



# Rams

**Director:** Grímur Hákonarson  
**Country:** Iceland  
**Date:** 2015

A review by Robbie Collin for *The Daily Telegraph*:

Thanks to grand-scale productions like *Noah*, *Interstellar* and *Game of Thrones*, Iceland's snow-whipped plains and blackened basalt deserts are having a bit of a Hollywood moment. But the landscape seems to withhold a little of its lugubrious magic for the moments Iceland gets to play itself – which, thanks to the country's small but increasingly self-assured film industry, are getting harder to ignore.

In Grímur Hákonarson's *Rams*, two lumbering, middle-aged brothers, Gummi (Sigurður Sigurjónsson) and Kiddi (Theodór Júlíusson), tend sheep in a remote valley. The animals are of the same ancestral stock their family has reared for aeons, and while the men haven't spoken to each other for 40 years, thanks to an amusingly unspecified grudge, for the most part they rub along, passing handwritten notes via a helpful sheepdog when a grunt or a glower won't suffice.



With their thick jumpers and tangled beards, they and their animals might be knitted from the same stuff. It's the present, but this existence, passed from one generation to the next, has the hewn-granite texture of myth. Modernity rears its unwelcome head in the form of scrapie, a highly infectious disease that requires all livestock to be culled and the valley to lie fallow for two years. Smiling, neat-faced men arrive in protective suits to oversee the slaughter: compared to Gummi and Kiddi's woolly countenances, they might as well hail from another species.

This intrusion starts to thaw the brothers' long-glaciated grudge, although each has a different solution in mind: Kiddi, the younger and more gregarious, wants to drink his way through the crisis, while Gummi, taciturn and watchful, has something sneakier up his sleeve. The actors who play the brothers are both storied thespians, and Hákonarson's camera, operated by the brilliant young cinematographer Starla Brandth Grøvlen, reads their faces like maps of mountains, parsing every crease and crag.

Like the last Icelandic film to secure a UK cinema release, Benedikt Erlingsson's excellent *Of Horses and Men*, *Rams* is a ruminative tale of man, animal and land, by turns darkly funny and melancholic, and overflowing with breath-catching images and pathos so cold it stings your cheeks.

Woven through the main plot are scenes of Gummi and Kiddi's daily routine, which Hákonarson often shoots at a distance with the same blank affect as slapstick – leading to some moments of sleety hilarity, including a showstopper entailing the creative use of a tractor scoop.

The sense of place is both natural and poetic, with scenes playing out in snug, drab cottages and on echoing pasture, and later, a barren mountain cloaked in snow, which sets the stage for *Rams*' dazzling, elemental final shot. It's too good to give away, but its fairy-tale quality closes Hákonarson's film on a note of cosmic reconciliation that lingers longer in your mind than a happy-ever-after ever could.

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