

Roger Moore, "Brokeback Mountain," *Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 6, 2006

They're young men in uniform -- worn Levis, dusty denim jackets, battered boots and 10-gallon hats that they haven't quite grown into.

All they want is that next job, as long as it's outdoors, on horseback, on the range. They talk the way cowboys always talk in the movies.

"I can't wait 'til I get a spread of my own."

And then they fall in love.

*Brokeback Mountain*, Ang Lee's sensitive and picturesque portrayal of a decades long love affair between two cowboys, is like every cowboy picture you ever saw, and like none that has ever been made before. It's a gay soap opera, a marital melodrama and an appreciation of quiet, repressed men who long for the wide open spaces and a love they can share without fear.

It's not a great film, but it is a touching one, beautifully acted and filmed.

Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger are Jack and Ennis, two "deuces" hired by a sheep rancher played by Randy Quaid to watch a herd they're to sneak onto federal land on Brokeback Mountain. They take turns up with the herd or down in base camp. They talk, but not much.

And when that feeling hits them, they can't articulate it, explain it or fight it.

"I wish I knew how to quit you," Jack says.

"If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it," growls Ennis (Ledger), through ever-gritted teeth.

Jack (Gyllenhaal) is the one who wants them to make a life together.

"It could be like this -- just like this -- always."

But it's the early 1960s. Nobody would understand it. And this is the West. They hang guys like this from barbed-wire fences.

Based on Larry Lonesome DoveMcMurtry's script of an E. Annie Proulx short story, it's a film whose novelty doesn't keep it from looking, sounding and feeling like the truth. As the years pass and the two men marry, unhappily, we see the cost of them denying their hearts' desires -- unhappy homes, crushed spirits and too many "fishing trips" back up to Brokeback Mountain.

The wives, stunningly played as a daddy's girl shrew (Anne Hathaway) and a confused and angry victim of emotional desertion (Michelle Williams), have their suspicions.

The betrayal is all the more painful, because the women didn't ask for this grief, and Jack and Ennis can't fight the urge to go back to that one perfect love they enjoyed.

Gyllenhaal is the ostensible star, but Ledger's tight-lipped stoicism is the perfect performance at the heart of the film. He's hardened, where Gyllenhaal's Jack is softer, weaker, the romantic dreamer of the two.

But both embody what that old Waylon and Willie song taught us -- "Cowboys ain't easy to love, and they're harder to hold."

The soapier moments seem trite, manipulative, making the movie, at times, a gay *Thorn Birds* or *Same Time Next Year*. The ending feels abrupt, perfunctory, robbing it of some emotional heft it should have.

Lee (*The Ice Storm*; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *The Wedding Banquet*) is more at home with the material than the locale. Like his failed *Ride With the Devil*, this story is almost swallowed by the wide open spaces of its setting.

But the characters make us understand their need to make these treks to Brokeback Mountain. And the actors make us want to make that trek too.