

## Jeff Nichols's 'Mud' Will Cause Cinephiles' Hearts to Swell

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when one falls in love with a movie. Other times, it's as effortless and intuitive as the day one stumbles upon a soul mate. That moment struck me like a bolt of lightning early on in Jeff Nichols's "Mud," the most richly satisfying and purely enjoyable moviegoing experience I've had thus far in 2013.

An Arkansas teen, Ellis (Tye Sheridan), witnesses an older boy aggressively hitting on a pretty girl across the street. Her resistance only intensifies his advances, thus inspiring the perturbed Ellis to swiftly cross the street and punch the brute squarely in the face. This sort of scenario would normally lead to a fistfight, but in this case, the offender realizes he's been owned and sheepishly fades into the crowd of his stunned peers. No macho action set-piece in any recent Hollywood blockbuster comes close to matching the badass euphoria of this scene.

Of course, there are at least a thousand ways in which it could've rung false. Not many young actors could pull off this scene without cloaking themselves in artificial posturing, but Mr. Sheridan is a special case indeed. He made his debut a mere two years ago in Terrence Malick's masterpiece, "The Tree of Life," in which he played the youngest of Brad Pitt's sons. Whether that experience taught him how to appear naturalistic on camera is anyone's guess, though it certainly couldn't have hurt. What is inarguable is Sheridan's gift for being wholly authentic in situations where many of his peers would resort to actorly tricks. There isn't a frame in which Sheridan appears to be forcing emotion, and the same can be said of his co-star, newcomer Jacob Lofland (evoking the look of "Stand by Me"-era River Phoenix), who sports wicked comic timing in the role of Ellis's loyal friend, Neckbone. Both of these fresh-faced performers grew up in the South and their comfort in outdoor physical activities—such as fishing and dirt bike riding—is a major plus, but that doesn't translate to having a commanding screen presence. Sheridan and Lofland embody the sort of rugged, self-assured, morally grounded masculinity that died somewhere during the steroid-induced era of '80s excess. These kids don't need to put up a false front in order to project fierce inner strength. No wonder the horndog didn't bother punching back.



Tye Sheridan, Jacob Lofland and Matthew McConaughey star in Jeff Nichols's *Mud*.

*Photo credit: Roadside Attractions*

Though Nichols's film, his third effort as writer and director, takes the form of a coming-of-age yarn, it is more about the evolution of the human heart. Rare is the American film that explores love through a male perspective that isn't primarily fixated on sex. First heartbreak is a pivotal moment in one's life regardless of gender, and the way in which we deal with it defines much of who we will become. For the sinewy fugitive dubbed Mud, played with Newman-esque magnetism by Matthew McConaughey, a misguided relationship has stalled his life into utter stagnation. The boat wedged in the branches of a tree on the island where Mud secretly resides, a startling sight apparently caused by floodwaters (the sort Michael Shannon undoubtedly envisioned in Nichols's "Take Shelter"), is emblematic of the grown man's own failure to launch. For a while, Mud lives off the generosity of Ellis and Neckbone, who discover his hide-out and become alternately fascinated and repelled by his mysterious past. After an enraged act of passion left him a hunted man, Mud's sole desire is to reconnect with his longtime flame, Juniper (Reese Witherspoon), the woman he's sworn to protect at all costs. Ellis is taken with Mud's idealistic beliefs about romance, especially since he's had his first taste of puppy love, but such expectations inevitably set himself up for a rude awakening.

Some critics have complained that the women in "Mud" lack three dimensions, and that's certainly how they're perceived by many of the men in the film, who warn their sons about feminine deception and betrayal. Yet Nichols potently illustrates how the worldview of these embittered souls is hopelessly arrested. One of the best scenes in the film takes place during a fiery altercation between Ellis's parents over the future of their houseboat. When the boy's father (Ray McKinnon) accuses the mother (Sarah Paulson) of conspiring to literally sink his way of life, she counters that he's done nothing to support his own livelihood and she's earned the right to pursue her own dreams. Loss is perhaps the most difficult thing one could ever be asked to embrace, but the change that it brings often proves to reap its own rewards. "Mud" is one of the most touching allegories in recent memory about the need to forge ahead in life and break the ties guaranteed to limit one's growth. It is clear-eyed, wise and romantic to its very core. It also happens to be one hell of a nail-biting adventure.





Tye Sheridan, Matthew McConaughey and Jacob Lofland star in Jeff Nichols's Mud.  
Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Though Nichols's portrayal of the South is heavily influenced by Mark Twain (the cross in the heel of Mud's boot is a direct homage to "Huckleberry Finn"), he's adamant about avoiding the small town stereotypes that permeate American pop culture. Adam Stone's majestic widescreen cinematography brings a remarkable level of depth and intrigue to the world observed with wonder and curiosity by the two young boys, while hinting at the mysteries that lie just beyond the frame. After sporting a great deal of promise in his previous two pictures, this is the film where Nichols has solidified his status as one of modern cinema's most sublime storytellers. Some cynics will undoubtedly gripe about the ending, but I found it to be perfectly in step with everything that came before. Here is a picture that leaves you high on the pleasure of redemption, the power of exquisite craftsmanship, and the unlimited possibilities of life itself.

*'Mud' stars Matthew McConaughey, Tye Sheridan, Jacob Lofland, Reese Witherspoon, Sam Shepard, Ray McKinnon, Sarah Paulson, Paul Sparks, Joe Don Baker and Michael Shannon. It was written and directed by Jeff Nichols. It opens in local theaters on April 26th, 2013. It is rated PG-13.*

*Matt Fagerholm will discuss 'Mud' along with other new releases on Vocolo radio's Morning AMp show Friday, April 26th, at 9:30am CST. Tune in here: <http://www.wbez.org/player>.*



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]  
Staff Writer  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

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