

## A Critic's Guide to the 2002 Oscar Nominees

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 12 February 2002 18:00

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**ALI** (in theatres): Covering Muhammad Ali's personal and professional life from 1964 to 1974, Michael Mann's biopic has everything except what it can't live without: a reason for being. You really have no better understanding of Ali after seeing the film than you had before; director Mann, along with his topnotch cast and crew, has dedicated an enormous amount of time, money, and talent to a technically adept yet vacuous experience. Will Smith pulls off a tip-top Ali caricature but, because of the emptiness of the script, finds nothing deeper in the material; it's easy to forget he's there. For all its strengths, *Ali* is a bit of a lightweight. **Nominations:** Actor (Smith), Supporting Actor (Jon Voight). **Actors:**

**A BEAUTIFUL MIND** (in theatres): Not since *Titanic* have I seen a movie so terrible in its first half and so remarkable in its second; do I smell a Best Picture Oscar here? The film is almost as schizophrenic as its main character (Russell Crowe, as mathematician John Nash, giving a moving, technically dexterous performance), and it's this unstable quality that makes the movie genuinely inspiring. Ron Howard directs with his typically pandering, middlebrow smugness but hints at a toughness we weren't prepared for, and while Akiva Goldsman can't write believable dialogue, he proves himself wickedly smart at subversive plotting.

*A Beautiful Mind*

is both the apex and nadir of Hollywood moviemaking, and it just might get better with repeat viewings.

**Nominations:**

Picture, Director, Actor (Crowe), Supporting Actress (Jennifer Connelly), Screenplay Adaptation, Makeup, Original Score, Film Editing.

**BLACK HAWK DOWN** (in theatres): A technically accomplished atrocity. Although based on true events and Mark Bowden's well-regarded book, Ridley Scott's Somalian war drama is jingoistic, dramatically inert, and sometimes startlingly racist; naturally, accolades, big business, and Oscar nominations followed. Scott and his technical team can't be faulted for their realistic presentation of the horrors of war, but the film's extended battle sequence – three-quarters of the film's running time – simultaneously numbs you and makes you a connoisseur of the visual effects, and Scott's insistence that we view the Somalis as nothing other than The Enemy helps make *Black Hawk Down* as frighteningly one-note as a Rambo vehicle.

**Nominations:**

Director, Cinematography, Sound, Film Editing.

**GOSFORD PARK** (in theatres): Robert Altman's murder mystery, set in England in 1932, is a sensational entertainment, featuring a wily, complex script by Julian Fellowes and Altman's patented, virtuoso direction of large ensembles. Filled as it is with roughly two dozen major characters, picking out a favorite performer is an impossible chore, but if pressed, Eileen Atkins, Jeremy Northam, Helen Mirren, Emily Watson, and the incomparable Maggie Smith are especially fine. Though hindered by some jarring anachronisms and muddled sound design in the opening, the film boasts tremendous production design and surprising emotional heft, and might be the most sheerly enjoyable British period piece you've ever seen. **Nominations:**

**Nominations:**

Picture, Director, Supporting Actress (Mirren, Smith), Original Screenplay, Art Direction, Costume Design.

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**I AM SAM** (in theatres): So shockingly offensive, both thematically and as a work of cinema, as to defy rational analysis. At the very least, you'd expect the film would open a debate on whether it's actually appropriate for a man with the mental capacity of a seven-year-old (Sean Penn in a shticky, gimmicky performance) to raise a child who will quickly be more advanced than he. But anyone who does in Jessie Nelson's seriocomic weepie is pegged a sonofabitch, while Sam and his lovable pals teach a hammy Michelle Pfeiffer – and all of us – basic truths about Love, Independence, and Caring For Your Child. Scene for scene, it's last year's most thoroughly repugnant movie. **Nomination:** Actor (Penn).

**IN THE BEDROOM** (in theatres): Filled as it is with Todd Field's supple direction, a real feel for detail, and a couple of marvelous performances by Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson, it's impossible not to recommend seeing this domestic drama. Yet I can't be alone in thinking that while the film's emotions feel true, the formulaic plotting doesn't – even the acting centerpiece, an emotionally violent battle between the leads, feels rote – and huge leaps of faith are required to get through its logic-defying finale. *In the Bedroom* is the damnedest experience; it's often a masterpiece of mood, but it winds up a frustrating, unfulfilling work.

**Nominations:**

Picture, Actor (Wilkinson), Actress (Spacek), Supporting Actress (Marisa Tomei), Screenplay Adaptation.

**THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING** (in theatres): Even those of us who aren't generally wowed by "cloak movies," where you're constantly knee-deep in swordfights and horses and mud, have to admit that this first installment in Tolkien's trilogy is pretty damned good. The production design is spectacular, the pacing is leisurely but engrossing, the visual effects are often astonishing, and the performers, especially the great Ian McKellen as Gandalf, are just right. In short, director Peter Jackson and his collaborators have pulled off a huge cinematic undertaking and succeeded in style. And it's just 10 months until the next one.

**Nominations:** Picture, Director, Supporting Actor (McKellen), Screenplay Adaptation, Cinematography, Film Editing, Art Direction, Costume Design, Sound, Original Score, Original Song, Visual Effects, Makeup.

**MOULIN ROUGE** (on video and DVD): The love-it-or-hate-it movie of the year, and so visually arresting and outlandishly, romantically *perfect* that you might find yourself wishing it would never end; as you've probably surmised, I'm most definitely on the side of the "love-its." Baz Luhrmann's musical, starring the magnificent duo of Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, is all about the intense feelings we have toward pop music, and there are more knockout individual set-pieces here than in your average

10 movies. (Personal favorites: McGregor's rendition of Elton John's "Your Song," performed as if his life depended on it, and Jim Broadbent's ribald, unforgettable "Like a Virgin.") The film is a stunning experience, two hours of sheer cinematic bliss.

**Nominations:**

Picture, Actress (Kidman), Cinematography, Makeup, Art Direction, Costume Design, Sound, Film Editing.

**THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS** (in theatres): Each novelistic segment in director/co-screenwriter

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Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* follow-up is so rich in character detail and transcendent dialogue that it's a little dizzying. Anderson outlines his characters and themes in big, bold strokes and walks an amazing tightrope between the hilarious and the poignant; he just might be the most confident comedic director alive. As the film's nightmarishly funny patriarch, Gene Hackman comes through with his most masterful comic work yet, and co-stars Ben Stiller, Gwyneth Paltrow, Anjelica Huston, Luke and Owen Wilson, Danny Glover, and Bill Murray are all flawless. Easily the best comedy of 2001, it oftentimes feels like the best book, too.

**Nomination:** Original Screenplay.