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True Grit

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True Grit

Abstract

This is a film review of *True Grit* (2010).

Joel and Ethan Coen's magnificent new adaptation of Charles Portis' beloved 1968 Western novel *True Grit* fittingly opens with Proverbs 28:1 as an epigraph: "The wicked flee when none pursueth..." It is appropriate because Portis' story, not unlike so many in the Old Testament, is very much about the wrath of the righteous "settin' down on" the wicked, as one character puts it. In addition, this yarn unfolds within a culture structured and defined by an ethic that is drawn almost exclusively from the first part of the Christian Bible; the flocks of Fort Smith and Yell County at the end of the nineteenth century are well acquainted with such principles as "an eye for an eye," but it seems as though the "good news" of Jesus Christ has yet to truly reach them. That said, neither Portis nor his cinematic interlocutors the Coen brothers are as unselfconscious as these characters; they do not see a black-and-white world in which moral order is rigidly maintained. The lawmen are capable of significant injustice, and criminals can sometimes display a disarming vulnerability. *True Grit* is a tale of Old West reckoning, but one where the characters are human beings and not caricatures.

True Grit is narrated from the point-of-view of a woman named Mattie Ross, who recalls herself as a strong-willed and square-toed fourteen-year-old in the American West circa 1880 (the younger incarnation is played by a splendid newcomer named Hailee Steinfeld). Her father's sincere Christian hospitality blows up in his face when he decides to help a drifter named Tom Chaney (the

somewhat miscast Josh Brolin), who murders him for a bit of money, and then flees, taking refuge with a criminal gang led by an outlaw named “Lucky” Ned Pepper (a solid Barry Pepper). Mattie demands satisfaction, and seeks the services of a bounty hunter to help her bring Chaney to justice. All paths lead to Reuben J. “Rooster” Cogburn (an absolutely astounding Jeff Bridges), a one-eyed, whiskey-soaked U.S. Marshal and former Confederate Army officer, who, while seeming to have little regard for any sense of justice other than his own, is known for his “true grit.” Through her cleverness and determination, Mattie is able to enlist the stubborn Rooster’s help. The two are also joined by a grandstanding Texas Ranger named Le Boeuf (the hilarious and totally winning Matt Damon), who’s after Chaney on a different charge (and for different reasons) altogether.

Originally published as a serial in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *True Grit* has been adapted for the movies once before in 1969 by Henry Hathaway. That version – which stripped huge swaths of the darker, stranger, and more Biblical qualities of Portis’ novel – is best known for John Wayne’s broadly comic take on Rooster Cogburn, which won the iconic actor his only Academy Award and was so popular with audiences that it inspired the 1975 sequel *Rooster Cogburn (...and the Lady)* with Katherine Hepburn. To be fair, Hathaway’s adaptation offers some changes to the story that actually strengthen the material in some ways (including a tragic death for La Boeuf and a comparatively anti-climatic end for Chaney), but it assiduously

avoids the less traditional facets of the source material that the Coen brothers instead choose to revel in, including all of its indictments of the politics of gender and race in the American frontier at that time. A few tweaks aside, the directors choose to render *True Grit* as faithfully as possible, complete with total commitment to telling the story from the perspective of a strict Presbyterian adolescent. (In fact, after the first frames, nothing is shown that Mattie herself is not a witness to.)

As technically accomplished as any of their other films, *True Grit* is also one of the Coens' most thematically rich and least cynical works. In their hands, Portis' intriguing observations about humanity continue to drive the narrative and get masterful cinematic assists: in *True Grit*, everyone seems to have strength of character and weakness of character, and those qualities often arise in unusual moments and from unusual places. The characters are rarely all "good" or all "bad" – with the possible exceptions of Mattie's father and Tom Chaney, respectively, whose encounter sets off the whole story. Reconciliation is another leitmotif of the Old Testament, to be sure, and the theme manifests itself here in this moral duality that comes to be understood as more a dialectic by the end. It is not a contrast theodicy, exactly; rather, it is more an acknowledgment that the seeds of both virtue and iniquity are everywhere. Though the Coens capture this quality of the story with the brilliant tagline for the film's marketing campaign ("Retribution...This

Christmas”), it is best symbolized in the character of Rooster Cogburn – truly one of the great literary creations in the last fifty years.

Seen through the eyes of a child, he is grotesque and audacious, imposing and unpredictable, funny and more than a little terrifying. In addition to being too rough on the job and a veteran of the wrong side in the Civil War, he's an alcoholic and something of a deadbeat dad as well. Then there's also the one eye and considerable girth to make him even more surreal and strange. For all of his moral ambiguity, a deep reservoir of goodness becomes apparent in Rooster Cogburn, specifically in his hard, midnight ride of the wounded Mattie to a doctor – a scene that is exquisitely captured by the Coens, their actors, cinematographer Roger Deakins, and especially composer Carter Burwell in his achingly beautiful cue “Ride to Death,” which incorporates themes from the traditional gospel hymn “Leaning On the Everlasting Arms.” When he’s acknowledged for this and his other small flashes of heroism in a gesture years later, it is virtually redemptive because that appreciation is so hard-won.

With *True Grit*'s other rich invocations of Judeo-Christian particulars throughout – including a bleak episode with “a Methodist and a son of a bitch,” and Mattie’s striking comparison of herself to Ezekiel after spending the night in a funeral home - Joel and Ethan Coen solidify their place as two of the most interesting filmmakers on religious subjects. Previous efforts have had much to say

on relevant topics as vast and varied as Southern Gospel (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), modern Judaism (*A Serious Man*), the problem of evil (*No Country for Old Men*), and “Zen” (*The Big Lebowski*), but this film confirms them as perhaps the most earnest and uniquely committed directors thinking about spirituality today. It’s a film that asks us to see ourselves in our fullness and complexity; *True Grit* is an important entry in the Coen canon that reminds us, just as the Book of Proverbs does, “only fools refuse to be taught” (1:7).