

Film Title: True Grit

Reviewer Name: Sam Lackey

Run Time : 1 h 50 min

Film Genre : Western

Director: The Coen Brothers

Screenplay: The Coen Brothers

Film Rating: PG-13

Leading cast members: Hailee Steinfeld, Jeff Bridges, and Matt Damon

In 2010, Joel and Ethan Cohen, better known to the film world as the Coen Brothers, remade the 1969 Western classic "True Grit" starring John Wayne, which in turn was based on the 1968 novel of the same name by Charles Portis. Though the new version largely depicts the same events as the 1969 version, the Coen Brothers claimed that it remained more true to the tone and style of the novel, which is told exclusively from the point of view of a precocious 14-year-old Arkansas farm girl named Mattie Ross. It's the 1880s and she's on the hunt for the man who murdered her father. She enlists the help of grizzled, hard-drinking U.S. Marshal named Reuben "Rooster" Cogburn after hearing that he's a man of "true grit," a term of obscure origin popular amongst the Scots-Irish and English settlers who filled the hills and forests of the southern backcountry throughout the nineteenth century. Essentially it means a combination of determination, moxy, and fortitude, but instances of the word's use dating back to the late 1700s and

early 1800s suggest that it's always been associated with criminality, or at least a certain level of familiarity with the criminal underworld. For example, it was applied to the notorious Tennessee bandit John Murrell in multiple works of fiction beginning in the 1830s.

Like Murrell in some of the highly fanciful tales featuring him throughout the nineteenth century, Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) is not bothered too much with scruples or, in some cases, legality. He tells Mattie that he once robbed a "high-interest bank" in New Mexico, but immediately justifies it by pointing out that "you can't rob a thief" and that he "never robbed a citizen" or "took a man's watch." After Mattie says "it's all stealing," he replies, "That is the position they took in New Mexico." Also like Murrell, he undertakes an arduous journey into "Indian Territory" (modern-day Oklahoma), but in Portis's story, he's not the only one possessed of the true grit.

As the adventure unfolds, Mattie (Hailee Steinfeld) consistently shows herself to be the equal in toughness to both the irascible Rooster and the conceited but ultimately good-hearted Texas Ranger LeBeouf (Matt Damon) who accompanies them in their pursuit of the killer. The real joy of the movie is the interplay between the three of them, and the lively, comic dialogue they lob back and forth. Bridges is pitch-perfect as the gruff but loquacious marshal, and Damon delivers several laughs as the buffoonish but brave LeBeouf. A running thread is the vanity of the two men, as they jockey to prove who has the most grit. Meanwhile, Mattie is the most grounded and practical-minded of the three, and she boldly stands up to all of the men's attempts to patronize her or relegate her to a minor role.

In fact, she remains more diligent and committed than Rooster or LeBeouf, who both have various misgivings and doubts about the mission. After a harrowing shootout with an outlaw gang leaves LeBeouf injured, Rooster gets drunk and pessimistic while marveling at the sustained verbosity of his counterpart, as the Ranger finishes explaining a couple of latin legal terms through a wounded tongue: "I am struck that Lebeouf is shot, trampled, and nearly bit off his tongue, and not only does he not cease to talk but spills the banks of English."

Like many of the Coen Brothers' films such as "O Brother, Where Art Thou" and "Fargo," "True Grit" is animated by a love of language and the peculiarities of a particular American dialect. All three characters speak with a level of formality that is first a bit jarring to modern viewers but true to the historical period. The filmmakers successfully capture Portis's wonderfully unique language and the way it combines nineteenth-century syntax with colorful slang and sly jokes. Rooster and LeBeouf are "western" men with a certain lingo of their own, and Mattie, well educated and polished though she is, is also the product of rural Arkansas and has the accent to prove it.

The search for her father's killer also represents the longest and most dangerous journey she's ever taken, and Steinfeld is a natural at combining youthful naivete with steely-eyed determination. Bridges and Damon are delightful as usual, and Josh Brolin (as the killer Tom Chaney) and Barry Pepper (as the outlaw leader named, appropriately enough, Pepper) eventually turn up as suitably menacing villains.

Perhaps the biggest improvement the Coen Brothers made to the original is to return the story to Mattie, who tells it in her own distinctive voice in the novel. Most movies cannot convey a first-person point of view quite the way literature can, but the perspective here is undoubtedly hers, the voice-over narration is hers, and the story ultimately centers around her and her single-minded search for justice. Steinfeld is the undaunted sun around which Bridges and Damon's colorful characters revolve. Throw in the Coen Brothers' script and direction and the sweeping cinematography of Roger Deakins, and True Grit isn't just a homage to the original or a throwback western -- it is the genre operating at its highest level.