



Starring: Sean Penn, Tim Robbins (I), Kevin Bacon,
Emmy Rossum, Laura Linney, Laurence Fishburne

9 out of 10 stars

At the beginning of *Mystic River*, three boys are playing hockey in the middle of the street in a working-class Boston neighborhood, batting around a ball with their weatherbeaten hockey sticks. One of them, the goalie, socks the ball away from the other two, and all three watch as it rolls down the street, headed for a sewer grate. They see it going towards the gaping opening, they exclaim in protest, run after it, and even try to retrieve it from its murky depths. All the while, though, it's obvious that from the moment it slipped out of play, the ball was lost, forever. And they saw it get away, and they know they can't ever get it back.

Clint Eastwood's phenomenal *Mystic River* is basically an extended riff on this one simple sequence, as all the characters who inhabit this film's world watch something that they own and love inexorably slip out of their grasp again and again, powerless to change what fate seems to have predestined. Right after the three young boys' hockey game is prematurely ended by the lost ball, two of them watch the third drive off in the back of a car presumably driven by two cops. In reality, it's two pedophiles (one bearing a ring with a Catholic insignia) who've pressured and threatened the helpless youngster; the other two escape only because they happen to live close by. And as this sequence unfolds, you're painfully aware that the three boys know something is *not right* with these guys. Still, they can't change what's happening, only stand by and watch as their friend is taken away. It's as if they're adrift in the river of the title, consumed by natural forces stronger than anything man can change.

Those three hockey-playing boys are the center of *Mystic River*, even though years later as adults they've grown far apart in their close neighborhood. Dave (Tim Robbins), the molested victim who was held for four days before escaping from his captors, is a permanently shell-shocked husband and father who exists half the time in what looks like a private dream world. Sean (Kevin Bacon), the most gregarious of the three, is a police detective with a quick one-liner and a grim smile, whose professionalism hides a collapsing marriage. And Jimmy (Sean Penn), the troublemaker, is the crooked guy gone straight, who's opened up a neighborhood grocery store after doing time for robbery and has (almost) forsaken his mafia-like ties to the local crime world. What reunites these three is the brutal murder of Jimmy's 19 year-old daughter Katie (Emmy Rossum, luminous in her brief screen time), who was shot, chased, beaten and then shot again in a city park.

Jimmy is the grieving father, whose thoughts turn to vengeance almost immediately after seeing his daughter's body; Sean is the cop assigned to the case, trying to go against the grain of Jimmy's building need for vigilante justice; and Dave, on the night of the murder, returned home late with someone else's blood on his clothes and a barely coherent, very unbelievable explanation as to why.

Based on Dennis Lehane's novel, *Mystic River* mixes whodunit with a visceral, almost painful exploration of the lives of these three childhood friends. In the hands of less skillful filmmakers, this could have been just another trashy thriller, but as he did with *L.A. Confidential*, screenwriter Brian Helgeland deftly balances the plot mechanics with evocative character explorations and surprisingly complex dynamics. And Eastwood, with his typically laconic, thoughtful directorial style, delves deep into the histories of these characters with a surprising amount of precision and grace. If the trappings of the story, with its emphasis on violence and revenge, bring to mind his Oscar-winning *Unforgiven*, his care with his actors is reminiscent of both *A Perfect World* and even *The Bridges of Madison County*, where the director took his time to explore the nuances of each person on screen. Here, his work with his core cast, rounded out by Laurence Fishburne as Bacon's partner and Marcia Gay Harden and Laura Linney as the respective wives of Robbins and Penn, outdoes any of his previous movies. Even his brief handling of the family dynamics of Katie's lovestruck boyfriend (Tom Guiry) hint at ominous undercurrents and almost subterranean dysfunctions.

While both Robbins and Bacon do some of their best work here – Robbins' performance is a tour de force of physical acting, his body conveying ten times more than his words ever could – it's Penn who lifts this movie to stratospheric heights, bringing to mind the work of Al Pacino before Pacino leapt beyond operatic and into crazyland. Only one instance is given over to Penn's howling grief, and after that he becomes a pressure cooker of anger, zooming from overwhelming sorrow and misery to steely, assured vengeance in a matter of seconds. Instead of falling to overt "acting," Penn seems to emanate amazing vibrations that bounce off the other actors he works with, most effectively with Harden, who, as Robbins' fearful, timid wife, delivers the movie's second best performance. When these two come together (she's his wife's cousin, who finds more reasons than necessary to help Jimmy's grieving family), it seems as if there are volumes of unspoken feelings between the two, and a past together is hinted at but never fully explored; it's a perfect example of the wordless chemistry that just clicks between two actors.

Given the extraordinary performances of the cast – Fishburne easily makes up for years of bad movies with an effortlessly light turn as Bacon's line-smudging partner – it's easy to consider Laura Linney altogether wasted in this movie, given that she has only a handful of scenes, most of which are overshadowed by Penn.

However, it's near the very end of the movie, after violence has begotten more violence, that she delivers a powerful, lethal and strangely seductive last act speech that helps elevate the movie into the realm of true tragedy and gives it an almost Shakespearean dimension. As complex as the rest of the movie – her words make sense, but considering everything that's come before, they seem to invert our sense of right and wrong – the monologue is only a balm to stave off the anarchy and violence that will inevitably erupt again for these doomed people.

And like the families of *The Godfather* or even *King Lear*, these characters' lives are ruled by tragedy, with one fateful moment sending out endless ripples like a stone thrown into a pond. And as the characters try to make their way among a local parade at the very end of the film, the looks on their faces say something that most movies never do: this story is far from over, and will reverberate for a long, long time to come.

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