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MYSTIC RIVER

It's tempting to say that in *Mystic River*, Clint Eastwood's complex, heartbreaking adaptation of Dennis Lehane's terrific murder mystery, Sean Penn gives the most nuanced approximation of grief to be found anywhere in modern movies.

He plays Jimmy Marcus, a one-time gangster now living the respectable life in Boston whose eldest daughter is found murdered. The chief suspect is Jimmy's boyhood friend, Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins), who was abducted as a child – in front of Jimmy and fellow pal Sean Devine – and survived four days of physical and sexual abuse; that crime now comes back to haunt Jimmy, Dave, and Sean (Kevin Bacon), the detective assigned to the case. Nothing if not grand in ambition, Eastwood's film details the relationships among the three men, the effects of the murder on Jimmy's and Dave's wives (Laura Linney and Marcia Gay Harden), and the uncovering of the mystery behind the killing. But, as with *The Godfather* films, the movie's primary theme is familial; it's about those inexplicable bonds that link us and occasionally destroy us, and it's on this level that Sean Penn's performance can be aptly labeled majestic. Jimmy's devastation at losing his child is so total that absolutely nothing of artifice remains in Penn's portrayal; loss affects Jimmy's every gesture and utterance, and his inevitable quest for vengeance makes Penn's performance, and Eastwood's direction, a work of uncompromising force. In a film of sterling acting – Robbins and Harden are nearly as exemplary – Sean Penn is close to flawless; it's his best screen work to date, which is saying a
lot
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Despite a mostly unimpeachable adaptation, screenwriter Brian Helgeland keeps a few of Lehane's lesser ideas intact – like Sean's relationship with his mostly-unseen wife – and wraps things up a little quicker than you might like; Laura Linney's Lady MacBeth-ish turn near the finale is, sadly, all but thrown away. But these are quibbles. Clint Eastwood and company have fashioned a brilliant meditation on life, love, and loss, *and* done so in the guise of a truly tricky and engrossing thriller. From opening shot to gut-wrenching close, from Penn's grandeur to Laurence Fishburne's gratifying normalcy, the beautifully edited and executed
Mystic River
is a marvelous work and, I think, Eastwood's finest cinematic offering.

THE MAGDALENE SISTERS

The Magdalene Sisters, currently playing at the Brew & View, is an appalling, potent true tale of a women's labor camp disguised as a nunnery, but I would have had more respect for the film if it didn't so specifically follow the blueprint of the Women in Prison genre. Set in a slightly fictionalized Irish covent where sexually "dangerous" young ladies are hidden from the masses and forced into slave labor – our heroines are a flirtatious orphan, an unwed mother, and a woman whose only crime was being raped by her cousin – writer/director Peter Mullan's work is like a female *Midnight Express*, so tenacious and cruel that you're both riveted and aching to escape the theatre. The impressive actresses, spirited Anne-Marie Duff and terrifying Geraldine McEwan in particular, keep the movie from being unbearable, as do Mullan's subtle compositions, but the nagging feeling persists that this work is, despite its noble intentions, just a high-minded exploitation picture for the art-film crowd; you half expect Sybil Danning or Linda Blair to show up. (The beatings, the mind games, the near-escapes followed by punishment, the sexual humiliation, the implied lesbianism, the eventual rebellion – there's nothing here you wouldn't find in the likes of
Chained Heat
or
Savage Island
.) Peter Mullan has too much taste to allow his movie to be any kind of disreputable good time; the film is well-made and fiercely intelligent. Yet
The Magdalene Sisters
remains an odd and queasy work –
Reform School Girls
as a Best Picture contender.

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE

Like many, I loved the theatrical trailer for the new re-telling of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because, in addition to appearing genuinely frightening, it looked almost completely devoid of standard genre elements – the overbearing scores, the pathologically stupid teenagers, the obligatory Oh-it's-just-a-cat/the-wind/my-boyfriend scares before the *true* attacks. How disappointing, then, to see Marcus Nispel's remake and realize it's a compilation of nothing *but* standard genre elements, with maximum gore and minimal brains. The original 1974 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is about as disturbing a horror film as you could want and achieves its primal power through its simplicity; there's absolutely no art separating the audience from Tobe Hooper's id. Yet this new movie, though competently produced, doesn't cut nearly as deep. Nispel's film provides an occasional jolt, but it's a tedious and predictable work, one that won't haunt anyone's memory longer than the car ride home. (Its only notable moment is its most brazenly stolen one, a Raimi-inspired camera zoom through the bullet hole in a woman's head.) The filmmakers should be commended for at least telling the tale with a straight face – R. Lee Ermey's baroque performance excepted – but aside from raking in some seasonal Halloween bucks, there doesn't appear to be a single reason for this remake to exist.

MIDCOAST FILM & ARTS FESTIVAL SHORT FILMS

Much the way a poem can be more affecting than an 800-page epic novel, oftentimes a short film can be more expressive and rewarding than something you'd pay eight dollars to see at the multiplex. As cases in point, among the dozens of offerings at this year's Midcoast Film & Arts Festival are 14 shorts ranging from three-and-a-half to 30 minutes long, many of which display more discernible filmmaking craft – and provide more enjoyment – than most full-length studio productions. (Full details on the festival are available at http://www.miscoast.org.) The intriguingly-titled *Tom Hits His Head*, for instance, is a zippy, surprisingly entertaining look at a man suffering from panic attacks, featuring a memorable cameo by Satan himself (in the guise of a red-faced plastic doll), and *Paint Thinner* details, in a mere seven minutes, the therapeutic benefits of posing for a portrait; the relationship between artist and subject, the short suggests, is akin to the one between a psychologist and his patient, or a barkeep and his barfly. *Terminal Bar*, though, is something else entirely – an astonishingly humane and vivid short that puts most

feature-length documentaries to shame. It's a kaleidoscopic look at what was thought to be New York's toughest bar, and, through a series of black & white photographs and recollections by the bar's former owner, the film paints an amazingly engrossing picture of NYC's scariest and saddest denizens and the tavern that opened its arms to all of them.

Terminal Bar

runs a mere 22 minutes and you wish it would last five times that, and if the film's "To Be Contiued ... " coda is truthful, a feature-length version should be in the works. I can't wait.