy’s many beatings, after which, he regains consciousness to find Elijah killed their father. The impact of their mother’s death isn’t revealed, yet one can imagine having been nursed by Mary’s mother comes with a lot of pain alongside gratitude. The twins also experienced war—“German trenches”—and gang battles a la Capone (although *Sinners* is not a [gangster film](#) as another vulture argued).

The twins’ Uncle Jed likewise survived the death of his brother, he believes killed by his nephews, and that trauma underscores protectiveness of his son Sammie and perhaps his dedication to the Lord. I wonder if he is supposed to also reflect Christianity as actually an offering to African descendants from the Devil given how Jedidiah is lit and his hair styled (and Slim’s reference to who gave Black Americans this religion). Biblical scholars no doubt have more to say about it. Regardless, Jed probably has feelings about the twins’ gift of his evil brother’s guitar (not actually Charley Patton’s) which could influence why Jed is so against Sammie playing it.



Delta Slim carries the tragedy of his buddy being brutally lynched at a rail station after the Klan made up a story about Rice killing a white man and raping his wife as reason for the money in his pocket. Is it an important detail that the church Rice wanted to start in Little Rock, Arkansas is where Mary lives with her white husband on a farm? Slim knows all of the prisoners chained at the side of the road doing hard labor, likely imprisoned for [vagrancy](#) like Slim and Rice were. Scoring the entire film is the trauma of slavery, sharecropping, and white supremacist weaponization of the state. If I make it to Rod Wave's melodic "Sinners" without tearing, I always choke up a little at the lyrics, "If I could set my people free ... Let my people free. I'll never be free." I feel that every day in this current mess of a nation.

I do think *Sinners* has flaws. Annie's voiceover in the opening of the film overlaying the guitar tuning after the match lights (with the strikes we hear in her store) primes us about "music so true." Then, however, we hear "Lord above" impossibly sung as *ancient Ireland's* Filí. The transition to "Choctaw land" seems to my ignorant ear to be more tribally traditional, but the label "Firekeepers" trips me at the contrary thought of literal men maintaining the temperature of a cooking fire. The West African Griots seem to sing more as Black American spirituals, and these types of disconnect always make me wonder whether they are filmmaker oversights or intentional with a message I am missing (I am, in fact, as I type listening to [Sibo Bangoura's TEDxSydney](#) Griot traditions, and Annie's mispronunciation adds to my questions). I also wonder why Annie and Remmick seem to be the only characters with voice effects and only in two moments: "How you know I ain't pray and work every root my grandmama taught me to keep you and that crazy brother of yours safe every day since you've been gone?" (Annie to Smoke) and "You will taste the sweet pain of death" (Remmick to Sammie).

Perhaps someone can also tell me why all of the vampires run out of Club Juke after Stack bites Annie and Smoke euthanizes her? Wouldn't that have been the perfect time to turn everyone else including the severely distracted Smoke? Why does vampire Stack feel compelled to keep a promise he made to Smoke to leave Sammie alone in exchange for his "life" as a vampire. What's

the code? Why do vampires Mary and Stack initially seem to need invitations to *return* inside Club Juke (not until Grace screams, “Come on in”)?



Remmick and Stack later just push their way onto the second floor. Where is Mary then, by the way? There is footage of her running away, but that looks like an edit in post-production using what was her escaping after Smoke shot her several times for killing Stack, not a motivated retreat in the moment. Maybe it was only in post that creatives decided Mary should survive to accompany Stack when they visit “Old Sammie” (Buddy Guy) in the *Pearline’s* scene?

My questions are separate from any conclusions about intentional message, for example, in the fact that the Christian churchgoers safely survive vampire night. I don’t like the way Smoke pivots Annie in her store (and café? live/work?) to have sex from behind; it feels like a rejection of intimacy that rubs me the wrong way given our country’s hostility toward women who look like beauty Wunmi Mosaku, fuller figured with dark skin and natural hair. A context perhaps influencing my interpretation is Michael B. Jordan and Hailee Steinfeld being the pair I mostly saw doing *Sinners* promotions (like April 2025’s *Hot Ones* which I enjoyed, by the way, and have adored Steinfeld since her outstanding youth performance in *True Grit* and Jordan at a whole new level since his [Erik Killmonger](#) portrayal in Coogler’s *Black Panther*, but still). Mosaku’s Annie is key to the story in a survival way while Steinfeld’s Mary is key in securing everyone’s death (commentary about Black and white women respectively?), so why wasn’t Mosaku paired with Jordan more often pre-release? Annie pulls Smoke back into the safety of Club Juke when vampire Cornbread comes for him, her mojo bag saves Smoke from Stack’s bite and perhaps every violent encounter of his adult life, and she is the reason anyone knows the danger of vampires and how to fight them let alone that Annie’s quick thinking of dousing vampire Stack with pickled garlic is the only reason he didn’t make a quick meal of them all.

As the notion of a sequel to *Sinners* simmers and *ohmygawdpleasedon’t* focus on [Remmick](#) in some *evil white villains like Bucky Barnes get gigs but Killmonger doesn’t*—the Choctaw story which we only see briefly is much more compelling and incredibly performed ... and maybe in a sequel they’re hunting Mary and Stack, even though Jordan in *Sinning™* wouldn’t play *three* characters (Smoke (Elijah), Stack (Elias), and vampire Stack)

and *yespleasehandmemybigcheckforthisidea*—I hope a new story doesn't pay too much mind to the flooded landscape of takes on the original's meaning, including whatever falsehoods that conference panelist might publish on the topic. I am not inviting these interpreters in to suck the life out of what keeps me coming back to *Sinners*, and I hope Ryan Coogler won't either.

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