

film

Flags of Our Fathers

Unless every member of the academy gets a lobotomy, Clint Eastwood won't bring home a fresh batch of Oscars for this heavy-handed World War II drama that questions the veracity of the iconic photo of U.S. soldiers at Iwo Jima. The battles are riveting and horrifying, but most of the acting is flat, and the clumsily structured screenplay by William Broyles Jr. and Paul Haggis (*Crash*) whips us back in forth in time for no good reason. The cast includes Ryan Phillippe and Jamie Bell of *Billy Elliot* fame. **C-**

—Stephen Blair

Flicka

Growing up watching the black-and-white television series *My Friend Flicka*, who didn't want to have a horse like Flicka, *Fury* or *Black Beauty*? I am always skeptical when a movie comes out ages after a classic show goes off the air, but this moving, heartwarming drama by director Michael Mayer (*A Home at the End of the World*) is really nicely done and great family entertainment for all ages. Country singer (and, I guess for a while now, actor) Tim McGraw stars as a man whose daughter (Alison Lohman) adopts a wild horse as her own and tries to tame it, thereby proving to him that she can take over the family ranch one day. Great cinematography beautifully filmed in Wyoming. **B**

—Yvonne P. Behrens

A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints

Winner of a Special Jury Prize for best ensemble at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, this autobiographical film by Dito Montiel features heartfelt performances by Robert Downey Jr., Dianne Wiest, Chazz Palminteri and several teenage talents. But the strong acting can't overcome the rambling, depressing story about children coming of age violently in Queens in the 1980s. The lengthy flashbacks play like a wimpy rip-off of Larry Clark's *Kids*, and the present-day sequences are nauseatingly overearnest. **C**

—SB

The Grudge 2

This dull sequel to an only-slightly-less-dull first film repeats the formula to poor effect. The only scares come from the soundtrack, as we get more octopus-ink-hair, white ghost child, herky-jerky ghost girl and dark pools of water. This time, they're bedeviling Amber Tamblyn, playing the sister of cameoing Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Tokyo*.

A seemingly unrelated story takes place in the United States, setting up the inevitable *The Grudge 3*. I seem to have caught the "rage" prevalent in the film; I want to haunt the filmmakers till they stop making these plodding "atmospheric" Japanese remakes. **C-**

—Andy Mangels

Marie Antoinette

After scoring high marks with *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*, Sofia Coppola takes a wrong turn with this biopic starring Kirsten Dunst as the notorious queen of France. The period costumes and the decadent sets are breathtaking, and the anachronistic use of modern rock music is infectious for the most part. But Coppola's script lacks a compelling central storyline, and the vapid dialogue makes it impossible for Dunst and the talented supporting cast to project anything but stupidity. This is history for dummies, but do see it if you're in the mood for an extraordinary fashion show. **C+**

—SB

The Queen

Stephen Frears (*The Grifters*) directed this startling dramatization of the royal family's muted reaction to the 1997 death of Princess Diana. (Prince Philip, played by James Cromwell, sniffs that the funeral guest list is "a chorus line of soap stars and homosexuals.") The film works not because of the tabloid fodder—although the juicy behind-the-scenes speculation certainly helps—but thanks to its balanced take on the modern-day relevancy of the monarchy. Helen Mirren delivers a restrained, authentic, Oscar-worthy performance as the title prig. Opens Oct. 27. **A**

—Jim Radosta

Running with Scissors

Fasten your seatbelts, ladies! This year's race for the Best Actress Oscar is going to be a tight one.

The buzz has it that Helen Mirren reigns supreme in *The Queen*, Penélope Cruz sizzles in



A mentally ill woman (Annette Bening) sends her gay teenage son (Joseph Cross) off to live with a highly unorthodox psychiatrist in *Running with Scissors*.

Volter and Cate Blanchett rocks *The Good German*. Now Annette Bening enters the ring with her brilliant turn as a mentally ill mother in the long-awaited film adaptation of Augusten Burroughs' memoir *Running with Scissors*, opening Oct. 27.

As Deirdre, Burroughs' mom, Bening undergoes radical and completely convincing mood shifts, crackling with grandiose manic glee in some scenes and slumping into blank-eyed catatonic depressions in others. And though the memoir is perhaps best known for the gay relationship between a teenage Burroughs and a man 20 years his senior, writer/director Ryan Murphy gives ample attention to the lesbian relationships Deirdre conducts after she divorces her slimeball alcoholic husband (Alec Baldwin).

Bening's performance is undoubtedly the highlight of the film, which is entertaining and generally faithful to the book. But the script is hampered by an inconsistent tone that clumsily transitions from zany humor to pathos, and the upbeat ending feels trite after we've spent two hours coming to terms with the inevitability of emotional suffering.

For the handful of you who are not familiar with the memoir, *Running with Scissors* documents Burroughs' relationship with his unstable mom and her unilateral decision to send him off to live with a highly unorthodox psychiatrist (Brian Cox), his dog-food-eating wife (Jill Clayburgh), his daughters

(Gwyneth Paltrow and Evan Rachel Wood) and an adopted schizophrenic son (Joseph Fiennes) who practices statutory rape on Burroughs.

The "way too weird to be true" flavor of the story raises questions as to whether Burroughs pulled a James Frey and elaborated on some of his material. In fact, the Massachusetts family on which he based these characters claims he's full of crap, and in 2005 they slapped a defamation-of-character lawsuit on him.

Twenty-year-old actor Joseph Cross looks boyish enough to portray Burroughs in his early teens. In early scenes his delivery is wooden, but by the film's end he effectively conveys the rage and confusion that anyone in his shoes would feel. **B+**

—SB

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning

It sometimes seems a little odd to call a film filled with torture and grisly goo "enjoyable," but the best "splatter films" have some jumps, characters you want to see live, characters you want to see die and a tone that should induce squirming and butt-cheek-clenching. TCM:TB has all of those, plus a lot of tied-up shirtless hunks waiting to be victims. It's the story of a man named Leatherface, and how he came to be the killer of a thousand sequels. And your butt will clench. **B-**

—AM [10]

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