

# Knockout punch

Christian Bale is the beating heart of 'The Fighter', says MATTHEW RODGERS

**The Fighter (15)**

Director: David O. Russell  
Cast: Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Melissa Leo  
Runtime: 115 mins

The undisputed champ will always be Rocky. There's no point in comparisons or featherweight challengers to this statement. In fact it might be helpful not to think of *I Heart Huckabees* director David O. Russell's grimy little biopic as your typical sports movie, because it isn't. Sure, it follows the clichéd trials and tribulations of a "one last shot" boxer, but aside from the montage heavy finale, this is first and foremost a character piece of the very highest order. It's a gritty examination of working class America and the pressures applied by the fading notion of The American Dream.

With a set-up that makes *Shameless* seem middle-class, we are plunged documentary style (but thankfully only for the first 10 minutes) into the life of Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg) and his assorted family. There's failed fighter and smack addict sibling Dickie (Christian Bale), a charismatic leech whose best intentions don't always ben-

efit Micky's career; and the uncouth, tracksuit wearing mother (Melissa Leo), who in turn disapproves of the influence of his level-headed girlfriend (Amy Adams). It's these multiple distractions that have stalled his progression beyond being a "pay-day punchbag" for larger opponents, and gives him a reason to give it one last shot at the big-time.

With O. Russell taking the reins from Darren Aronofsky, *The Fighter* is a very different film to what it could have been. Shot in a raw, basic style, with even the fight scenes recreated in a rather muted fashion, he appears to prefer his characters to be the stand-out.

Wahlberg may be the main event here. It's a solid, underplayed but unspectacular performance that at least solidifies his own career resurrection after *The Happening*, but he won't go down as one of the screen's most charismatic sports personas.

Christian Bale, meanwhile, descends to *Machinist* lev-



FIGHTING TALK: Mark Wahlberg, Melissa Leo, and Christian Bale in white collar boxing drama 'The Fighter'

els of method, with his wiry frame and thinning hair simply the surface level indicators of commitment to a role that's the beating heart of the movie, and surprisingly good fun. It's

noticeable that any time he is absent from proceedings *The Fighter* suffers, and it is his narrative fate that provides the hook over Wahlberg's predictable triumph.

Soaked in testosterone, the script still allows the female leads space to shine. Melissa Leo is brilliantly white-trash, caked in make-up and a constant irritant, while Amy

Adams plays against type as the promiscuous barmaid, the only character to have accepted her lot in life. She grounds the more clichéd aspects of the "against all odds" story

with a controlled turn. Overall, this is an above average sports movie that rises to become an even better character study in which anyone could be the titular

fighter, but in which Bale is the real champ.



**Sanctum (15)**

Director: Alister Grierson  
Cast: Ioan Gruffudd, Richard Roxburgh, Alice Parkinson  
Runtime: 108 mins

MATTHEW RODGERS  
EPOCH TIMES STAFF



Rhys Wakefield in 'Sanctum'

Having travelled to Pandora and the outer reaches of space to make the billion dollar blockbuster *Dances with Wolves 3-D* (aka *Avatar*), King of the World James Cameron (his official title) returns to messing about in water with executive producer duties on this subterranean thriller.

For whatever reason, a group of deep-sea cave divers and assorted adrenalin junkies are attempting to traverse the most treacherous cave system on the planet, all at the behest of Ioan Gruffudd's Ambramovich-esque money man. Predictably so, or else it would be like watching a rather dull IMAX movie, things begin to go awry when a large storm threatens to flood the caves, forcing our explorers to use the deepest recesses of the labyrinthine maze in order to escape.

Evoking aspects of the best disaster movies, in particular *The Poseidon Adventure* and the schlocky Stallone vehicle *Daylight*, *Sanctum* is made up of all the requisite genre criteria. An ensemble of actors with varying degrees of ability are put through increasingly difficult scenarios, numbers constantly dwindling before the one you knew was going to survive all along escapes to freedom. But boy is it guilty

fun. Shot using the Cameron endorsed 3-D technology, it does look like a big budget version of a David Attenborough narrated BBC documentary, in that it is stunning to look at. You really get a feel for the overhanging rocks and tight spaces and that does assist in increasing the peril.

Playing out like Neil Marshall's superb *The Descent*, but without the monsters, or the hugely effective claustrophobia, you get the feeling that the desire to utilise the 3-D has been to the detriment of the tension. Even when the characters are in a life or death scenario the cinematography is never invasive or close enough for the audience to feel involved in the same way that *Buried* succeeded. It's as if the film-makers thought, "OK, they are stuck in a tight tunnel, but look how beautiful that expanse of water is".

That said, there are genuinely thrilling moments to be had here, and *Sanctum* is never

dull. Bones crack left, right and centre with wince inducing results, and there's a set-piece that will have you clutching at your scalp in grimaced pain.

You'll pick your favourite characters and root for their survival no matter how clunky the dialogue is. Richard Roxburgh plays it straight as the detached veteran who never knows where to draw the line when it comes to danger, and it's his father-son relationship with the likeable Rhys Wakefield that provides the most successful narrative hook. Less successful is the former *Hornblower* Ioan Gruffudd, who fails on every level to convince as the villain.

Unashamed throwaway fun, *Sanctum* won't win any awards, but it gets my vote in the overcrowded Friday night film category for being a genuinely gripping slice of clunky entertainment.



**Rabbit Hole (12A)**

Director: John Cameron Mitchell  
Cast: Nicole Kidman, Aaron Eckhart, Sandra Oh  
Runtime: 91 mins

MATTHEW RODGERS  
EPOCH TIMES STAFF



Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart in 'Rabbit Hole'

*Rabbit Hole* isn't going to pack out the multiplexes in the same way that Alice venturing down one would, and it isn't an easy recommendation if you're looking to be entertained. What it is is an intimately heart-breaking study of grief that reintroduces us to Nicole Kidman's acting ability with a performance *To Die For*, as she hasn't been this good since that dark delight.

Becca and Howie Corbett (Kidman and Aaron Eckhart) are a white picket fence family whose core is ripped from them by a personal tragedy. Becca deals with it by retreating into a mode of denial, hiding her emotions from Howie, who himself has taken the opposite approach by attending grief counselling and cherishing the memories of a lost one. And ostensibly that is the plot of *Rabbit Hole*, how these two people cope with the mourning process.

Minimalist in every aspect, this never betrays its stage origins, but whereas that can often lead to a sterile, un-ambitious movie translation - see 2008's *Doubt* as evidence of that - here it only helps to maintain focus on the delicately drawn characters and their

situation. All of which is beautifully handled by director Mitchell. At times it walks a fine line between indulgent wallowing and patient character study during its very brief running time, but succeeds because nothing about it, in particular the emotions, ever feels forced.

Cleverly, the family tragedy is never in the foreground. This is a film about the aftermath, and we have to wait some time to establish exactly what the void in their lives is, and then even longer to find out how this happened. This tactic means that interest never wanes and the desire to fill in the plot holes is maintained thanks to some exceptional performances.

As a woman living a vacuous, regimented life, forced upon her by absence, Kidman is simply stunning. Equally so is the perennially underrated Eckhart (criminally ignored for all awards),

perfectly complementing one another to depict a relationship that feels extremely real. Newcomer Miles Teller is also worth mentioning; his park bench exchanges with Kidman are the powerful heart of the movie.

If it all sounds laden in doom and gloom, fear not, because thankfully the script is still peppered with some very funny moments, such as Eckhart getting high at a group therapy session, and some quality dialogue - "Somewhere out there I'm having a good time" - all of which help with the empathy required for a film of this nature.

*Rabbit Hole* oozes class and quality as an under-the-radar gem, which disappointingly won't find an audience beyond those that can't get a ticket for *The King's Speech*.



## The Grapevine

'The King's Speech' grabs PGA top movie award  
The countdown to the Oscars has certainly become more interesting. After being largely ignored at the recent Critics Choice Awards, and the Golden Globes, *The King's Speech* was honoured with the Darryl F. Zanuck Producer of the Year Award in Theatrical Motion Pictures by the Producers Guild of America (PGA). Accepting the award were the film's producers Iain Canning, Emile Sherman, and Gareth Unwin.

Among the winners in other categories were *Toy Story 3* for animated feature, *Waiting for Superman* for feature documentary, as well as *Modern Family* for TV comedy, *Mad Men* for TV drama, and Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch* for non-fiction television.

The Producers Guild of America describes itself as "the nonprofit trade group that represents, protects, and promotes the interests of all members of the producing team in film, television, and new media".

'Wonder Woman' pilot ordered  
The fierce female superhero character that is Wonder Woman has been picked up as a pilot on US channel NBC, according to reports from *The Hollywood Reporter*. The uber-talented television writer/producer David E. Kelly will be at the helm on this production.

Having many hits under his belt, including the popular new US drama *Harry's Law*, Kelly's involvement adds to the anticipation of the remake of the 1970s icon.

Zsa Zsa Gabor returns home after amputation  
The ailing 93-year-old actress and socialite Zsa Zsa Gabor is back home at her mansion in Bel Air, California, one week after having most of her right leg amputated, according to a report from the Associated Press.

Sarah Ferguson's show on Oprah channel delayed  
Oprah is one boss you don't want to disappoint. Reports have surfaced that Duchess of York Sarah Ferguson's reality show for the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) titled *Finding Sarah* has been delayed because the big boss has allegedly found it "boring", according to a *Daily Mail* article quoting an inside source.

The article states that the show will be reshot and will likely make an appearance in the summer, versus its original launch date of this spring. No doubt this is a tough critique for Ferguson, who is likely taking this show as an opportunity to re-establish her reputation following last year's scandal in which she was caught on video selling access to her former husband, Prince Andrew.

Compiled by Michele Gonçalves.

ALBUM REVIEWS

**Iron and Wine**  
Kiss Each Other Clean  
(4AD)

Like a heavily bearded magpie, Sam Beam demonstrates an admirable ability for snaffling genres on this fourth album. It's still unclear whether he can transcend his alt country origins, but the range of influences here is unquestionably impressive. His ethereal, often effected, vocals sing deceptively simple refrains over a shifting bed of hooky marimba, funky guitar, jazzy brass, and wispy, squelchy electronics. Every track glistens with magnificent and surprising production, and Beam's intelligent lyrics (although he's a little swearsy for these tender ears). It all culminates with the utterly beautiful and aptly titled 'Glad Man Singing'.

John Smithies



**Six Organs Of Admittance**  
Asleep on the Floodplain  
(DRAG CITY)

With the absence of an isolation tank from most of the nation's two-up two-downs, many of us seek relaxation in our music collections. This record would be a worthy addition for anyone wishing to get away from the strains of the day. Languid and hypnotic, built around the exponential flutter of Ben Chasny's acoustic guitar, vocals are an intermittent feature, but they only complement the heady atmosphere, as showcased on 'Hold But Let Go' and 'Dawn Running Home'. Chasny's prolific output may count against him as the music world's fetish for the new grows ever more prominent, but this quiet gem deserves attention.

Patrick Healy



**Sea Of Bees**  
Songs For The Ravens  
(HEAVENLY)

Sacramento multi-instrumentalist Julie Ann Baenziger has delivered a stunning debut album. From the grungy 'Marmalade' to the lighter Goldfrapp-like textures of 'Willis' and 'Strikefoot', proceedings are ethereal and quietly mesmerising throughout. 'Won't be Long' is one of the most plaintive and moving songs you are likely to hear all year and recalls Belly at their slowest best, underpinned by some haunting electric guitar work. This album of acoustic-based mystical folk songs and upbeat indie pop features Baenziger on glockenspiel, marimba, and slide guitar. Experimental yet accessible, *Sea of Bees* is a hotly tipped talent for 2011.

Simon Miller



**Cloud Nothings**  
Cloud Nothings  
(WICHITA)

Cloud Nothings' UK debut album proper confirms Dylan Baldi as another expert exponent of lo fi, infectious clatter pop, and he joins a seemingly inexhaustible flow of classic indie revivalists from across the pond. On last year's collection of singles and demos *Turning On*, Baldi showcased his unerring ability to write short, sharp, hook-laden songs, couched in a pleasing lo fi fug. If anything this new record is more polished than its predecessor with production values turned up a notch; however, the hooks remain and make him a more instantly listenable proposition than former peers such as Japandroids and Beach Fossils. A joyous and accessible blast of energy.

Patrick Healy



**Aurelio**  
Laru Beya  
(REAL WORLD)

Multilayered, multi-textured, rich, evocative and joyful, this is a journey through the traditions of the Garifuna people, from Africa to the Caribbean to the Central American coast. Youssou N'Dour graces this precious album, recorded in Honduras, Belize, and Senegal, and the sumptuous CD booklet enhances the quality. With a background in the sacred drumming of religious ceremonies, Aurelio's concern for Garifuna culture extends to political as well as musical spheres, and traditional rhythms and refrains suffuse each song. Distinctive and uplifting, it is a fitting tribute to the recently passed away original torch bearer of Garifuna music, Andy Palacio.

James Poulter



**Esben and the Witch**  
Violet Cries  
(MATADOR)

If I was to down tools and relocate to Dartmoor to film a low budget gothic horror flick with admirable high production values, I would attempt to enlist Esben and the Witch to provide me with an effective soundtrack. That they would be unavailable due to currently being flavour of the month with various tastemakers is not in doubt, but beneath the impressive veneer of their debut record there are few reasons to elevate the band to next big thing status. There are some starkly beautiful moments on *Violet Cries* with 'Marine Fields Glow' being a standout, but even dark records need a certain charm to lift them above the prosaic, and this has too little.

Patrick Healy



**The Memory Band**  
Oh My Days  
(HUNGRY HILL)

The nu-folk protagonists strike some interesting new ground for this third album, incorporating soul - yes, soul - into their sonic palette. Repetitive instrumental opener 'Crow' leads into the fascinating 'New Skin', in which a soulful female vocal promises a "new start, new beats, new skin" over insistent banjo and percussion. Sadly, it's business as usual from there on in, with the familiar Memory Band "rabble folk" vocals taking centre stage. 'Demon Days' does have a welcome and gritty bluesiness, but much of the album is bogged down by pretty but pedestrian folk. They would do well to take a leaf out of Tunng's book and shake things up a little.

John Smithies



**Chopteeth**  
Chopteeth Live  
(GRIGRI DISCS)

This is an authentic, feel-good, big band extravaganza. With sound quality equalling most studio productions, the legendary Afrobeat sound is presented to full effect. The flawless rhythm section provides inexorable, high-tempo, hip-shaking grooves. Organ, trombone, electric guitar, and flute each take centre stage with aplomb, adding their own unique qualities to the potent brew. But it is the sax that really shines - deep, resonant, and undeniably commanding fashion, accompanied by traditional call and response. Afrobeat is taken from its Nigerian roots to Guinea, Senegal, and Congo. A truly gorgeous album.

James Poulter

