

Film favorites of '07: Lars tops the list

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

By the time the credits began to roll for *Lars and the Real Girl*, the movie was at the head of my list of top movies of 2007. Writer Nancy Oliver and director Craig Gillespie deliver a sensitive portrait of Lars Lindstrom (Ryan Gosling), a young man so gripped by shyness that the only companion he dares relate to is a life-size silicon doll. The doll becomes his constant (nonsexual) companion. Lars imagines a life story for Bianca, who speaks a language only he can understand, and aids her with a wheelchair because she is unable to walk.

Although his job allows him to hide in an office cubicle, Lars cannot hide from a community that accepts him for who he is. When his sister-in-law hosts dinner, for example, she is determined to accept Bianca as she would any girl Lars might bring home.

His small Lutheran congregation holds a committee meeting and decides, with only one negative voice, that if Lars loves Bianca, so will they. A woman doctor agrees to “treat” Bianca when Lars worries that she is ill and starts informal talks with Lars that are a remarkable display of what therapy ought to be—accepting, not probing.

Lars reminds us that the Larses in our lives ask only to be accepted and understood. See this film and be thankful for congregations that know how to accept others.

Director Paul Thomas Anderson begins *There Will Be Blood* in semidarkness. Seen only in shadows, a man stands in a deep hole attacking a wall of rock with a pickax. He picks up one rock, wets it with spit and sees streaks of oil. The year is 1898. Thus begins the narrative of Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis), a story of sin and denial that draws inspiration from Upton Sinclair’s 1927 muckraking novel *Oil*.

Plainview is a charming con man with a coldness toward the human race and a love for power and profit, who builds an oil empire. He hates religion and publicly humiliates a young evangelist who asks for help in building a new church. Later,

when he concludes a business deal, the same evangelist tries to grip Plainview's hand during a prayer: Plainview jerks it away.

The film has its share of violence, but the "blood" of the title may also reflect director Anderson's focus on this hostility toward religion.

At the outset of the film, Plainview adopts an orphaned boy and uses him as a shill to soften his image while he seizes land from the pious farmers of Southern California. *There Will Be Blood* concludes with Plainview confronting his own depravity in two separate clashes, first with the orphan as an adult and then with the evangelist, who comes to beg for help. Final scenes in the darkness of Plainview's mansion suggest that Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* is another inspiration for Anderson's film.

Based on Cormac McCarthy's novel, *No Country for Old Men* is directed and produced by the Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan. In a deceptively simple story set in a desolate section of Texas around 1980, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) stumbles across the aftermath of a failed drug deal. In addition to the bodies left on the ground, Moss finds \$2 million. A man of limited means and less judgment, Moss sees prosperity in his future and decides to keep the money. That decision puts him on a collision course with Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a cold-blooded killer.

Moss ignores all warnings, even one from the wise local sheriff, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones). His future is determined not by the luck of finding a fortune, but by this one dumb act of greed. The Coen brothers treat McCarthy's novel with the respect it deserves and deliver one of their finest films.

Atonement is about another bad choice, this time a decision by 13-year-old Briony Tallis (Saoirse Ronan) to make a false accusation against a young man (James McAvoy) who is in love with Briony's older sister, Cecilia (Keira Knightley). On her word, Cecilia's suitor is arrested and sent away, first to prison and then to the front in World War II France. When the adult Briony (Romola Garai) realizes the destructive impact of her actions, she longs for atonement.

Director Joe Wright faithfully replicates the vision of Ian McEwan's novel of the same name. The film moves from a developing young love affair in the quiet beauty of an English country estate to the horror and chaos of the Dunkirk evacuation, to a conclusion that insists that forgiveness is God's alone to deliver.

Where were you when it happened? This is the question that underlies Romanian director Corneliu Porumboiu's gem of a film, *12:08 East of Bucharest*. I initially saw this film at the 2006 Denver Film Festival (a good place to find hidden gems). It received a brief 2007 release in the U.S., and is now available on DVD. This funny but sad film takes place during a single day, December 22, 2005, 16 years after the day that communism was overthrown in Romania.

A small-town television host (Ion Sapdaru) invites local guests to appear on his program to discuss the day of the overthrow. The program's topic is: Did the revolution happen here? The film's title refers to the precise time on December 22 that Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, fled from the capital city by helicopter. (They were later executed.)

Townpeople who went to the central square before 12:08 to join in the anti-Ceausescu demonstrations qualify as revolutionaries. One guest insists he was in the square before 12:08. Other callers argue that he is lying, and on-air squabbles ensue about what people remember. The humor teaches us about this era in Romanian history and gently reminds us how easy it is to change the past when our memory denies us a heroic role.

Away from Her was written and directed by Sarah Polley, a 28-year-old Canadian who recruited her friend Julie Christie to star as Fiona Anderson. Christie has largely withdrawn from major film roles and spends most of her time on a farm in Wales. But she agreed to take the part of Fiona and has already won several awards for her role.

Fiona and her husband of 40 years, Grant (Gordon Pinsent), are living in retirement and in good health until Fiona develops Alzheimer's. She checks herself into a nursing home. A month later Grant comes for a visit and finds that Fiona is giving most of her attention to another man, a fellow patient. Grant commiserates with the man's wife, who lives nearby, but there is little that either surviving mate can do except try to accept the reality of their changed lives.

George Clooney plays the title character in *Michael Clayton*, a film that is a layered look at the world of major law firms that sometimes protect wrongdoers—in this case corporate polluters—because even the bad guys deserve legal representation. Clayton is a flawed attorney with a gambling habit, but he is also a talented legal fixer. He is assigned to prevent a mentally unstable colleague from following his

instinct for honesty. Tom Wilkinson as the disturbed man and Sydney Pollack as the firm's lead attorney are superb in portraying a standoff in the struggle between the law and honesty.

Fifty years after the original *3:10 to Yuma*, with Glenn Ford and Van Heflin, a new version of the film has been made with Russell Crowe and Christian Bale. Having promised to deliver his prisoner to the station in time to catch the 3:10 train to Yuma, Dan Evans, the character played by Bale, is tempted to increase his fee at the cost of his promise. Director James Mangold honors the original in a film focused on a complex relationship between an outlaw headed for prison and a rancher struggling to keep his integrity and relate to his adult son.