

# 'The Hunting Ground': Sundance Review

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*Courtesy of Sundance International Film Festival*

*'The Hunting Ground'*

## The Bottom Line

*A shocking but ultimately galvanizing work of reportage.*

## Venue

*Sundance Film Festival (Documentary Premieres)*

## Director

*Kirby Dick*

Director Kirby Dick and producer Amy Ziering ('The Invisible War') tackle the epidemic of sexual violence sweeping America's campuses.

With stories breaking regularly over the past year or so about rape cases on campuses across the United States, there's a risk that director **Kirby Dick**'s documentary *The Hunting Ground* might seem like just one more voice from the media chorus on a subject many already refuse to look straight in the eye. There's even a backlash underway from a sinister faction who seek to discredit the victims one by one and distract readers from the larger issues at play around the colleges' and universities' culpable attempts to cover up incidents.

Dick and his producer **Amy Ziering** set themselves the ambitious quest of creating a documentary that limns a bigger picture, creating a unifying narrative that makes some kind of larger public sense of what seems on the surface like a series of disparate, intensely private experiences. The result is a shocking but ultimately galvanizing work of reportage that meets the same high standard of their previous collaboration, *The Invisible War*, about sexual

assault in the military. Given that the film levels a withering *j'accuse* against a complex skein of heterogeneous institutions and organizations, it will have a harder road ahead inspiring organizational reform in the same way *The Invisible War* did, but there's no doubt it will get audiences debating and talking when it goes on release via RADiUS in March and when it is broadcast later this year on CNN.

In order to build up that bigger picture, the film presents a dizzying array of young women who have been sexually assaulted on campuses and who are willing to speak bravely about their experiences, interspersed with reams of onscreen statistics that set out the horrifying scale of the problem. For a start, according to studies quoted, approximately 20 percent of students will be sexually assaulted during their college careers. One interviewee puts that in perspective by flipping the script and imagining educational institutions writing to parents to let them know that one in four of their children will be a victim of a drive-by shooting, and then going on to thank them for their tuition fees.

The bombardment of fact, although deftly — and yes, sometimes humorously — delivered through montage sequences, could all too easily lead to viewer compassion fatigue were it not for the adroit way Dick and Ziering cement the story with human interest. Threaded throughout, the film follows **Annie E. Clark** and **Andrea Pino**, two students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who both were sexually assaulted on campus, whose cases were both given slighting, unsatisfactory address by the faculty authorities, and who teamed up to start the organization End Rape on Campus (EROC).

Cleverly interpreting the federal law Title IX, which prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions, to name and shame schools that have failed to guarantee students' safety from sexual assault and thus violated their rights, Clark and Pino are seen here gathering evidence from other victims, traveling the country, talking to the press and attending events to raise awareness about the issue. Numerous campus bigwigs implicitly are shamed throughout for their failure to curb sexual violence on campus, and almost none agree to speak to the filmmakers, but surely chancellors and university presidents of the future rightly will laud these young women for their campaigning efforts with honorary degrees.

Indeed, all the numerous young women and men who come forward here to speak about their ordeals are worthy of immense respect and regard, but what is especially impressive about the film is that it doesn't settle for being a mere catalog of crimes. In the latter half especially, focus broadens to explore the aggressive, macho culture that permeates party life on campuses across the country and draws a map of how Greek fraternities, who so generously endow schools through fundraising efforts, form and sustain that culture. Likewise, the worship of star athletes and school teams, and the massive sums of money at

stake in college sports are shown to be part of the problematic puzzle that leads to the shockingly low rates of prosecution. The woman who accused star FSU quarterback **Jameis Winston** of sexually assaulting her speaks eloquently on camera about her ordeal, not just the alleged rape itself but also the threats against her person from fellow students and fans, and the invasion of her privacy that led her to drop out of school.

Snappy design and animation by **Bil White** for the factual title cards add vitality and energy to a smoothly assembled package. Special praise is due to editors **Doug Blush, Derek Boonstra** and **Kim Roberts**, who keep up the propulsive pace and provide wry counterpoint through juxtapositions. A song, "Till It Happens to You," contributed by **Lady Gaga** and **Dianne Warren** provides an extra jolt of poignancy, although if the film has one glaring flaw it's **Miriam Cutler's** mediocre, off-the-peg score elsewhere that sounds too much like tabloid TV docs.

*Production companies: A CNN Films, Regina K. Scully, Paul Blavin presentation in association with Canalplus, Cuomo Cole Productions, Minerva Productions, Impact Partners, ro\*co films*

*Director: Kirby Dick*

*Producer: Amy Ziering*

*Executive producers: Dan Cogan, Geralyn White Dreyfous, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, Nicole Boxer, Jacki Zehner, Sarah Johnson, Barbara Dobkin, Ted Dintersmith, Elizabeth Hazard Dintersmith, Julie Lépinard, Sébastien Lépinard, Anne O'Shea, Brian Quattrini, Wendy Schmidt, Julie Smolyansky, Maria Cuomo Cole, Mark Gerson, Barbara Gerson, Sukey Novogratz, Bob Compton, Ruth Ann Harnisch, Amy Blavin, Paul Blavin, Regina K. Scully, Amy Entelis, Vinnie Malhotra, Tom Quinn, Jason Janego*

*Cinematographers: Thaddeus Wadleigh, Aaron Kopp*

*Editors: Doug Blush, Derek Boonstra, Kim Roberts*

*Composer: Miriam Cutler*

*Sales: Ro\*co Films*

*No rating, 102 mins*

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