

Brothers' odyssey

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), directed by Joel and Ethan Coen

*Chocolat* (2000), directed by Lasse Hallström

Joel and Ethan Coen came up with a strange concept for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: they took major elements of Homer's *Odyssey* and set them in the Depression-era South. George Clooney's character is named Ulysses, the cyclops is represented by a Bible salesman with a patch over one eye, a blind seer comes along on a handcar, and of course, there are three bathing sirens.

Like the *Odyssey*, the film is episodic. A flimsy plot is used to hang together ten- to 15-minute stories that are for the most part dropped as soon as they are finished. This style can make for a compelling film (like last year's *Jesus' Son*), but the individual stories must be powerful. In *O Brother*, the odds of that are about even.

The Coens are determined to include numerous southern characters, such as Baby Face Nelson, Ku Klux Klansmen, racist southern politicians and bluesman Robert Johnson. It's like the Coens are saying, "Hey! We studied up on Depression-era Mississippi!" (One could say they're also showing off their knowledge of the *Odyssey*, except they claim they've never read the book.) The KKK scene features formation patterns that seem inspired by musicals, with the strange result of making being in a racist hate organization look almost cool.

Surprisingly, the film hits its zenith in its episodes about Christianity. Religion hasn't been given more than a passing glance in the Coens' other films, but here Christianity is talked about explicitly. At a waterfront revival, Ulysses's two convict companions are baptized, and one of them is positively giddy about having his sin washed away. I've never seen a film so successfully show a character experiencing great joy in freedom from sin.

Miramax Studios is known for its skill in landing Oscar nominations, but I still have to wonder how *Chocolat* got the nod. It does have appealing, talented actors in Judi Dench, Johnny Depp and Juliette Binoche, and an accomplished director in Lasse Hallström, whose last film was the Oscar-nominated *Cider House Rules*. Its storyline

of an outsider (Binoche) who sells chocolate to Catholics abstaining during Lent leads to a message of tolerance that makes people warmer inside than if they were drinking hot cocoa.

The problem is that in spite of those virtues--good actors, a director with a good eye, and a joyful message--the film has the paint-by-numbers feel. This becomes quite apparent as the religious clichés surface. A very pompous religious mayor convinces the town's priest and the townsfolk that eating chocolate during Lent is a sin. (The young priest sounds like a mainline minister when he finally speaks his own mind.) As expected, there is a transferal of hatred from the sin to the sinner. And as expected--this film is, after all, touted as life-affirming--the townsfolk desert their puritanical leader for the chocolate-seller's joie de vivre.

Given the film's Academy acclaim, I had to question my reaction to it. Maybe the actors are good enough to counteract the weak screenplay? No, they're good, but Dench, Depp and Binoche have all been better; their roles aren't nuanced enough to support a great performance (although Dench comes close). Maybe the message of tolerance is so important that the film's problems can be ignored? Not really, given that every third film these days preaches tolerance. Well, didn't you have an urge for chocolate afterward? I can't say that I did.