

Oscar Picks 2009!

by Joe Mulder

Hey, kids! It's that time of year again. Time for the glorious Onebee.com Oscar pool, time for my 5th annual Oscar picks column (previous incarnations have appeared on various websites) and, to a lesser extent, time for the 81st Annual Academy Awards. [You can also read [Jameson's picks](#).]

Sure, my picks have fallen short in recent years. Back around the turn of the century I was red hot, could do no wrong, would win every Oscar pool I entered; lately I've been struggling, bringing up questions as to whether the Oscar-predicting game has passed me by. This year, however, I return to greatness and show you all that I'm as good as I've ever been... just think of me as the Kurt Warner of Oscar picks. Sort of. But, like, if the Cardinals had managed to win the Super Bowl.

Like I do every year, let me cut-and-paste what I wrote back in 2005 to tell you how this particular column works:

Please note: these are my [PoopReading.com] predictions, not to be confused with my all-important picks in [PoopReading.com co-contributor] Jameson Simmons' Onebee.com Oscar pool (aka "The Only Reason At All I Still Pay Any Attention to the Oscars"). I reserve the right to refine my choices for Jameson's until late Sunday afternoon.

And, may I add, I'm telling you who *will* win, not who *should* win.

Here we go...

BEST PICTURE

Winner:

Slumdog Millionaire

Other Nominees:

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
Frost/Nixon
Milk
The Reader

Best Picture is usually a pretty easy category to predict (I recall being surprised by this category only twice during my Oscar-following career, when *Shakespeare in Love* beat *Saving Private Ryan* and when *Crash* beat *Brokeback Mountain*), and this year's race should be no exception. *Slumdog Millionaire* has won just about every award it's been up for and is a prohibitive favorite here, and why not? It's a marvelous, rapturous film that hooks you early and never lets up, a modern fairy tale in which the stakes are no less than a most idealized form of pure, true love. *Slumdog*

Millionaire, in short, is why we *have* movies.

I really liked *Frost/Nixon*, but didn't think it was quite in *Slumdog's* league. Which is okay; not many movies are (for those who are curious, *Frost/Nixon* was my personal third best movie of the year, behind *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Wrestler*).

Milk and *The Reader* I didn't get to, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* I had my wife see with her girlfriend instead of with me. Based on what I've heard from various sources, that was either a missed opportunity or a bullet dodged on my part.

BEST DIRECTOR

Winner:

Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*

Other Nominees:

Stephen Daldry, *The Reader*
David Fincher, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*
Ron Howard, *Frost/Nixon*
Gus Van Sant, *Milk*

While some hold out hope for a Best Picture upset from *Milk* (though I wouldn't bet on it), Danny Boyle for Best Director seems to be the biggest sure thing this side of Heath Ledger. You know where I stand on *Slumdog*; I hope Danny Boyle wins, too.

It should be noted that, for years, Best Picture and Best Director tended almost always to match up. Then we had a stretch where they split three times out of five years (Steven Spielberg, Steven Soderbergh and Roman Polanski each won without directing a Best Picture). Recently, however, they've started to match up again, as they have four out of the last five years; expect that trend to continue.

BEST ACTOR

Winner:

Mickey Rourke, *The Wrestler*

Other Nominees:

Richard Jenkins, *The Visitor*
Frank Langella, *Frost/Nixon*
Sean Penn, *Milk*
Brad Pitt, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Every year there's one I just can't settle on; this year it's Best Actor. My issue here is that I saw *The Wrestler* and didn't see *Milk*, which skews things for me a bit. I can't imagine anyone not being blown away by Mickey Rourke's turn in *The*

Wrestler; I found it to be a one-of-a-kind, once-in-a-decade performance, the caliber of which I had not seen on film since Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* almost ten years ago.

The problem is that plenty of people who saw and loved *Milk* seem to believe that Sean Penn was just as good in that. So who knows? It's too darn close to call. Consider:

Nate Silver, that baseball stat whiz who also famously predicted the 2008 presidential election more accurately than anyone, gives Mickey Rourke a 71.1% chance of winning, vs. 19% for Sean Penn. Why such a big gap when most feel the race is a dead heat? "Once someone's won an award before," Silver recently said on "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," "they become much less likely to win a second time." Furthermore, in a *New York Magazine* piece this week, Silver writes that "If an actor... has been nominated several times without nabbing a statue, his odds of winning increase. Once he does win, odds go way down." Silver based his analysis on the past 30 years of Oscar voting. Looking back throughout the entirety of Oscar history, however, I discovered something else: of the 19 men who have won two or more acting Oscars, eight of them won their second Oscar the very next time they were nominated following their initial win. In other words: sure, if you won one acting Oscar you're statistically unlikely ever to win a second. If, however, you *are* going to win a second one, there's a 42% chance you'll win the very next time you're nominated. This is Sean Penn's first nomination since he won a few years ago for *Mystic River*, and I think we can all agree he's the type of guy who eventually winds up with at least two Oscars, so I say we've got to give him at least 42% odds.

Entertainment Weekly, pretty much the be-all and end-all of Oscar picking (in terms of what people look at to make their own picks, if not necessarily in terms of accuracy), says it's Sean Penn 33%, Mickey Rourke 32%. Now, clearly, those numbers aren't scientific like Nate Silver's; they're just made up. They want to pick Sean Penn, but if Mickey Rourke wins they want to be able to say, "See, we said Mickey Rourke could win just as easily." And I can't say I blame them. Still, *EW* picks Sean Penn, as do two of the three actual Oscar voters they polled (the third hadn't made up her mind between the two, clearly preferred Penn's performance, but wanted to see Rourke win because of his "personal story." And, I mean, come on, anonymous *Entertainment Weekly* lady: at least *pretend* that you're basing your Best Actor vote on who you actually thought did the best acting. Don't you sort of owe it to those of us who fill out Oscar pools not to blatantly admit otherwise in print?).

Sean Penn plays a gay civil rights activist in *Milk*; most Academy members undoubtedly live in California and undoubtedly opposed Proposition 8, a ballot measure last November whose passage restored the traditional definition of marriage to the state. Will Academy members, who work in one of the least important industries in the world (apart

from writing stuff for people to read while they're on the throne, I suppose), see rewarding Penn's performance as a chance to acknowledge an *actual* important contribution to the gay rights movement? In other words, could Sean Penn score a politically-motivated, *Fahrenheit 9/11*-type win (not that I mean to diminish his actual performance, which I've heard is more than deserving on its own merits)? In today's political climate, it's not unlikely.

Over at the indispensable AwardsDaily.com, they've posted their annual predictions roundup featuring, as I write this, the prognostications of 29 relative experts. 14 of them are picking Sean Penn, and 15 of them are picking Mickey Rourke.

AwardsDaily itself, as an entity, picks Sean Penn, although I'm not sure what metric they use; maybe it's just a certain selection of pre-Oscar awards.

So, how to decide? My brain says Sean Penn, my heart says Mickey Rourke (not literally, of course; if those two parts of my body somehow acquired the power of speech, and "Sean Penn" and "Mickey Rourke" were the respective things that each organ chose to say, I'd have way, *waaaaay* bigger concerns than not knowing who to pick for Best Actor).

I say Mickey Rourke, because if I pick Sean Penn and then Mickey Rourke wins, I'll be slightly bummed that I got the pick wrong. And I loved Mickey Rourke so much in *The Wrestler* that if he wins, I don't want to be bummed.

Any other year, Frank Langella might be a shoo-in for his portrayal of Richard Nixon, but this year he's unlikely to win.

Also, it's probably worth noting that as much as the Oscars love nominating actors who play Presidents, and as much as the Oscars love nominating actors who play the mentally handicapped, Josh Brolin somehow failed to score a Best Actor nomination for *W*.

(Note: I'm a Republican, but I'm not just going to leave that joke sitting there)

BEST ACTRESS

Winner: Kate Winslet, *The Reader*

Other Nominees:

Anne Hathaway, *Rachel Getting Married*

Angelina Jolie, *Changeling*

Melissa Leo, *Frozen River*

Meryl Streep, *I Appeared In a Movie This Year* – I mean, *Doubt*

Other than Angelina Jolie, anybody could win this category and I wouldn't be completely, completely shocked. It was a

particularly strong Best Actress year; the preferred choice of a lot of your movie geek and film critic types, Sally Hawkins in *Happy-Go-Lucky*, wasn't even nominated. Also, one gets the sense that if Oscar voting were done by hypothetical beings who knew how to evaluate cinema as well as anyone but somehow didn't know anything about Hollywood, or about previous Academy Awards years, or about any of the performers' offscreen lives or backstories, Anne Hathaway would win. But such beings do not vote for the Oscars, and it appears to be Kate Winslet's year.

BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

Winner: Heath Ledger, *The Dark Knight*

Other Nominees:

Josh Brolin, *Milk*

Robert Downey, Jr., *Tropic Thunder*

Philip Seymour Hoffman, *Doubt*

Michael Shannon, *Revolutionary Road*

To put it mildly, a win by anyone other than Heath Ledger would be the biggest Oscar shocker in recent memory.

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

Winner: Penelope Cruz, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*

Other Nominees:

Amy Adams, *Doubt*

Taraji P. Henson, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Viola Davis, *Doubt*

Marisa Tomei, *The Wrestler*

This category almost seems wide-open, since just about everyone was surprised when *The Reader's* Kate Winslet was nominated for Best Actress instead; she had won a number of critics' accolades – as well as the Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild awards – in the Best Supporting Actress category, but the Oscars considered it a lead role. Everybody was all ready to induct Meryl Streep into the all-time greats pantheon with a third Oscar (not that there's anybody who doesn't already think Meryl Streep is an all-time great) and finally give Winslet her first win; now nobody's sure what to do. I almost think there's a poor village in some third-world country somewhere in which you'd find the locals wearing donated "Kate Winslet, Best Supporting Actress 2008" t-shirts right alongside their "Tampa Bay Devil Rays World Champs" and "Patriots 19-0" duds.

So who will take it? Once again *Entertainment Weekly* gives us the ol' 33%-32% routine, this time with predicted winner Penelope Cruz and runner-up Viola Davis. Almost nobody else seems to think Davis has a chance, however, at least according to AwardsDaily.com's predictions roundup. Nate Silver's numbers chose early front-runner Taraji P. Henson,

though even Silver himself said on "Olbermann" that he doesn't think that's going to happen.

So why not just pick the hot chick, then? I mean, four out of the five nominees in this category this year are indisputably hot chicks, and there's certainly nothing wrong with the way Viola Davis looks, but when you're talking Penelope Cruz you're talking about a different level altogether. And, lately, Best Supporting Actress has been where hot chicks go to get their Oscars. Last year Tilda Swinton won, and I'm sure there's a certain contingent out there who considers her very hot indeed. Before that it was Jennifer Hudson, and if you'd like to make the case that she's not a hot chick, feel free. In fact, why don't you go tell that to President Obama right now, during Black History Month?

(Yeah. I thought so)

Before that came Rachel Weisz, Cate Blanchett, Renee Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Jennifer Connelly, Marcia Gay Harden (quite a looker herself, she upset Kate Hudson in *Almost Famous*) and Angelina Jolie.

Look: I realize that Best Actress boasts a recent string of hot chick winners just as impressive, if not more so. Give me a break; we all expected Kate Winslet to win this category, and when she didn't get nominated we all had to scramble. I made up my mind to pick Penelope Cruz because the buzz seems to be going her way, I needed an angle, and I picked "hot chicks." So sue me. I could also have gone with "When in doubt, don't bet on the American," since foreigners won all four of last year's acting awards, but I went with "hot chicks" and I'm glad I did.

BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

Winner:

Dustin Lance Black, *Milk*

Other Nominees:

Courtney Hunt, *Frozen River*

Mike Leigh, *Happy-Go-Lucky*

Martin McDonagh, *In Bruges*

Andrew Stanton, Jim Reardon, Pete Docter, *WALL-E*

Quietly one of the most competitive races of the night; anybody could win. Realistically, though, it comes down to *WALL-E* and *Milk*. The screenplay categories, as I annually point out, often serve as something of a consolation prize for Best Picture, and since the Academy clearly isn't interested in letting an animated movie anywhere hear Best Picture, *Milk* is the pick here.

BEST ADAPTED SCREENPLAY

Winner:

POOP READING

Simon Beaufoy, *Slumdog Millionaire*

Other Nominees:

Eric Roth, Robin Swicord, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

John Patrick Shanley, *Doubt*

Peter Morgan, *Frost/Nixon*

David Hare, *The Reader*

It'll likely be *Slumdog's* night; may as well pick it to win all the major awards it's nominated for.

BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM

Winner:

Waltz With Bashir, Israel

Other Nominees:

The Baader Meinhof Complex, Germany

The Class, France

Departures, Japan

Revanche, Austria

For reasons unknown to me, a good rule of thumb for predicting this category has been that if I've heard of one of these movies independently of the fact that it was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film, then that movie won't win. Don't ask me why it always ends up that way; it just does. This year, though, we're going to buck the trend with *Waltz With Bashir*. I heard of *Waltz With Bashir*, an animated war documentary, months ago, and I heard raves. Raves upon raves, in fact. The people from whom AwardsDaily collects their predictions must have heard the same raves; it's the overwhelming favorite over there, even though *Entertainment Weekly* picks *The Class*.

Now let's plow through the pee-break categories, shall we? Again, 2005 Joe will explain how this works:

For the major categories, I'll give you my analysis; for the others, I'll just tell you who *Entertainment Weekly* says is going to win (that's what everybody does anyway. Like you've got any clue about Best Documentary Short).

If I disagree with an *EW* pick I'll let you know that's what I'm doing, so you can go against them and with me at your peril.

BEST EDITING: Chris Dickens, *Slumdog Millionaire*. Editing often matches up with Best Picture, and really qualifies as a mid-major award. If it's to be *Slumdog's* night, then *Slumdog* will take editing.

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY: Anthony Dod Mantle, *Slumdog Millionaire*. In Oscar picks columns past, I've always pointed out that Best Cinematography could just as well be called "Most Sweeping Shots of the Outdoors," and then I've listed the past several winners to prove my point. My regular reader(s?) are no doubt tired of that line by now, so I hereby introduce a new one, to be used in the Best Cinematography section of my Oscar picks column for the next few years at least:

"Not to minimize _____'s talent and accomplishments, all of which are undoubtedly impressive, but even I could point a movie camera at _____ and win Best Cinematography."

Let's try that out for a spin:

"Not to minimize Anthony Dod Mantle's talent and accomplishments, all of which are undoubtedly impressive, but even I could point a movie camera at the Taj Mahal and win Best Cinematography."

Yep; I like it. That one's a keeper. See you next year, unnecessarily glib remark about a person I've never met.

BEST ART DIRECTION: Donald Graham Burt, Victor J. Zolfo, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. I didn't see *Benjamin Button*, you'll remember, but it seems like it's Oscary enough that it has to take home *some* Oscars, right?

BEST ORIGINAL SCORE: A.R. Rahman, *Slumdog Millionaire*. "Score" another Oscar win for *Slumdog*, everybody!

(Sorry; don't worry, we're almost done)

BEST ORIGINAL SONG: "Jai Ho" from *Slumdog Millionaire*, music by A.R. Rahman, lyrics by Sampooran Singh Gulzar. If another year passes without Sampooran Singh Gulzar winning an Academy Award, I just don't know what I'll do.

BEST COSTUME DESIGN: Michael O'Connor, *The Dutchess*. Okay, *Entertainment Weekly*. It's not like I'm going to argue with you on this one.

BEST MAKEUP: Greg Cannom, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Greg Cannom probably could have won this award for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button's* trailer alone; opinions of the film may vary, but opinions of the makeup are glowing.

SOUND EDITING: Richard King, *The Dark Knight*.

SOUND MIXING: Lora Hirschberg, Gary Rizzo, Ed Novick, *The Dark Knight*. If the loudest movie of the year was also the one that made the most money, then the sound categories are pretty easy to predict.

POOP READING

VISUAL EFFECTS: Eric Barba, Steve Preeg, Burt Dalton, Craig Barron, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Next year, Hollywood, please give your big, sweeping, expensive Oscar-bait epic a shorter title. Those of us who type out Oscar prediction columns will greatly appreciate it.

BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE: *Man on Wire*. Best Foreign Film rules generally apply (if I've heard of the movie, it won't win the Oscar), but, just like in the Foreign category, we're switching that up this year. People can't say enough good stuff about *Man on Wire*. *Trouble the Water* could play spoiler, however.

BEST DOCUMENTARY SHORT: *The Witness – From the Balcony of Room 306*. While you're spending the last week of Black History Month telling President Obama you don't think Jennifer Hudson is hot, you can also tell him you don't think this documentary about the Martin Luther King, Jr. assassination will win an Oscar.

(Yeah. I thought so)

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE: *WALL-E*. Usually in this category it's a Pixar offering and then two much lesser movies that don't have any chance to win. This year, it's a Pixar offering and then *Bolt* and *Kung Fu Panda*, two very excellent movies... that don't have any chance to win.

By the way: now that I have little kids, expect me to become one of the world's leading experts on the Best Animated Feature race. I saw 16 movies in the theater this year, and three of them were this category's three nominees.

BEST ANIMATED SHORT: *Presto*. *Presto* screened right before *WALL-E*; I missed some of it because of a diaper situation, but what I saw of it was absolutely hilarious.

BEST LIVE-ACTION SHORT: *Spielzugland (Toyland)*. Apparently it's about the Holocaust; that subject does well at the Oscars.

And that, my friends, is all she wrote.

Well, all *I* wrote, anyway.
