

Top films: Best of 2003

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

My choice as 2003's best film is *Mystic River*, which introduces us to characters burdened by their choices. Three boys are playing in the street one day when two men approach them. The men say they are policemen and order one of the boys to get into their car, leaving the other two to watch as the car drives away. Later, as adults, the abduction haunts each of them: Why did one get in the car and why not the other two? Their unshared memories strain their adult relationships.

With *Mystic River*, 73-year-old Clint Eastwood has made a film that surpasses even his 1992 *Unforgiven*, another story of choices made by men who are unable to face what they have done to themselves and to others. The main characters in *Mystic River* are played by Sean Penn, Tim Robbins and Kevin Bacon. Two of their wives (Marcia Gay Harden and Laura Linney) offer their husbands support, but their efforts only dig their spouses deeper into despair.

Confronted with his worst mistake, one of the men weeps over a bad choice made for what he thinks are good reasons. The film's closing scene asks how we are to live with such sins. The answer one man gives another is a shrug and a small smile, implying that we must "just live with it," but reminding viewers that life without honesty and forgiveness will never rise above an empty shrug.

A series of 20 novels by Patrick O'Brian has made Captain Jack Aubrey a popular character. Two O'Brian novels are the basis of a film about early 19th-century sea warfare: *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. It is 1805, and Russell Crowe is Lucky Jack, captain of a ship that's chasing a French warship off the coast of Brazil. What lifts this sea adventure above others is Crowe's steady, strong performance and Peter Weir's masterful direction. *Master and Commander* combines sea battles with the personal narrative of a leader who inspires and cajoles his crew to perform its duty for God and king.

Australian-born Weir (*Gallipoli*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Dead Poets Society*) juxtaposes the fury of battle with moments of human encounters aboard ship, including one moment when a young boy has to have his shattered arm cut off. The

boy is consoled when Captain Jack gives him a book about British hero Horatio Nelson who—as every British schoolboy knows—bravely served as a British commander even after he'd lost both his right eye and his right arm in battles.

Cold Mountain, set in the closing days of the Civil War, is based on a novel by Charles Frazier. Jude Law is Inman, a Confederate soldier recovering from battle wounds who decides to leave the military hospital and walk home to Ada (Nicole Kidman), a young woman waiting on her farm on the other side of “Cold Mountain” in North Carolina. Frazier draws his plot from stories handed down by his great-great-grandfather. The story of the two lovers parallels other tales within this tale: tales of battlefield suffering, of the journey home, and of surviving on a 19th-century homestead. Director Anthony Minghella also made *The English Patient*, another wartime film.

Swimming Pool slyly and skillfully demonstrates French director François Ozon's insight into the struggle toward wholeness that is so crucial to the creative process. British actress Charlotte Rampling is Sarah Morton, a British mystery writer who is invited to retreat to her publisher's French villa and overcome a writing block.

But when the young daughter of the publisher arrives unexpectedly, she interrupts Rampling's work. The older woman is jealous of her visitor's carefree view of sensuality, and soon the two are competing for the same man. The film's resolution is satisfying and surprising, as befits both a mystery story and a mature woman's journey toward self-discovery.

In *Something's Gotta Give*, Diane Keaton makes her own journey of discovery. Divorced for ten years and staring at a laptop screen that won't produce the play she is trying to write, Keaton is surprised when her daughter and boyfriend show up to spend the weekend. You know this is a commercial film made in Hollywood heaven when the man is played by Jack Nicholson, who thinks he is resisting the aging process by dating much younger women.

Not surprisingly, Nicholson falls in love with the mother—a wise choice even though he finds that to connect with Keaton he will have to give up his rakish cover. The film, however, belongs to Keaton. In the hands of director-writer Nancy Meyers, Keaton celebrates her own gift of creativity by writing her experiences with Nicholson into a successful play and by finding a satisfying resolution to her own struggle with growing older.

In the book *Seabiscuit*, Laura Hillenbrand told the story of the unlikely race horse that captured the love and loyalty of a depression-burdened America. Hillenbrand wrote much of *Seabiscuit* on a laptop in bed as she struggled with the debilitation of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. *Seabiscuit* the movie follows three men—the owner, the trainer, the jockey—and Seabiscuit. All are characters flawed to a serious degree, but strong enough as a team to reach a climactic racing victory over the racehorse War Admiral. The event was the biggest news story of a prewar U.S. in 1938.

Whale Rider, based on a book by Maori author Witi Ihimaera and written and directed by New Zealand's Niki Caro, has the distinction of being one of the few South Pacific (non-Australian) films to gain wide access to American screens. Keisha Castle-Hughes, a young Maori actress in her first role, is superb as the 12-year-old Pai. Although Pai is born into the line of succession to become the head of her tribe, the tribal elders, led by her grandfather, refuse her that position because she is a girl.

Undaunted, Pai secretly studies the customs and practices of the role. She also develops a relationship with the spirit of the whales surrounding her island, huge creatures that seem to know she is the tribe's rightful chief. It was a whale, after all—so the legend goes—that deposited the first human inhabitant on this land a thousand years ago.

The Human Stain: Philip Roth's 1998 novel of the same name is the source of director Robert Benton's brooding tale of Coleman Silk, a college professor living a lie. Anthony Hopkins plays Silk, and Nicole Kidman is Faunia Farley, his working-class lover. *The Human Stain* deserves a place among the year's best films because of its relentless probing of guilt, deception and anger. The professor explodes when he is accused of racism, but the plot soon reveals an ironic twist to his protest. Ed Harris is outstanding as Faunia's former husband, a Vietnam veteran whose demeanor is chilling as he threatens both his former wife and Silk.

Harris has an entirely different role in *Radio*, a film based on a true story about a mentally challenged young African-American nicknamed Radio (Cuba Gooding). When Harris, the coach of a South Carolina high school football team, notices Radio hanging around the practice field, he gives him jobs to do at practice and at games. The coach learns that he must stand up for Radio, not so much for racial reasons, but because Radio is different.

The Irish immigrant family in the film *In America* arrives in the U.S. in a station wagon from Canada, traveling as tourists. The father, Johnny, as one of the girls in the family brightly informs the customs agent, “doesn’t have a job”—not the best recommendation for coming into a new country. Johnny and his wife Sarah are played by Paddy Considine and Samantha Morton; their daughters are real-life sisters Sarah and Emma Bolger. Director Jim Sheridan’s film script, which he wrote with his two adult daughters, is autobiographical, and recalls his own arrival in New York as an out-of-work actor.

The film sparkles with the newness of the family’s experiences. They drive through Manhattan, for example, with their heads outside the car windows, eyes blinking at the neon lights. When they move into a rundown apartment with pigeons flying inside, daughter Emma asks, “Can we keep the pigeons?” The girls go trick-or-treating in a building where no one opens the door to strangers except Mateo (Djimon Hounsou), an artist from Nigeria who becomes a kindly uncle to the family. The coffee shop on the first floor becomes a family living room where waitresses babysit the girls. The immigrant experience is seen from the children’s perspective, and the resulting experience is joyful.