True Grit

Director: Ethan and Joel Coen
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Review by Xan Brooks of The Guardian, January 2011

Jeff Bridges – stooped and shambling, with a gravelly drawl – gives us the Duke by way of the Dude in the Coen brothers' satisfying, back-to-basics overhaul of the antique John Wayne classic. True Grit is a film in which boot-heels bump reassuringly on wooden porches and where horses kick up sprays of water as they canter through the creek-bed. The old-school American western was not dead, it seems. It was just playing possum, waiting for the Coens to come along and rouse it.

True Grit beats a path back to the original Charles Portis novel to spin the tale of 14-year-old Mattie Ross, a pig-tailed angel of vengeance, hellbent on finding the man who robbed and killed her father. Given the choice of three US marshals to hire, Mattie promptly opts for "the meanest": a cantankerous cyclops called Reuben "Rooster" Cogburn. Also joining her on this mission is LaBoeuf, a Texas ranger far from home. Rooster and LaBoeuf plan to ditch the girl and split the reward between them. But Mattie will not be deterred and pursues them across the river and into the trees. Up ahead lies Chocktaw country, where the snow whirls and the rule of law no longer applies. This is a land prowled not by dragons, but bears, brigands and rattlesnakes.

The fact that True Grit marks the brothers' first collaboration with Bridges since 1998's The Big Lebowski has inevitably led some viewers to expect something in a similar vein: freewheeling and irreverent, a gleeful dismantling of wild west cliche. And yet what's most confounding about the Coens' 15th feature is how respectful – how inherently conservative – it is. This has no interest in poking fun at the genre, nor even of shaking it up a little. Instead, it sticks safely to the path and doffs its hat to the cowboy archetypes. True Grit is lean, spare and unadorned; modest almost to a fault. Like one-eyed Rooster Cogburn, it stares at a world without depth or dimension, where the well-worn landmarks stand out plain and true.

Bridges, despite stirring faint memories of drawling Dude Lebowski, plays the sort of boozy old lawman we've seen a hundred times before. Riding shotgun, Steinfeld gives it her all as the feisty – but faintly one-note – heroine, while Josh Brolin crops up late as a black-hat villain to hiss at. Surrounding them, meantime, is a familiar arrangement of stakeouts and shootouts, sagebrush and sentiment.

It's robustly played and ravishing to look at, with its bullish inhabitants and glorious, bleached-bone cinematography. But its furniture is almost too comfortable and too lovingly restored, and it is left to Damon to provide the tale's one properly unruly ingredient as the florid, preening ranger. LaBoeuf's introduction, lighting his pipe in the gloom of the hotel veranda, gives True Grit a sensual, otherworldly charge that is largely missing elsewhere. It's like spying a lonely campfire burning far out on the darkened prairie.

Review by Philip French of The Observer, February 2011

The Coen brothers' excellent western True Grit is a second and rather different version of Charles Portis's novel, rather than a remake of the 1969 film that brought John Wayne an Oscar as the one-eyed bounty hunter Marshal Rooster Cogburn. Portis's novel, a demotic classic in the tradition of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, is narrated by Mattie Ross, a prim, Presbyterian spinster looking back from the 1920s to the great adventure of her life. In 1878, just 13 years after the civil war, she set out at the age of 14 to bring to justice the crooked hired hand Tom Chaney, who murdered her father in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Although she was well played by the 21-year-old Kim Darby as a perky modern miss in the first film, the picture was dominated by Wayne. A controversial figure at the time, Wayne was loathed by many for his arrogant rightwing politics and the previous year his stridently patriotic The Green Berets had been picketed by anti-war protesters. But he was always popular in westerns, and especially in True Grit, where

he was perceived to be mocking the gruff frontier bully he'd been playing ever since his screen persona was reshaped for Howard Hawks's Red River. His Cogburn had a big heart behind his marshal's star and a twinkle in his remaining eye, in his case the right, which may or may not have been making a political point.

The Coens restore Mattie's centrality. First, they've cast the 14-year-old Hailee Steinfeld, who plays her as a tough frontier farm girl reared on the Protestant work ethic with a firm sense of right and wrong. Her strong, dark eyebrows and carefully braided hair declare her earnestness. Second, their film begins with her speaking the novel's opening paragraph as her father lies dead in the street at Fort Smith, the snow swirling around him as she declares her intention to revenge his blood. This introduces her as controller of her own narrative and establishes the language of the King James Bible that she shares with those around her. Everyone speaks a formal English with no elisions and they delight in carefully rounded phrases and allusions.

Arriving on her mission at Fort Smith, the seat of the infamous "Hanging Judge" Isaac Charles Parker, she joins the happy crowd attending a triple hanging. The first two condemned men deliver farewell speeches; the third, an Indian, is interrupted during his first sentence by having the sack pulled over his head and the hangman pulling the lever. This reflects the film's gallows humour, realism and brutal social commentary.

Mattie discovers the wicked Chaney has moved into the Indian Territory, the lawless land that's now the state of Oklahoma. Though within Judge Parker's jurisdiction, it is for many a no-go area and Mattie needs a man like Cogburn to take her there. In the novel, the local sheriff describes Chaney as being "now over in the territory". The Coens turn this into his having "lit out for the territory", a nod in the direction of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, where the phrase occurs in the book's penultimate sentence.

Fort Smith is not a welcoming place. The Irish undertaker who has prepared her father's corpse, the proprietress of the hotel where she stays and a sly businessman she must deal with all attempt to take advantage of her age and what they think of as her inexperience. In each case, she manages, amusingly and admirably, to drive a hard bargain. The same proves true of her relationship with the boozy Rooster Cogburn, whom she first addresses while he's closeted in a privy, and first meets when he appears in court explaining how he came to kill several men while bringing them to justice.

It's here we first become aware of Roger Deakins's excellent photography. The courtroom in the 1969 film is bland, nondescript. Now populated by men in dark business suits, it evokes the paintings of Thomas Eakins, the Philadelphia recorder of emerging middle-class life, and represents the bourgeois world that's encroaching on the frontier. This contrasts with the Indian Territory, a place of fear and freedom where Mattie will have her adventure with Cogburn and handsome Texas ranger LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), who joins them in the pursuit of Chaney, also wanted for the murder of a Texas politician.

Jeff Bridges's Rooster is a wily, duplicitous, self-centred man and, as they journey west, he's revealed to have had a terrible domestic life and a dodgy professional one, first as a member of Quantrill's murderous guerrilla band during the civil war, later as an outlaw. LaBoeuf, on the other hand, is an upright lawman who served with a Virginia regiment in the war. Both, however, are on the trail to perform for money.

Neither has the dedication and determination that Mattie shows in her quest for justice and family honour. Traditionally, women in westerns are either golden-hearted whores providing pleasurable company or schoolmarms and homemakers, upholders of decency and determined to civilise their men. Children are there to learn from their role models or be misled by them. Mattie gives us something new, a 14-year-old girl who directs the lives and strengthens the moral resolve of the men reluctantly riding with her.

True Grit is a harsher, more sombre film than the Wayne version, the tone chillingly wintry rather than gently autumnal, the music less jaunty, more religious and pastoral. It's also funnier, yet never inviting the description "comic western". The villains, when they eventually appear, are perhaps a little less colourful than those in the 1969 film, and Jeff Bridges's diction lacks Wayne's clarity, though in other ways he's altogether more complex. It also has a brief, moving, beautifully staged epilogue set in 1903 that brings the picture to a satisfying conclusion.