

DECEMBER 27, 2010, 8:30 PM

## Narrative and the Grace of God: The New ‘True Grit’

By [STANLEY FISH](#)

Movie critic Dan Gagliasso doesn't like the Coen brothers' remake of the Henry Hathaway-John Wayne "True Grit." He is especially upset because the moment he most treasures — when Wayne, on horseback, takes the reins in his teeth and yells to Lucky Ned Pepper (Robert Duvall), "Fill your hand you son-of-a-bitch" — is in the Coens' hands just another scene. "The new film," [Gagliasso complains](#), "literally throws that great cinematic moment away."

That's right; there is an evenness to the new movie's treatment of its events that frustrates Gagliasso's desire for something climactic and defining. In the movie Gagliasso wanted to see — in fact the original "True Grit" — we are told something about the nature of heroism and virtue and the relationship between the two. In the movie we have just been gifted with, there is no relationship between the two; heroism, of a physical kind, is displayed by almost everyone, "good" and "bad" alike, and the universe seems at best indifferent, and at worst hostile, to its exercise.

The springs of that universe are revealed to us by the narrator-heroine Mattie in words that appear both in Charles Portis's novel and the two films, but with a difference. The words the book and films share are these: "You must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free with the exception of God's grace." These two sentences suggest a world in which everything comes around, if not sooner then later. The accounting is strict; nothing is free, except the grace of God. But free can bear two readings — distributed freely, just come and pick it up; or distributed in a way that exhibits no discernible pattern. In one reading grace is given to anyone and everyone; in the other it is given only to those whom God chooses for reasons that remain mysterious.

A third sentence, left out of the film but implied by its dramaturgy, tells us that the latter reading is the right one: "You cannot earn that [grace] or deserve it." In short, there is no relationship between the bestowing or withholding of grace and the actions of those to whom it is either accorded or denied. You can't add up a person's deeds — so many good one and so many bad ones — and on the basis of the column totals put him on the grace-receiving side (you can't earn it); and you can't reason from what happens to someone to how he stands in God's eyes (you can't deserve it).

What this means is that there are two registers of existence: the worldly one in which rewards and punishment are meted out on the basis of what people visibly do; and another one, inaccessible to mortal vision, in which damnation and/or salvation are distributed, as far as we can see, randomly and even capriciously.

It is, says Mattie in a reflection that does not make it into either movie, a "hard doctrine running contrary to the earthly ideals of fair play" (that's putting it mildly), and she glosses that hard doctrine — heavenly favor does not depend on anything we do — with a reference to II Timothy 1:9, which celebrates the power of the God "Who hath

saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

This and other pieces of scripture don't emerge from the story as a moral kernel emerges from a parable; they hang over the narrative (Mattie just sprays them), never quite touching its events and certainly not generated by them. There are no easy homiletics here, no direct line drawing from the way things seem to have turned out to the way they ultimately are. While worldly outcomes and the universe's moral structure no doubt come together in the perspective of eternity, in the eyes of mortals they are entirely disjunct.

Mattie gives a fine (if terrible) example early in the novel when she imagines someone asking why her father went out of his way to help the man who promptly turned around and shot him. “He was his brother's keeper. Does that answer your question?” Yes it does, but it doesn't answer the question of why the reward for behaving in accord with God's command is violent death at the hands of your brother, a question posed by the Bible's first and defining event, and unanswered to this day.

In the novel and in the Coens' film it is always like that: things happen, usually bad things (people are hanged, robbed, cheated, shot, knifed, bashed over the head and bitten by snakes), but they don't have any meaning, except the meaning that you had better not expect much in this life because the brute irrationality of it all is always waiting to smack you in the face. This is what happens to Mattie at the very instant of her apparent triumph as she shoots Tom Chaney, her father's killer, in the head. The recoil of the gun propels her backwards and she falls into a snake-infested pit. Years later, as the narrator of the novel, she recalls the moment and says: “I had forgotten about the pit behind me.” There is always a pit behind you and in front of you and to the side of you. That's just the way it is.

Reviewers have remarked that the new “True Grit” — bleak, violent, unrelenting — is just like “No Country for Old Men.” Yes it is, but not quite. “No Country for Old Men” is a movie I could barely stand seeing once. I watched “True Grit” twice in a single evening, not exactly happily (it's hardly a barrel of fun), but not in revulsion, either.

The reason is that while the Coens deprive us of the heroism Gagliasso and others look for, they give us a better heroism in the person of Mattie, who maintains the confidence of her convictions even when the world continues to provide no support for them. In the end, when she is a spinster with one arm who arrives too late to see Rooster once more, she remains as judgmental, single-minded and resolute as ever. She goes forward not because she has faith in a better worldly future — her last words to us are “Time just gets away from us” — but because she has faith in the righteousness of her path, a path that is sure (because it is not hers) despite the absence of external guideposts. That is the message Iris Dement proclaims at the movie's close when she sings “Leaning On the Everlasting Arms”: “Oh how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way / Leaning on the everlasting arms / Oh how bright the path goes from day to day / Leaning on the everlasting arms / What have I to dread what have I to fear / Leaning on the everlasting arms.”

The new “True Grit” is that rare thing — a truly religious movie. In the John Wayne version religiosity is just an occasional flourish not to be taken seriously. In this movie it is everything, not despite but because of its refusal to resolve or soften the dilemmas the narrative delivers up.