

Ann Hornaday, "Lost in Love's Rocky Terrain," *Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 2005

It's hard to know what to make of "Brokeback Mountain," one of this season's most buzzed-about -- and, this week at least, award-nominated -- movies. On the one hand, it's high-toned and refined, an impeccably pedigreed literary adaptation of a short story by Annie Proulx that was first published in the *New Yorker*. On the other hand, it's a potential camp classic, larded with unintended humor and "Saturday Night Live"-ready fodder for instant pop culture parody. The story of two cowboys who fall in love in the 1960s, it's a genre-subverting exercise similar to Todd Haynes's 2002 "Far From Heaven," although some theorists might argue that it's redundant, the idea being that all Westerns have a whiff of lavender about them, at least subliminally.

A sweeping, solemn, self-serious chronicle of the men's relationship over several decades, "Brokeback Mountain" possesses handsome and sympathetic lead players, magnificent scenery, heartbreaking melodrama, righteousness and cultural import. But as a testament to the importance of following one's passion, it's devoid of one crucial thing: passion.

This isn't to say that things don't get physical. Because "Brokeback Mountain" has been marketed as a breakthrough movie in its portrayal of homosexual relationships, from the moment Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) first meet while applying for jobs herding sheep in Wyoming, it's just a matter of when, not if. The consummation of their relationship is a brief, violent, loveless episode that over their first summer together becomes an idyll of half-naked wrestling, nuzzling by the campfire and fistfights that inevitably end in an embrace. They won't meet again until four years later -- by which time Ennis has married Alma (Michelle Williams) and had two daughters. But when Jack shows up on his doorstep, the attraction clearly hasn't waned.

Jack and Ennis's highly charged reunion inspires Jack to suggest that the two run away and start a ranching operation together, a suggestion Ennis dismisses out of hand. Over the next several years, the two men will have to be satisfied with fishing trips on Brokeback Mountain during which no fish will be caught. (Their subterfuge is often what sparks "Brokeback Mountain's" unintentional humor, such as when Alma finally confronts Ennis by pointedly asking him why he never brought home any trout.) Meanwhile, Jack gets married to a rodeo queen (Anne Hathaway) down in Texas, sublimating his desire for Ennis in furtive, dangerous assignations across the Mexico border.

As a tragic evocation of the costs of homophobia -- not just to closeted gay people but also to their families and loved ones -- "Brokeback Mountain" is indeed a watershed movie, an airing of taboos and secrets that can only be seen as welcome and deeply humanist. (And, in its depiction of the violence that threatens Jack and Ennis should their relationship come to light, it's a sensitive, empathic homage to those who have died of hatred, including Matthew Shepard, who seems to haunt the production from his Wyoming grave.)

But director Ang Lee -- who knows his way around gay love ("The Wedding Banquet"), confining social strictures and rituals ("Eat, Drink, Man, Woman," "Sense and Sensibility") and the wages of repression ("The Hulk") -- treats the source material with such deference that it's as if the entire movie were made in *New Yorker* typescript. Lee and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto frame and shoot everything for maximum grandeur: The Wyoming vistas are flawlessly manicured, Ledger and Gyllenhaal perfectly costumed and coiffed; even Ennis and Alma's sad little apartment over a laundromat seems to have been designed to death. Even more oddly, the two men are never portrayed within the welter of a larger life, whether it's Ennis's Wyoming town or an America undergoing seismic social and political changes. Instead, Jack and Ennis remain hermetic, chiseled paragons atop their Bighorn Olympus.

Given such a limited range to play in, both Gyllenhaal and Ledger deliver fine performances, and they make "Brokeback Mountain" memorable, not as a stunt or political touchstone but as a good, old-fashioned love story. Both are more complicated men than their terse personas would first lead you to believe; indeed, it's never clear just how surprised either man is by that first encounter in the tent. Ledger is especially impressive as the withdrawn, emotionally stunted Ennis who, if homosexuality is the love that cannot speak its name, cannot speak at all. (Ledger seems to have looked to Billy Bob Thornton's dialect in "Sling Blade" as inspiration for Ennis's rock-jawed diffidence, and he pulls it off with impressive authenticity.)

It's Ledger's Ennis who ultimately overcomes the pall of self-importance and sanctimony that hangs over so much of "Brokeback Mountain." In the film's wrenching final scenes, he provides what has been needed all along, an immediate, shattering sense of sadness and longing and loss. It's as if the movie has finally shifted its focus from the mountain to the man.

*Brokeback Mountain* (134 minutes, at Loews Dupont Circle and Landmark's Bethesda Row) is rated R for sex scenes, nudity, profanity and some violence.