

True Grit, a revenge tale from the Coen brothers

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True Grit is the latest film from Joel and Ethan Coen, the writer-directors responsible for such films as *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Their new work is a remake of the 1969 film of the same name directed by Henry Hathaway and starring John Wayne. Both films are adaptations of Charles Portis's 1968 novel *True Grit*.

After her father is murdered by outlaw Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin), 14-year-old Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) arrives in Fort Smith, Arkansas, looking to hire someone who will bring the killer to justice. Marshall Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), with a reputation for heavy drinking and a hair-trigger temperament, reluctantly agrees to take the job.

Joining Cogburn and Mattie in their pursuit of Chaney is a young Texas Ranger named LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), who has been tracking Chaney all the way from Texas where the outlaw killed a senator. The proud and disciplined LaBoeuf will clash repeatedly with the unruly Cogburn and the headstrong Mattie. This unlikely posse follows Chaney, now running with Lucky Ned Pepper's gang, into "Indian country" to bring him back to be hanged. Should "the law" prove unable to bring him to justice, Mattie promises to kill the outlaw herself.

The Coen brothers have adapted *True Grit* to suit some of their pet themes or interests. They have focused their energies and creative efforts on drawing out the humor of the confrontations between Cogburn, Mattie and LaBoeuf, something only partly achieved in the earlier version of the film. Some of this is amusing, especially the arguments between LaBoeuf, who is proud of his training and brags about having the best equipment available, and the more experienced Cogburn, who couldn't care less about such things. The

two try to outdo one another, often to their own detriment.

There are also those instances in which characters believing themselves to be fully prepared for a confrontation suddenly find themselves in over their heads. When one character demands at gunpoint that another come along with him, the answer he gets is a simple "No, I don't think I will." What does one do then? Bringing out the awkwardness and absurdity of such a moment, the impasse at which two ill-equipped, but thoroughly stubborn characters arrive, is a Coen brothers specialty.

But while it may contain amusing moments, *True Grit* is not a comedy, properly speaking. It is a fairly straightforward Western, perhaps even something of a tribute to the genre. It must be said, however, that neither this nor the Henry Hathaway version of *True Grit* is a particularly strong film.

The new work is somewhat more successful than its predecessor. Bridges, Damon, Steinfeld and Brolin all turn in fine performances. The punchy dialogue of the original, much of it retained here, is also more alive in the new film. As is generally the case with the Coens' films, their *True Grit* is well-directed and performed. Why, then, does one leave this film, and so many of their films, feeling as though something essential has been left out?

True Grit is a film about revenge, but the Coens have very little to say on the subject. Young Mattie Ross wants to see her father's killer hanged. She pursues this goal with single-minded determination. She is even prepared to do the outlaw in herself, using her father's old gun. This raises, or ought to raise, a number of questions for an artist.

Killing another human being is no easy thing to do. The artist might ask, under what circumstances does a

person (especially one so young) arrive at a point at which this becomes possible, or even simply thinkable? What does desire for revenge do to a person and what are the consequences for one's psyche once the act is committed? What are the broader social implications of such a law-and-order mentality? This rich ground for drama, and for social insight, is left untouched by the Coens, as it was by Hathaway in the earlier film. Both works suffer considerably for it.

The Western genre has featured its fair share of revenge tales. One can't help but contrast both versions of *True Grit* with several earlier westerns in which revenge is treated far more seriously, or at least with more depth. One thinks of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* (1952) or Henry King's *The Bravados* (1958), as well as many of the works directed by Anthony Mann or Budd Boetticher. These filmmakers all brought out in their work, to one degree or another, the devastating moral and emotional consequences of revenge for both the wanted criminal and his pursuers.

This was largely absent from the original version of *True Grit*, and the Coens have regrettably remade that film with its weaknesses intact. Ultimately, the new *True Grit*, like Hathaway's before it, strikes one as a well-constructed film, entertaining up to a point, but with far too little on its mind.



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