

Scarred for life

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

Dating back to his "man with no name" westerns and including his recurring role as Dirty Harry Callahan, Clint Eastwood has embraced projects that rely on his own version of the three R's: remorse, revenge and redemption. His combination of wounded morality and grim artistry peaked in 1993 with the revisionist western *Unforgiven*, a chilling tale of a gunfighter who fully comprehends the sinful life he has led ("It's a hell of a thing to kill a man") but proves helpless to do anything about it.

Critics have been treating *Mystic River* with the same reverence, but the praise is misplaced. It is a very good film, with moments so pure and painful they catch you mid-breath, but it is pocked with too many story flaws to be a masterpiece.

The tale begins in a tough Boston neighborhood where three 11-year-olds--Jimmy, Sean and Dave--are hanging out and causing mischief. A car pulls up. Two men, claiming to be policemen, chew them out and take away Dave. It turns out they are not cops but predators, who subject Dave to four days of sexual torture before he is able to escape.

This opening flashback is one of the best sequences in the film, grabbing us quickly and continuing to squeeze. Eastwood's use of memory-inducing yellow light is particularly strong here. He photographs much of the action at dusk.

Fast-forward 25 years to 2000. Dave is now a husband and father, though it is clear that the tragedy of those four days still haunts him. As played by Tim Robbins, Dave gives off the air of a man who expects the worst from life, while stumbling forward as best he can.

His two buddies from that fateful day are still in the neighborhood. Jimmy (Sean Penn) is a small-time thief who is trying to keep his nose clean after a two-year prison term. Sean (Kevin Bacon) is a homicide detective with anger issues and a drinking problem.

They seem to be traveling through parallel universes, barely recognizing each other's existence, until a second tragedy brings them together again. Jimmy's 19-year-old daughter, Katie, is murdered. Sean is put on the case. And Dave is a suspect.

A copious exposition of their scarred lives, juxtaposed with the ongoing murder investigation, constitutes the movie's second act. We discover, for instance, that Jimmy's first wife died of cancer when he was in jail, and that he swore to go straight for Katie's sake. It is also the reason he married the tough-as-nails Annabeth (Laura Linney). We learn that Sean's wife has recently left him, and only communicates via silent phone calls at all hours of the day and night. And we find out that Dave has been sleepwalking through his marriage to Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden), a gentle but nervous woman who tries her hardest to be a loyal wife and responsible mother, despite the fact that Dave has never confided in her about the defining moment in his life.

The investigation into Katie's death, loaded with procedural details, has more than its share of intriguing twists. (Dave is just one of many suspects, along with local hoods and a former boyfriend.) But the further the tale strays from the relationship of the three men, the weaker the film gets. The plot line is confusing, leading us to feel we should be looking back at the more engrossing story we've left behind. This is due in part to the strong performances, especially Harden as the confused wife who knows her husband is in trouble but doesn't know why.

Instead of ending the film on a telling shot of the two boys, now men, as they watch Dave, as a boy, being driven out of their neighborhood, Eastwood and screenwriter Brian Helgeland tie up loose ends that don't need tying. This includes a totally out-of-the-blue speech by Annabeth (think *Lady Macbeth*) to Jimmy about his power as a man, and the superfluous resolution of Sean's marital problems.

What is perhaps most fascinating about *Mystic River* is how closely it resembles the social dramas of the 1930s, especially *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). In that film, Jimmy Cagney and Pat O'Brien are childhood pals who make trouble together. When Cagney gets caught and tossed into jail, it leads to a life of crime, while O'Brien, who barely eluded the long arm of the law, becomes the parish priest. The film ends, famously, with Cagney getting the electric chair, while O'Brien urges the neighborhood tough kids to accompany him to church so they can say a prayer for "a boy who couldn't run as fast as I could."

The "There but for the grace of God go I" theme runs through *Mystic River*. Jimmy and Sean know full well that they could have been the ones who climbed into the car on that day. If the film had focused more on those revealing chords of memory and less on the whodunit, a very good film might have been great.