

James Berardinelli, "Brokeback Mountain," *Reelviews*,

Longing is such a potent element of the human experience that it has formed the fabric of numerous stirring motion pictures. *Brokeback Mountain* is one such movie - a tale of love and loss, of unrealized dreams, and of lives wasted by denying passion and accepting convention. The primary difference between *Brokeback Mountain* and say, for example, Clint Eastwood's *The Bridges of Madison County*, is that in Ang Lee's picture, the central relationship is between two men. And this isn't a platonic friendship. These men are as intimately involved as two lovers can be.

Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) meet in the summer of 1963 when both are hired by Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) to be shepherders on Wyoming's Brokeback Mountain. Their job: keep the sheep moving and make sure as many as possible make it home. Gradually, a friendship forms between the two men, although neither is a master of words. And, one chilly night, the relationship turns physical. They agree that what happens on Brokeback Mountain stays on Brokeback Mountain, and when the summer is over, they have every expectation of never seeing each other again. Ennis is off to marry Alma (Michelle Williams), and Jack meets rodeo queen Lureen (Anne Hathaway). But, deep down, neither can forget their summer together, and Jack eventually decides to break the silence and make contact.

The richness of the characters and situations in *Brokeback Mountain* is both its strength and, to an extent, its undoing. One problem is that many of the subplots only tangentially brushed by the movie prove to be at least as interesting as the main story, and it become frustrating to view only snapshots of some of these tales. Alma is as tragic a character as they come, and she has to live with the ghost of a memory that will haunt her, yet we only see snippets of her life. I realize this is Jack and Ennis' story, but director Ang Lee (*Crouching Tiger, Hulk*) causes us to be so interested in all the characters - even the secondary ones - that there are times when the singleminded focus of the primary plot can make viewers feel cheated.

Although the tale is well developed, and there is great emotional resonance in the push-and-pull between the characters and their world, *Brokeback Mountain* doesn't break new ground, except that this story has not previously been told (at least not in a major motion picture) with the gay spin. The sexuality of the characters is deliberately left ambiguous. Ennis would seem to be a mostly heterosexual individual who loses himself in a moment of passion with another man, who subsequently comes to dominate his thoughts. Jack, on the other hand, is at least bi-sexual, with a likely preference of men over women (despite his assertion that he's "not queer"). While it shouldn't matter that the romance occurs between two men, there are some who will feel uncomfortable about the subject matter. One would hope, however, that *Brokeback Mountain* won't be pigeonholed as a "gay cowboy movie." That may be essentially accurate, but it's an underrepresentation of what's going on.

One of the film's strengths is the way in which Lee causes the longing to bubble off the screen. We can feel it. It's a palpable presence. It turns our memories to roads not taken. The other post of *Brokeback Mountain*'s foundation is the acting. Gyllenhaal - who may be battling against himself for Oscar contention (he's also good in *Jarhead*) - has shown in three 2005 films (the third being *Proof*) that he's a talent to be reckoned with. Jack may be his most challenging role of the year, and Gyllenhaal nails it. Heath Ledger is equally as good, showing a depth not yet explored (certainly not in his other late-year movie, *Casanova*). Ennis is a taciturn introvert, but that doesn't stop Ledger from a subtle exploration of his pain and loneliness. This character is strangled by convention, and Ledger successfully shows that in everything from Ennis' hangdog look to his slow gait.

The primary supporting actors deserve equal recognition. This is the best performance yet from Michelle

Williams, who has parlayed a popular TV role into a respectable motion picture career. Anne Hathaway, bearing a breast as she throws her Disney image aside, plays Lureen with the right amount of sass and artificiality. And Randy Quaid gets a chance to play a character who isn't a buffoon, although, like many "tough" men of the '60s, he's a homophobe to the bone.

*Brokeback Mountain* spans a time period of nearly twenty years. We only get the highlights, but they are enough to give us a picture of the compromises both men have made to steal the occasional moment with each other, and the boundaries they are unwilling to cross. Jack wants them to give up their current, unsatisfying lives and live with each other; Ennis refuses to consider this because of how they will be viewed by society. The ending is predictably tear-jerking, but it's filmed with less melodrama than it might be. Lee's restraint during this portion of the story is welcome. Another director might have taken things too far in his quest to provoke an emotional reaction.

The film is based on a short story by Annie Proulx, and has been adapted for the screen by Diana Ossana and *Lonesome Dove*'s Larry McMurtry. *Brokeback Mountain* isn't for everyone, but for those who are not bothered by the homosexual relationship, it offers a study in yearning, love, and loss. It didn't affect me as deeply as either *The Bridges of Madison County* or *The Remains of the Day* (both of which offer similar themes in different settings), but it evokes some of the same feelings. It's a brave and affecting effort from a director from whom we have come to expect worthwhile things.