

The Five-Year Oscar Rule: Best Picture, 2003

by Brandon Kruse, Joe Mulder, Jameson Simmons, & Mike Wagner

When it comes to selecting the players and coaches that are eligible for induction into their respective Halls of Fame, the three major sports – baseball, basketball and football – all require candidates to be retired from the game for a period of five years. (Hockey only requires three years for induction to its Hall of Fame, but who cares about hockey? Am I right, ladies?) The theory behind this waiting period is that it gives the voters time to put a candidate's career into proper perspective, to filter out any hype and other assorted noise. Ideally, this leads to smarter decision-making (though in the case of the Baseball Hall of Fame: not always true).

PoopReading.com co-creator Joe Mulder has long argued that a similar waiting period should be used for the Academy Awards; over the years, this has come to be known simply as "The Five-Year Oscar Rule." If any voting process would benefit from time, perspective, and reduced hype, it's the Oscars. After all, the sporting leagues all have stats to aid their assessments; with the Oscars, it's largely subjective judgement, often fueled by ridiculous political machinations behind the scenes. So today we'd like to look back five years at the Best Picture category for 2003, and discuss what the Academy got right, and more importantly, what they got wrong.

JAMESON: Fascinating. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* actually does fine on the five-year test (its cultural staying power is undiminished), but it was still the wrong Best Picture. It's the kind of movie that belongs in the Best Sound Editing category and that's it. I'm on shaky ground here, because I generally defend *Titanic's* Best Picture win, but I think *Titanic* had more on offer than *The Return of the King* (except in the screenplay department) and seemed a lot less like a kids' fantasy romp (e.g., *Narnia*, *Spiderwick*, etc.). As a worldwide mega-event, LOTR deserves every dollar it made off its multiple special-edition 19-disc DVD sets – but popular movies can be popular and still not win Best Picture. In fact, there's normally an unwritten rule to that effect.

Five years later, its co-nominees fare even worse. Who ever talks about the cinematic watershed of the *Master and Commander* movie? I personally adored *Lost in Translation* but it deserved to take Best Director from LOTR, not Best Picture. And *Seabiscuit*? Clearly that was just there to fill out the category. Finally, there's *Mystic River*. Here it gets interesting: if the question is, which pick would've been more appropriate to Oscar's legacy, I think we have to say *Mystic River* in deference to that dour, misguided legacy (subsequent winners were *Million Dollar Baby* [*Mystic River* in a boxing ring] and *Crash* [*Mystic River* among racist Los Angelenos]). If the question is, which pick would've been correct, it's hard to do better than *Finding Nemo*. It was the

best movie I saw in 2003, and I'd put it up against any of these nominees five years later. Plus, more Best Picture winners should have Albert Brooks in them.

JOE: More? Try ALL!

BRANDON: I'm with you on the idea that *Finding Nemo* deserved more Oscar love, rather than just being relegated to the Best Animated Feature kids' table. Great story with a smart, heartfelt and relevant theme, and a performance (Ellen DeGeneres) that people raved about – isn't that exactly what the Academy looks for in a Best Picture candidate?

But I think you're being waaaay too hard on *Seabiscuit*. It was another in a long line of top-notch Gary Ross screenplays (*Big*, *Dave*, *Pleasantville*), and I think it was a worthy heir to the history of well-crafted sports movies (*Rocky*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Field of Dreams*) that have been nominated for Best Picture. Plus, I'm going to argue that *Seabiscuit* is the movie that pushed Elizabeth Banks into the public eye, and I know no one here wants to risk any travel-back-in-time-and-change-the-future mishaps that would result in taking Elizabeth Banks away from us just by removing *Seabiscuit* from the list of nominees.

Master and Commander deserves whatever bad things anyone wants to say about. Its nomination was clearly the last gasp of the Academy infatuation with Russell Crowe that ended shortly after, once Crowe started throwing phones at people. If there's one thing the Academy won't tolerate, it's throwing phones at people (you hear that, Marcia Gay Harden?).

MIKE: I just don't see the appeal of *Lord of the Rings*. If I made a documentary out of that facebook thread "10 Things I'm Just Not That Into," three of them would be the *Lord of the Rings* movies and three more would be the *Lord of the Rings* books. The other four, of course, are Ted McGinley sitcom vehicles. But, since I never saw any of the movies and only read one of the books, I'm willing to let the *Return of the King's* victory slide. What I will not abide, Jameson, is a trashing of *Seabiscuit*. Need I remind you that Jeff Bridges, America's least appreciated totally awesome actor, was phenomenal in the movie? All hail the Dude! Of course, as others have noted, *Seabiscuit* gives us Elizabeth Banks's career trajectory.

JOE: I'm willing to jump on the "Jameson's being too hard on *Seabiscuit*" train; I thought it was fine. Standard Best Picture fare, but fine.

I didn't care for *Lost In Translation*, although I can't possibly argue against anything that gets Bill Murray an Oscar nomination.

Master and Commander and *Mystic River* I never saw, and I just never really got into *Lord of the Rings*. It's just not my thing. I won't trash it too much because it's not really fair for

me to review a movie from a genre I'm almost certain not to like, but, I will say that I don't think *Return of the King* stood particularly well on its own. I saw the first two movies, and still, during the third, I pretty much sat there like Homer Simpson the whole time ("Who's that guy? What did that guy say when I said, 'Who's that guy?'").

And we can all agree that *Finding Nemo* should have won 2003's Best Picture, right? Right.

That said, here's a partial list of other movies from 2003 that probably would look fine as a Best Picture nominee five years out. It is by no means a comprehensive list; some of the movies on here I haven't seen, and one of them (*Big Fish*) I disliked intensely. But this is not necessarily about what I think. Here we go:

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl
The School of Rock (I'll fistfight anyone who disagrees with me on that one; I really will)
Big Fish
Love Actually
Monster
A Mighty Wind
In America
House of Sand and Fog
The Station Agent
City of God

So, I think, based on what we know five years later, and remembering that I'm trying to leave my personal tastes out of it, my 2003 Best Picture nominees would have been:

Big Fish
Finding Nemo
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (even in my own little world, I can't make a legitimate case for keeping it off the list)
Lost In Translation

A much better-looking group than what they came up with five years ago, I'd say.

BRANDON: I don't think you need to go there with *Big Fish*; critics weren't that fond of it (it got a 57 composite score on Metacritic), and while critical praise is not the end-all, be-all of any movie's Oscar-worthiness, I think it's at least a decent barometer (for reference sake, some other Metacritic scores of note: *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* 94, *Lost in Translation* 89, *Finding Nemo* 89). And frankly, five years later, is anybody talking about *Big Fish*? Anybody?

JAMESON: Jesus, to hear you guys talk, there must be an annual SeabiscuitFest somewhere in Kentucky with people dressing up as all manner of obscure references from the movie. I take back everything I ever said! I never would've thought we'd still be talking about *Seabiscuit* five years on,

especially since I don't think I've heard anyone mention once in the interim. I withdraw my criticism. I hadn't seen it, and I completely forgot to factor in the time-travel ripple effect of taking even one Elizabeth Banks movie out of circulation.

In a perfect world in which the Academy appreciated fun or funny movies, it sure would be great to see a line-up like:

Finding Nemo
House of Sand and Fog
Lost in Translation
A Mighty Wind
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl

In the real world, though, *Pirates* and *A Mighty Wind* don't stand a chance. (*Nemo* either, these days. It seems we won't see another *Beauty and the Beast* so long as the Animated Feature category still exists, but that tirade is best reserved for our retrospective on how various dipshit AMPAS rules hold up years later.)

BRANDON: At the risk of incurring Jameson's wrath, I'd like to submit one other movie that I think deserved a Best Picture nomination: *American Splendor*. 90 Metacritic score and well-received by audiences (except Jameson), with strong central performances by Paul Giamatti and Hope Davis – I don't get why it got no love from the Academy, it seems right up their alley.

JOE: I'll concede to *American Splendor* over *Big Fish*; it had been my impression that everybody went absolutely apeshit over *Big Fish*, and if that's not the case, then I'll withdraw my support for it (cheerfully, since I personally thought it was a steaming turd). I haven't seen *American Splendor*, but I can say without hesitation that I have no doubt I would think it was better than *Big Fish*.

In fact, I've seen the poster for *American Splendor*, and I would absolutely rather stare at that for two hours than watch *Big Fish* again.

(Not to be too harsh; but as I've discussed elsewhere, I simply don't like post-*Ed Wood* Tim Burton movies. At all. Not my fault, maybe not even Tim Burton's fault; I really just don't like them for whatever reason.)

JAMESON: Hm, I think *House of Sand and Fog* was a better movie than *American Splendor* and *Big Fish* put together, though I realize its 71 Metascore is lower than the 90 *Splendor* got. (Stupid aggregated critics, with their aggregated stupidity!) Both are depressing, but at the end of *House of Sand and Fog* I cared about things and felt ways about stuff. At the end of *American Splendor* I just wanted to take the DVD out of the player, smash it into tiny pieces, and yell at it. I never cared about anyone in it; I just hated them and got completely enveloped by their misery.

Which is the kind of shit critics love in a movie: bleak

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despair. So, I'd say that accounts for at least 19 undeserved Metapoints right there. I agree *Big Fish* (which I didn't hate) should be cut from the nominees list, but I'm not convinced there's nothing better to take its place than *American Splendor*. Though more Best Picture nominees should have Judah Friedlander in them.

JOE: More? Try THE LION'S SHARE!

(If only because I'm not sure how we'd work him into *Slumdog*. Albert Brooks at least could have played the husband from that American tourist couple; not sure Friedlander could have pulled that off. Although seeing him in a trucker hat with the words "AMERICAN TOURIST" ironed onto it would have been interesting.)

JAMESON: I'd have paid to see Judah Friedlander in a trucker hat with "GAME SHOW HOST" ironed onto it sitting across the screen from Dev Patel the whole time. Or, a hat reading "MEAN VILLAIN" keeping Freida Pinto captive in his gangland mansion (which is essentially what they had, they may have well have let Friedlander wear the hat).

BRANDON: I'm on board with this as well. In fact, while we're putting Albert Brooks and Judah Friedlander in every Best Picture nominee, let's get them together as father and son for a separate movie that will clearly receive 105 Oscar nominations while curing cancer.

JOE: Also, I'd support *House of Sand and Fog* over *American Splendor*, because I've seen the former and, indeed, it made me feel ways about stuff. Particularly the part where we got to see Jennifer Connelly's boobs. That was the next best thing to having been able to see them in *Career Opportunities*, which, in one of the bigger tragedies of the 20th century, we did not.

Sorry to sound like such a pig, folks, but, come on. Jennifer Connelly. Topless. What sort of person would I be if I let that go unremarked upon?

So our final list of 2003 Best Picture Nominees is:

Finding Nemo
The House of Sand and Fog
The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King
Lost in Translation
Seabiscuit

And the Oscar goes to...

Finding Nemo

Thank you and good night!