



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Brokeback Mountain

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

The prose style of Annie Proulx's 1997 story 'Brokeback Mountain', first published in the *New Yorker*, is doggedly brisk. The moment when two young cowboys, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, who have been herding sheep one summer in 1960s Wyoming, finally have sex is dealt with in three blunt sentences, as though the taciturn Ennis himself had dominion over Proulx's pen. Despite its brevity, the story has scope: it evokes the passing of decades without aspiring fraudulently to the epic.

Ang Lee's film adaptation pulls the same trick in reverse. It takes less time to read the story than watch the movie, though each tracks Ennis and Jack from that first summer through the next 20 years, during which they intermittently interrupt their heterosexual family lives to be together. But in Lee's hands, this lengthy picture zips by. The years are ticked off with changes in facial hair, fashion and interior design, or by the unannounced arrival of a new baby. (In film time, Jack becomes a father less than a minute after meeting his future wife Lureen.) Vastness is suggested too by the locations, rendered with unfussy curiosity by the cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto. Layers of blue mountain recede into the distance, overlooked by menacing stacks of cloud; a hillside wriggles with sheep; an undisturbed lake that stretches out before Jack as he berates Ennis for failing to act on his feelings seems to represent the future the men will never have together. The screenwriters – the novelist Larry McMurtry (author of *The Last Picture Show* and *Lonesome Dove*) and Diana Ossana – have carved up the story's extended motel room dialogue between Ennis and Jack, distributing slices of it throughout the film and introducing the sense of the same dilemma being pointlessly thrashed out over the years.

That screenplay is a model of sensitive adaptation. Events referred to in asides by Proulx are unravelled. Ambiguities are both cleared up and renewed. In the story Jack tells Ennis that he is having an affair with a rancher's wife. That detail is retained and revealed to be a lie within the greater deception of Ennis and Jack's clandestine meetings: it is the rancher himself with whom Jack, to use the film's euphemism, 'goes fishing'. The fight between Ennis and Jack that gets a throwaway mention on the page is played out, beginning with playful lassoing and ending with a bloody nose, but is rendered no less mysterious in the process. McMurtry and Ossana also stage some tense showdowns that place the film squarely in Western territory, but the confrontations occur in living rooms and supermarket aisles, and hinge on whose turn it is to mind the babies, or whether the Superbowl should be on during dinner.

The screenwriters' most significant contribution is their investment in well-defined, plausible female characters. Lee is correspondingly generous in the screen time he devotes to them: as the men embark on their first night together for four years, Lee complicates subtly our empathy for them by training his camera on Alma as she waits for Ennis at the kitchen table, a mug of black coffee growing cold at her arm. It would be easy to offset Ennis and Jack's passion with the claustrophobia of the domestic lives they are

temporarily escaping. But Lee is too compassionate and democratic for that. Like Jean Renoir or George Cukor, he sniffs out humanity in the romantic complications of *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), in the brittle domestic battlefield of *The Ice Storm* (1997) and on both sides of the US civil war in *Ride with the Devil* (1999). It was obvious, too, that he was equipped to untangle the vulnerability of the brutish hero of *Hulk* (2003). Far from making Alma or Lureen the smothering or castrating females they could have been, Lee locates in them a vitality that their husbands squander or ignore.

As Alma, Michelle Williams is crushed into quiet helplessness; her open face requests mercy from Heath Ledger's Ennis, but his habit of bowing his head until the rim of his Stetson shields his eyes like a visor precludes this possibility. From Alma to Jack to Ennis's two daughters, the picture is populated by people who spend their lives waiting for Ennis to make himself available. One of the film's most telling shots shows the crook of a coat hanger imposing a wire question mark on Ledger's intractable face. The actor rises to the challenge of constructing a character from grunts, glances and evasions, but is careful to reveal Ennis' moments of joy – like when he marvels at an eyeball sized hailstone that he's caught in his hat.

Between them, Lee and his editor Dylan Tichenor have developed a textural motif that prickles like the refrain of a Johnny Cash lament or a Glen Campbell heartbreaker: they simply allow the sound of one scene to flood prematurely into the scene that precedes it. The first example has Ennis and Alma's wedding vows layered over a shot of Ennis raging and retching following his initial separation from Jack. In the second, the unholy grunts and catcalls of Jack's rodeo riding intrude on a shot of Ennis flipping his wife onto her belly in bed. The third instance has Alma refusing sex because she doesn't want to bear more children for Ennis to ignore; the sound of their divorce proceedings plays over a shot of the couple in bed, backs turned.

The last time Lee and Tichenor generate friction between sound and image comes when Ennis receives news of Jack's death: while he listens to the official, sanitised explanation, a flashback to the brutal truth (which he is imagining) plays silently under the dialogue. The crushing irony of the scene is that both Ennis, receiving the bad news, and Lureen, who is delivering it, know what really happened. Using sound to discredit distort images is an established trick; Terrence Malick has been unsurpassed in this specialist field, with his voiceover tracks in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* altering comprehensively the visual evidence of those films. Perhaps even Malick has attempted nothing as complicated as using a mutual flashback to unite two characters – a wife and a lover – who would dispute that they shared anything except a man.

**Ryan Gilbey, *Sight & Sound*, January 2006**

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## **BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN**

*Directed by:* Ang Lee  
*©/Presented by:* Focus Features  
*Produced with the participation of:* Alberta Film Development Program, Alberta Foundation for the Arts  
*A co-production with:* Alberta Film Entertainment  
*Presented by:* River Road Productions  
*Executive Producers:* Alberta Film Entertainment, William Pohlad, Larry McMurtry, Michael Costigan, Michael Hausman  
*Producers:* Diana Ossana, James Schamus  
*Co-producer:* Scott Ferguson  
*Production Accountant:* Anne Hannan  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Hudson Cooley  
*Unit Production Managers:* Scott Ferguson, Tom Benz  
*Locations Manager:* Darryl Solly  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Gerry Robert Byrne  
*1st Assistant Directors:* Michael Hausman, Pierre Tremblay  
*Script Supervisor:* Karen Bedard  
*CASTING:* Avy Kaufman  
*Screenplay:* Larry McMurtry, Diana Ossana  
*Based on the short story by:* Annie Proulx  
*Director of Photography:* Rodrigo Prieto  
*2nd Unit Director of Photography:* Peter Wunstorf  
*A Camera Operator:* Damon Moreau  
*Steadicam Operator:* Damon Moreau  
*Gaffers:* Christopher Porter, Chris Sprague  
*Still Photographer:* Kimberley French  
*Visual Effects:* Buzz Image Group  
*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Maurice Routly  
*Edited by:* Geraldine Peroni, Dylan Tichenor  
*Production Designer:* Judy Becker  
*Art Directors:* Tracey Baryski, Laura Ballinger  
*Set Decorators:* Patricia Cuccia, Catherine Davis  
*Property Master:* Ken Wills  
*Costume Design:* Marit Allen  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Renée Bravener  
*Department Head Make-up:* Manlio Rocchetti  
*Department Head Hair:* Mary Lou Green  
*Title Design:* yU+co.  
*Digital Opticals:* Cine-BYTE Imaging Inc  
*Colour Timer:* Chris Hinton  
*Music:* Gustavo Santaolalla  
*Additional Music:* Marcelo Zarvos  
*Orchestrations/Conductor:* Richard Emerson  
*Strings Arranged by:* David Campbell  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Drew Kunin  
*Boom Operator:* Peter Melnychuk  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Reilly Steele, Eugene Gearty  
*Supervising Sound Editors:* Eugene Gearty, Philip Stockton  
*Dolby Sound Consultant:* Brad Hohle  
*In loving memory of:* Geraldine Peroni  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Kirk Jarrett  
*Dialect Coach:* Joy Ellison  
*Animal Management:* Gerry Hornbeck, Wildlife Incorporated  
*Animal Co-ordinator:* T.J. Bews  
*Animal Wrangler Captain:* Ken Zilka

## **Cast**

Heath Ledger (*Ennis Del Mar*)  
Jake Gyllenhaal (*Jack Twist*)  
Linda Cardellini (*Cassie*)  
Anna Faris (*Lashawn Malone*)  
Anne Hathaway (*Lureen Newsome*)  
Michelle Williams (*Alma*)  
Randy Quaid (*Joe Aguirre*)  
Kate Mara (*Alma Jr, age 19*)  
Valerie Planche (*waitress*)  
David Trimble (*Basque*)  
Victor Reyes (*Chilean sheepherder 1*)  
Lachlan Mackintosh (*Chilean sheepherder 2*)  
Larry Reese (*jolly minister*)  
Marty Antonini (*Timmy*)  
Tom Carey (*rodeo clown*)  
Dan McDougall (*bartender 1*)  
Don Bland (*biker 1*)  
Steven Cree Molison (*biker 2*)  
Duval Lang (*announcer*)  
Dean Barrett (*bartender 2*)  
Hannah Stewart (*Alma Jr, age 3*)  
Scott Michael Campbell (*Monroe*)  
Mary Liboiron (*Fayette Newsome*)  
Graham Beckel (*L.B. Newsome*)  
Kade Philips (*Ennis, age 9*)  
Steffen Cole Moser (*K.E. Del Mar, age 11*)  
Brooklyn Proulx (*Jenny, age 4*)  
Keanna Dubé (*Alma Jr, age 5*)  
James Baker (*farmer 1*)  
Pete Seadon (*farmer 2*)  
Sarah Hyslop (*Alma Jr, age 9-12*)  
Jacey Kenny (*Jenny, age 7-8*)  
Jerry Callaghan (*judge*)  
Cayla Wolever (*Jenny, age 11*)  
Cheyenne Hill (*Alma Jr, age 13*)  
Jake Church (*Bobby, age 10*)  
Ken Zilka (*roughneck 1*)  
John Tench (*roughneck 2*)  
David Harbour (*Randall Malone*)  
Will Martin (*Carl*)  
Gary Lauder (*killer mechanic*)  
Christian Fraser (*grease monkey*)  
Cam Sutherland (*assailant*)  
Roberta Maxwell (*Jack's mother*)  
Peter McRobbie (*John Twist*)  
Chyanne Hodgson (*barrel racer*)  
Dave Leader (*bull fighter 1*)  
Jory Vine (*bull fighter 2*)  
Mark van Tienhoven (*bull fighter 3*)  
Greg Schlosser (*bull rider 1*)  
Dwayne Wiley (*bull rider 2*)  
Shane Pollitt (*bull dogger 1*)  
T.J. Bews, Lynn Ivall (*rodeo hazers*)

USA/Canada 2005©  
134 mins

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