

Brokeback Mountain

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

The date is 1963. The location is Signal, Wyoming and the mountain is Brokeback. Two young unemployed cowboys (Jack Twist, played superbly by Jack Gyllenhaal, and Ennis Del Mar, played by Heath Ledger) will spend the summer on its slopes. Mustering sheep against a stunning backdrop, Jack and Ennis experience a growing sexual attraction. Neither believes they are “queer” and for both, this is “a one-shot deal,” “nobody’s business” but theirs. Isolated and bored, they enter a summer of love that will cast a shadow over their entire lives.

The movie can be enjoyed for the stunning scenery and outrageous beauty of what is a jagged, bare land. The humour is subtle and rich. The merging of two flocks of sheep on Brokeback Mountain and the resultant struggle of two “gay” cowboys to separate what is similar is a moment of comic genius. While the humour of Jack makes him warmly endearing, some of his dialogue is difficult to hear.

Rural America is portrayed as a land that has bred a certain way of being male. It has resonances with the Barry Crump mythology of New Zealand culture, and the male as emotionally sparse, verbally insecure, hardworking and alone. Today’s metrosexual male might well ponder the place of a robust, male spirituality, as they wipe latte froth from their designer stumble. How do men today express friendship, experience companionship and embrace spirituality?

Director Ang Lee refuses to settle for cardboard cut out characters. Both Jack and Ennis are portrayed as victims of less than ideal relationships with their fathers. Both leave the summery slopes of Brokeback to get married and have children. Both settle into less than fulfilling work situations. They reunite to enjoy wilderness “fishing trips,” moments of sexual escapism between work and domestic life. And so the movie follows their lives and loves over twenty years. The homophobic culture that is rural United States, and the memories that are Brokeback Mountain, casts a chilling shadow that neither can escape.

But this is a movie, and not short story of the same name by Annie Proulx. In the end, 134 minutes is not long enough to do justice to the complexity that is twenty years of life spread between two men, two wives, three children, one divorce and various other sexual relationships.

Our culture regularly portrays relationships as built upon an intense sex of a summer of love. But if relationships, irrespective of orientation and understandings of marriage, are built upon not only a summer of love, but upon the shared pursuit of mutual redemption, then the movie *Brokeback Mountain* tries to do too much. The movie has raised, but never answered, too many questions. Is the struggle of Jack and Ennis to separate what is similar wrapped up in poor relationships with their fathers, a homophobic culture, a certain way of being male or their personal relational inadequacies? As a result, the complexity that is human sexuality and relationships is reduced to a ‘gay cowboy’ movie. Sex and homosexuality potentially become marketing tools to titillate and provoke an audience. As Jack Twist says, “As for the marriage, we could do it over the phone.” I left the movie wondering if human relationships deserve better, whether in reality or when they are simplified for the scramble that is box office ratings.

562 words

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