

True Grit

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue



True Grit is the last thing you'd expect from the movies' most resolutely ironic brother act, the writer-directors Joel and Ethan Coen: a labor of love. They set out to adapt Charles Portis's charming novel faithfully, correcting the errors of the 1969 Henry Hathaway version, a stock western memorable only for John Wayne's performance as the tippling marshal Rooster Cogburn.

Hathaway reshaped the material as a vehicle for Wayne. Portis's book, however, is the story of Mattie Ross, a strong-minded, precocious 14-year-old who hires Rooster to track down her father's murderer and insists on making the journey with him—and with LaBoeuf, a Texas Ranger, in pursuit of the same quarry. The Coens restore the original focus, and with the help of their frequent cinematographer Roger Deakins they imbue it with a storybook quality. Rooster (played in this version by Jeff Bridges), with his permanently sozzled slurriness and his voice stripped down to a dry husk, is the hero of a tall tale, a character who could come fully alive only in a child's imagination.

The movie doesn't begin well. The first set piece, a triple hanging, is presented in the Coens' usual tongue-in-cheek tone, and its jokiness is smugly knowing. In trying

to approximate Mattie's weird blend of naïveté and moralizing persistence, Hailee Steinfeld mainly sounds like a scold. But the young actress improves as the movie goes along. Meanwhile the Coens abandon their ironies and cotton onto Portis's eccentric style, a shift that serves as a metaphor for the girl's point of view in her dealings with the grownups, who are thwarted in their efforts to treat her like a child: first Colonel Stonehill (Dakin Matthews), whom she beats down for the price of her father's ponies, then Rooster and LaBoeuf (Matt Damon). *True Grit* is as stylized as any other Coen brothers picture, but this time it's Portis's style they're working to emulate.

Rendering a larger-than-life narrative about a girl who comes of age in the most extraordinary adventure of her life, the Coens create a groundswell of emotion. You may not realize how much it has caught you up until the scene, late in the film, when Rooster, in a desperate effort to get the injured girl to a doctor, rides her beleaguered pony to the point of exhaustion, shoots it to put it out of its agony and scoops Mattie up in his arms under a star-dazzled sky. The scene is as wondrous as any sequence in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or *E.T.*—and as full-hearted.

John Wayne's Rooster was a model of the kind of old-Hollywood star acting that was on its way out in 1969, and he brought so much of his career to it that you couldn't separate the actor from the performance. Bridges is a far superior actor, but he isn't an icon, and in any case the Coens don't go in for movie-star charisma. Your preference between the two Roosters will depend on whether you value personality over technique; Bridges's technique is prodigious.

In the role of LaBoeuf, to which Glen Campbell brought a too-lightweight presence in the 1969 movie, Matt Damon is remarkably good. The Texas Ranger is a decent fellow who overcomes a pair of flaws—conventionality and ego—when he learns to appreciate Mattie and is honored by her in turn. It's a tricky part, and Damon, who seems to become a finer actor every year, locates the ideal balance of comic foolishness and depth of feeling.

The Coens add a bizarre detail: during a gun battle, LaBoeuf bites off part of his tongue and is saddled with a vocal handicap for the rest of the picture. Almost all the men we encounter have a vocal tic, including Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin), the childish villain the heroes are seeking, and a character known as Bear Man (Ed Corbin), who rides around in a bear hide with the beast's face totem-poled atop his own. It's an odd motif, but it works with the movie's peculiar style of humor and

somehow enhances the air of enchantment.

True Grit reproduces the novel's acknowledgment that Mattie's adventure is the highlight of her life; nothing that comes afterward can equal it. The final image is of a middle-aged Mattie (Elizabeth Marvel), who has just visited Rooster's grave, trekking doggedly away from the camera. You carry its plaintiveness with you as you walk out of the theater.