

John Wayne classic still majorly entertains

Novel by Charles Portis

Screenplay by Marguerite Roberts

Directed by Henry Hathaway

John Wayne ... Marshall Reuben J. 'Rooster' Cogburn

Glen Campbell ... La Boeuf

Kim Darby ... Mattie Ross

Jeremy Slate ... Emmett Quincey

Robert Duvall ... Ned Pepper

Dennis Hopper ... Moon

Strother Martin ... Colonel G. Stonehill



True Grit is a special movie at the end of the 1960s (1969) when Vietnam had become a major issue and crime was a concern for many Americans. I was 20. Initially receiving a II-S (student) deferment then subsequently drawing a high number in the draft lottery, I managed to avoid that expedition to the southeast Asian tropical paradise. Grit was two Duke movies after The Green Berets, a cartoon piece of corporate-government propaganda likening US military aggression on the Vietnamese people to nourishing the roots of the Liberty Tree. In that time I was a sucker for movies like Beret, and seriously considered volunteering when I walked out of the theater after watching Patton in 1970!

I grew up believing John Wayne was a god, and even had a letter to the editor published in Time Magazine—actually, I recall the letter was in response to a critic's praising of True Grit—where in my young prose I exclaimed how the "John Wayne kind of hero" is essential for our great country. The movie was controversial, mainly because John Wayne was not a "John Wayne" kind of character, and back in the day I wasn't sure what to make of that. What I now realize is how magnificently textured Rooster Cogburn was drawn in this suis generis film and how exactly the real John Wayne fit the character.

Indeed, Wayne's final movie, The Shootist (1976), is even more reality and acting meeting up. But Grit has the better story, along with the perky ultradetermined young teenage heroine Mattie Ross (Kim Darby) who turns the work into a duet. I don't know if she was nominated for an Oscar, but without her complement, Big John would not have won his. Some reviewers have wondered whether the true grit designation applies more fittingly to Mattie.

The story: Mattie's father takes along a hired hand Tom Chaney (Jeff Corey) to make a financial transaction in a remote town, Chaney turns on the old man, killing him, stealing his money, and heads into Indian Territory. Mattie finds out and launches a mission of retribution. She's a pistol herself, but knows she needs a man with "grit" to help her with the details of Chaney's apprehension. Marshall Reuben J. 'Rooster' Cogburn is a one-man crime cleanup operation out here in the wild mountainous west—much filming was performed in Colorado—and you can tell the marshal is supposed to represent the anticrime, anti-counterculture "Dirty Harry" icon of the day.

But he's an icon with a lovable streak and a kind heart. He lives with a Chinaman and a big ol' gold-colored cat named General Sterling Price. He's quite fond of the bottle,

which he usually hits for hours after his regular roundup of bad guys for the jail. After quite a bit of banter, where Rooster plays the codger and Mattie sets about making some good deals for horses and supplies, Rooster reluctantly agrees to set out after this Chaney sleazeball for a hefty fee. He doesn't anticipate that Mattie will insist on accompanying him, or that a young Texas Ranger named La Boeuf (Glen Campbell) is also on Chaney's trail for killing a senator in Texas.

Only after Rooster is assured the Ranger will split the substantial reward with him, La Boeuf and Cogburn form an uneasy alliance. Some of the best lines of the movie are between these two— enlivened by Mattie's continuing attempts to inspire them both toward clean and righteous living. Chaney has fallen in with a gang led by Ned Pepper (Robert Duvall). There's some cat and mouse, then confrontation—following the long trail in which we get to know the three protagonists. [Back in the late 60s, the "anti-hero" was coming into its own as kind of a reaction to the unrealistic iconic figures we saw, often in John Wayne Westerns and war movies, of the 1950s. Rooster is one such antihero, but when all is said and done he's more of a genuine hero than an anti hero... or pseudo hero. The writers thankfully also give Ned Pepper and his men the same realistic "anti" villain touch; Ned in particular seems like a good ol' neighbor boy who just took the easy way out too many times, not mean just treacherous.]

Why do the critics all love the movie? Well, I've known characters in my life like the Duke in True Grit, as well as the Glen Campbell and Kim Darby types. Back in the 1960s, the population was so divided about the war and about what America stood for, I think too many movie critics saw way more significance in the film than it warrants. It's simply a really good Western, probably one of the best. Why is the movie so much fun? It's more fun to watch it now than 39 years ago because it's not burdened by so many expectations or so much analysis. When I watched it in '69, I thought Mattie was just a Miss Goody Two Shoes so totally square; but this time around I see that such a youngster could actually exist and be rather inspiring. Indeed, she'd be exactly the "Baby Sister" our solitary marshall could come to regard as family.

A lot of people before True Grit came along never regarded John Wayne as much of an actor; one of my friends chides me that the Duke is in the same category as Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock when it comes to acting. [First of all, Mr. Reeves and Ms. Bullock are fine actors who just happened to have been type cast from early career moves. Virtually every actor we now consider great started off in some lame TV series or had a couple of real dogs before he or she gained acclaim. Johnny Depp, Will Smith, Sally Fields, the list is endless. So you can't hang Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure on Keanu's shoulders like some critical albatross.] But I swear if you keep an open mind and come to True Grit or The Shootist as if you had never before seen John Wayne, you're going to be impressed with the natural intelligence and emotional depth of the characters he plays. The fact that we know John Wayne suffered with cancer in his later years makes both the man and the actor more heroic.

A fine movie that's as fresh as when it first appeared. For the whole family, too.

###

2008 April 11

Copyright © Brian Wright | *The Coffee Coaster*™

John Wayne | *True Grit* | *All American heroes* | *Kim Darby* | *Vietnam era*

http://brianrwright.com/Coffee_Coaster/02_Movie_Reviews/2008/080411_True_Grit.htm