



TRUE GRIT (Cert 15)

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Overview: A classic western story centred on the theme of vengeance, but with a twist – the avenger is an upright and determined 14-year-old girl. Acclaimed directors the Coen Brothers based the film on the 1968 Charles Portis novel previously adapted for the screen in a 1969 film starring John Wayne.

Directors: Joel and Ethan Coen (2010)

Studio: Paramount Pictures

Running time: Approximately 106 mins

Caution: Contains scenes of violence.

SUMMARY OF PLOT

The film begins with a voiceover in which a woman – Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) – tells of the murder of Frank Ross, her father, by Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin), a man whom he considered a trusted employee. The voiceover explains how, as a 14-year-old girl, she went to collect her father's body. While in the Arkansas town, Mattie asked the Sheriff what progress had been made in bringing Chaney to justice, only to be told that if she wanted to catch her father's killer she would need to hire a US Marshall to track him down. She decides to employ Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), a one-eyed drunk, but a man with, she determines, 'true grit'.

Cogburn initially refuses to believe Mattie has the money to pay him, but finally convinced, he takes the job. However, on the morning they had planned to head into Indian territory to begin their pursuit, Mattie

finds that Cogburn has departed without her. Cogburn has left a train ticket and a note advising her to go home while he has set off with a Texas Ranger named LaBoeuf (Matt Damon) who is also on Chaney's tail. Undaunted, Mattie heads off to follow and join them.

When Mattie discovers that LaBoeuf and Cogburn planned to return Chaney to face justice in Texas so they can split both her money and a reward from Texas, she is outraged. This would mean that Chaney would not be tried for the murder of her father in Arkansas. Mattie argues that this is fraud and Cogburn agrees to end his arrangement with LaBoeuf who goes his own way.

Cogburn learns that Chaney has joined up with Ned Pepper's gang and discovers where they will be that night. Cogburn and Mattie lay in wait, but minutes before the gang arrive, LaBoeuf appears. Cogburn's plan is disrupted, but he manages to kill two members of the gang and Pepper's horse while, inadvertently, wounding LaBoeuf.

Warning: Spoilers ahead!

The following morning Mattie encounters Chaney at a nearby stream and he takes her as a prisoner back to Pepper and the remainder of his gang. Mattie comes face to face with her father's killer and has the opportunity to take revenge for his death. Mattie survives the ordeal but not without drama and at some cost.

An epilogue ties up a number of the loose ends left at the end of the pursuit of Tom Chaney. We learn that Mattie wrote to Cogburn and asked him to call by, but she heard nothing from him until she was a mature woman. The film ends with Mattie, 'an old maid' considering how 'time just gets away from us'.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Justice – Mattie has a straightforward attitude towards justice – a forensic sense of right and wrong – perhaps drawn from the Bible teaching at her church (clip 1). In contrast, Cogburn, the worldly-wise US Marshal, has a rougher, more pragmatic approach (clip 2).

Persistence – Cogburn, Mattie and, to a lesser extent, LaBoeuf, all demonstrate persistence in achieving their own differing ends. We sense that Cogburn and Mattie come mutually to admire this in one another (clip 2).

Saving grace – The Old Testament speaks of people calling out to God to rescue them from 'the pit'. This metaphorical cry is real for one of our characters, but there may also be a less literal sense of salvation for another of the story's characters (clip 3).

The journey of life – Coen Brothers' films are known for their gloomy world-view – their last film, *A Serious Man*, was a study on the story of Job. While not overall as downbeat as *A Serious Man*, the theme of disappointment is revisited by the end of *True Grit* (clip 4). But our life experiences – even our disappointments – can be positive learning points.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1 – DVD chapter 1. Starts at 0 hours 08.07 minutes to 0 hours 12.10 minutes. Just over 4 minutes in length.

Between the beginning of the film and the start of this clip we have already seen Mattie identify the body of her dead father and witness the hanging of three men who would soon be joining her father's body at the undertaker's. The theme of judgement is evident in the hanging scene, where one of the condemned men

makes a long and emotional speech to the effect that parents should teach their children to keep the law and so avoid the fate that was soon to be his.

- The film begins with a quotation from Proverbs 28.1 in the Authorised Version, 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth'. Does this give us any clue regarding the message the Coen brothers want to convey in this film? (To understand the verse, you might like to look ahead to the 'Justice' theme in the God's Story section.)
- Yarnell, Mattie's family's African-American servant, pronounces that Mattie's father has, 'Gone home. Praise the Lord'. What might this tell us about the deceased and how does Mattie react?
- What does this clip tell us about Mattie's understanding of justice?
- Mattie declared that, 'The only thing in life that's free is the grace of God'. Is the grace of God free and if it is, is it the only thing? [There is a further opportunity to discuss this topic in the second point in the God's Story section]

Clip 2 – DVD chapter 2. Starts at 0 hours 13.34 minutes to 0 hours 17.52 minutes. 4.18 minutes in length.

Having been told by the Sherriff that Tom Chaney is beyond his reach, Mattie goes looking for someone whose reach extends further and is pointed towards Reuben 'Rooster' Cogburn. When Mattie first sees Cogburn, he is slouched in a chair as a witness in the murder case against Odus Wharton. Odus Wharton is the only survivor following Cogburn's – and a deceased colleague's – attempt to arrest Odus and CC Wharton at the home of Aaron, the brother's father. On cross-examination by the defence attorney, we

learn that Cogburn had already killed two other brothers from the same family. Mattie's justice was black and white, but Cogburn's was less calculating and more pragmatic. He would try to bring in an outlaw alive, but he wasn't too bothered if he brought a man in dead.

- What is your opinion of 'Rooster' Cogburn's tactics as a US Marshal?
- Cogburn claimed he, 'never shot nobody [he] didn't have to'. On the evidence you heard, do you agree?
- Teenage Mattie seemed to see the world as black and white. How does Cogburn's world-view differ, do you think?
- If you were in Mattie's shoes, would you have hired 'Rooster' Cogburn and why/why not?

Clip 3 – DVD chapter 8. Starts at 1 hour 28.18 minutes to 1 hour 33.35 minutes. 5.17 minutes in length.

With LaBoeuf having shot Ned Pepper and Tom Chaney out cold, it seems that justice is in sight. However, Chaney revives and knocks out LaBoeuf with a rock. Mattie grabs LaBoeuf's rifle and quickly realises she has an opportunity to settle her quarrel with Chaney.

- What do you think was Mattie's motive in asking Tom Chaney to stand?
- How should we interpret Mattie's immediate fate following her shooting of Tom Chaney?
- The Coen brothers have often shown an interest in biblical and religious themes. Mattie fell into 'a pit' (cf Proverbs 28.10). In the context of the film's

- religious themes, what thoughts does the idea of 'a snake pit' conjure up in your mind?
- Do you think that Cogburn's actions indicated a change in his outlook on life?

Clip 4 – DVD chapter 9. Starts at 1 hour 36.51 minutes to 1 hour 41.36. 4.45 minutes in length.

The film leaves few loose ends as it reaches its conclusion. We find that Mattie recovered, but not before her arm had been amputated. Cogburn became a performer in a Wild West touring show. LaBoeuf's destiny is unknown. Mattie remains a rather cold woman, but determines to take care of Cogburn in death, as he cared for her in life.

- What were your feelings when you heard Cogburn had become a performer in a Wild West show?
- Why do you think that Cogburn didn't respond to Mattie's first attempt to make contact?
- The 1969 John Wayne film version ends with Mattie's hand healing up nicely. In this version, Mattie must live the rest of her disfigured, perhaps therefore affecting her marriageability. Does the Coen brothers' faithfulness to the novel's more sombre ending teach us anything about the difference between salvation and restoration?
- Do you think that it is realistic that the young, spirited, and wide-eyed Mattie would have grown into the way that she is portrayed at the end of the film? Is this a product of circumstances – another Coen theme – or simply the enthusiasm of youth having been worn down by life's disappointments?

GOD'S STORY

Justice in lawless times – Proverbs 28:1/Psalm 108

The Bible verse used at the beginning of the film suggests that wicked people will flee justice if no one is prepared to pursue them. The full verse, in the NIV reads, 'The wicked man flees though no-one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.' This suggests that the way one can distinguish between wicked and righteous persons is the way that they might respond to danger, ie a wicked person will run for the hills, while a righteous person will respond with boldness.

- The Book of Proverbs offers wisdom for living, but this verse reminds us that justice was often as hard to find in biblical times as in the American West of the 19th century. It's easy to see that Tom Chaney can be identified with 'the wicked', but who among the main characters would you describe as 'bold as a lion'?
- Psalm 109 uses some of the language of the law court – e.g. 'accuser', 'tried' and 'found guilty' – as the Psalmist brings his case before God. Do you view God in this way, as a judge? Why/why not?
- The Bible tells us about people who seek revenge, but does this mean that revenge is biblical (see Leviticus 19.18; Romans 12.19 – 21)?
- Mattie was ostensibly seeking justice for her father, but was it really revenge that she was really after? Is there a difference?

Saving grace – Matthew 20:1-16

This parable takes us back 50 years or more to the days when dock workers were kept in a pen and waited to be called out by a foreman for work for the day or perhaps just a few hours. This happened twice a day and some men would get work while others would

go home having not earned a penny. This same situation happens in developing countries to this day – casual labourers wait on corners in the hope of being given some work.

- Mattie was the employer hiring labour in our story. We can imagine how she would feel about the way that these workers not being paid in proportion to how long they worked. How does it make you feel?
- Jesus often told stories in which people were concerned about the way that others were treated compared to themselves. You might think of the reaction of the brother when the Prodigal Son returned home. Does justice for those who have worked all day necessarily mean that they should be paid more than those who worked for only a few hours?
- Is how we view a parable like this dependent upon our economic circumstances? How differently from us do you imagine the 1 billion people who live on \$1 a day or less might read this story?
- Jesus told this parable as part of a passage of teaching about rewards – deserved and undeserved. Mercy is sometimes described as, 'Not getting what you deserve'. How would you define grace?

Persistence – Luke 11:5-8; Luke 18:1-8

These two parables are both ostensibly about the need for persistence in prayer. While Luke explicitly says this before the second parable, it is less clear that this is Jesus' purpose in the first story.

- Mattie wouldn't take 'no' for an answer in her pursuit of 'Rooster' Cogburn – a trait she shares with Abraham in his argument with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you consider this

an admirable trait or can it mean that those who 'shout loudest' get what they want?

- Which of the two biblical characters who are knocked up at night most resemble 'Rooster' Cogburn and his pursuit by Mattie to take on her task?
- Some parables use a human character to illustrate what God is like; others suggest that if even a human being will do something, how much more is God likely to do it. These parables seem to fall into the second category, but what do they tell us about God's willingness to answer prayer?
- In the parable of the unjust judge, Jesus tells his hearers that God will, 'bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night'. How do we reconcile this with our knowledge of a world in which, as the Psalmist often complains, the righteous suffer and the wicked go free?

The journey of life: learning to love – Luke 10:25-37

Jesus told this story in answer to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' In telling the story, Jesus undermined the questioner's desire to be given permission to limit the extent of his care. Jesus has also given us one of the greatest moral examples – the Good Samaritan. At the beginning of the film the two main characters demonstrate, in their different ways, little understanding of loving anyone other than themselves. By the time we arrive at the epilogue, both

Mattie and Cogburn have found 'the neighbour' in people different from themselves.

- How many points of comparison do you see between this parable and Cogburn's rescue of Mattie?
- Like the Samaritan in the story that Jesus told, Cogburn had nothing to gain from helping Mattie. What was his and the Samaritan's motivation in doing they did?
- Jesus told the story to illustrate the nature of human love, but does it also tell us – and did it tell Mattie – something about the un-calculating nature of divine love?
- We saw that the film begins with a quotation from Proverbs 28.1. It ends, in the form of the hymn, 'Leaning on the Everlasting Arms' with a quotation from Deuteronomy 33.27, although the hymn implies that the arms that keep us safe are those of Jesus. How far do you think this reflects the film's movement from 'Old Testament justice' to 'New Testament love'?

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