

The Hurt Locker

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow
Original Screenplay by Marc Boal

Principal Actors: Jeremy Renner + Brian Geraghty & Anthony Mackie



Date: Summer 2004. Place: Iraq. Army Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), and Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) are members of an American EOD squad ("Explosive Ordinance Disposal"). Day after day after day, they crisscross the streets of Baghdad in their humvee, responding to calls from military patrols that have spotted something "suspicious" (a car parked somewhere it shouldn't be, a pile of rubbish with wires sticking out of it, or something that just looks "wrong").

The Hurt Locker brackets out politics. Director Kathryn Bigelow and her team are totally focused on putting us in the boots of an EOD squad and showing us the world through their eyes. Everything is in the moment, but as bomb after bomb is defused, we also learn intimate secrets about camaraderie, courage, and honor. **The Hurt Locker** is by far the best film I've seen to date about the Iraq War, and it is now on my list of best combat films ever. My guess is Bigelow herself would not want you to see **The Hurt Locker** just because it was directed by a woman, but I'm telling you that is one reason (among many) that YOU absolutely must go. Bigelow has done her job, now we must do ours.

Pen's Points: **1/2 1/2**

Heat! My two favorite Kathryn Bigelow films—*Point Break* and *The Weight of Water*—taught me new respect for the ocean: huge waves crashing against the northern edge of Australia; furious storms lashing the rocky islands off New Hampshire. In her new film, *The Hurt Locker*, the Iraqi heat feels so intense that I'm sweating. I'm sitting in the cool darkness of a Chicago screening room, but grit prickles my throat and my eyes ache from the sun's relentless glare.

The Hurt Locker brackets out politics. Perhaps Americans should never have sent soldiers to Iraq, but the fact is we did. Bigelow honors their service by placing us in their boots, giving us an opportunity to literally see the world through their eyes.

The three main characters in *The Hurt Locker* are members of an EOD squad ("Explosive Ordinance Disposal"). A routine patrol spots something "suspicious." Maybe a car is parked somewhere it shouldn't be, or a pile of rubbish has wires sticking out of it, or something just looks "wrong." Time stops. The soldiers call for an EOD squad, establish a perimeter, evacuate civilians, and wait.

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Army Specialist Owen Eldridge, Staff Sergeant William James, and Sergeant J.T. Sanborn crisscross the streets of Baghdad in their humvee (“High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle”), responding to calls. Day after day after day, they, and only they, cross the perimeter. Their job is to make things right... or die trying.

EOD squads are elite units, so Eldridge, James, and Sanborn have volunteered for hazardous duty twice, first by joining the Army and then by requesting EOD training. They have each traveled a different path to reach their first moment of shared crisis, but there are no flashbacks to fill in past lives. Everything is in the moment, and as bomb after bomb is defused, we learn intimate secrets about camaraderie, courage, and honor.

Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) spent seven years in Intelligence before moving to the EOD squad. He has a mature personality anchored by considerable military experience. When they reach a new site, Sanborn is the man who stays closest to the humvee, steering his team members while also communicating with the other soldiers on the scene.

Army Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) is the rookie. His job is to eliminate potential trouble coming from outside the perimeter. Sanborn, look to the right! Someone on the balcony has a cell phone! Sanborn, look to the left! Someone on the roof has a camera! Is one of these (or both) a triggering device!?!

Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) is the man actually responsible for defusing bombs. Every situation starts the same way. The humvee arrives at the perimeter and Sanborn helps James suit up. Like an astronaut or a deep sea diver or a knight in shining armor, James must be completely encased in protective gear before he can begin to do his job. Hot! So hot! Suiting up in the heat of day is James' first act of courage, even before he begins his perilous walk towards the IED (“Improvised Explosive Device”).

Whatever life trajectory brought each man to this specific point in time, Eldridge, James, and Sanborn all respond to the moment with a unique combination of training and temperament. And with each incident, Bigelow pushes us ever deeper into the emotional complexity of 21st Century war. Pundits and historians can debate causes and consequences, but for filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow there's only one side—side-by-side with the soldiers.

Brian Geraghty (“Eldridge”), Anthony Mackie (“Sanborn”), and Jeremy Renner (“James”) are not well-known actors, but I've seen them all in numerous prior films, and all three of them go way beyond their previous personal bests here, creating indelible characters with superlative chemistry. In every scene, they each dig deep, revealing subtle backstory and increasing complexity as individuals as well as team members. Every line reading, gesture, and grimace works. No false moments. No wrong steps.

That said, the real star of *The Hurt Locker* is English cinematographer Barry Ackroyd, who uses his significant documentary experience to ground the action, capturing multiple points-of-view by simultaneously filming from various angles with numerous hand-held cameras. Somehow editors Bob Murawski and Chris Innis meticulously stitched all this footage together, expertly locating us within the physical danger and emotional turmoil of each scene. Triangulation at every moment is critical: where is the character, where is the IED; where is the perimeter. I suspect this was Bigelow's most important directive to every member of her team.

Close to perfect, *The Hurt Locker* does have one major flaw. Specifically, almost all of the action is set in the city of Baghdad, but suddenly, in one scene, Eldridge, James, and Sanborn are in the desert. The psychodynamic and technical components of this scene are just as well-crafted as the rest of the film, but with no explanation of how they got there, it just doesn't fit. Even so, *The Hurt Locker* is by far the best film to date about the Iraq War, and it takes its place with *Beaufort*, *Das Boot*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Patton*, and *Twelve O'Clock High* as one of the best combat films ever made.



Jeremy Renner as a modern
"knight in shining armor."



Director Kathryn Bigelow at the 2008
Venice International Film Festival.

Can We Talk?

Three Reasons Why YOU Should See *The Hurt Locker*

The Hurt Locker has received incredibly positive reviews from a great many critics (including women as well as men). As of today (7/7/09), *The Hurt Locker's* *Rotten Tomato* score is 95% "Fresh" (http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/hurt_locker). But since I'm writing this review for a website targeted to women, I'd like to use this opportunity to tell women everywhere why WE (each and every one of us) should see this film.

1.) I can already hear some of you saying you don't like violence and you consciously avoid films that you know will be violent. Believe me, I understand! I also abhor gratuitous violence! *The Hurt Locker* is about bomb disposal, so no question about it, *The Hurt Locker* is a violent film that contains several massive explosions as critical plot elements. So why am I emphatically telling you to please go anyway?

The simple fact is that violence is a part of life and although I abhor gratuitous violence, I also applaud filmmakers who take violence on as a serious narrative subject. *The Hurt Locker* is about the war in Iraq, and one of the distinguishing features of this specific conflict is insurgent use of IEDs. Even today, IEDs kill massive numbers of Iraqi men, women, and children, so every time EOD squad members destroy an IED, they help save the lives of countless Americans and Iraqis. In the moral equation of the Iraq War, EOD squad members are definitely good guys, and we should honor their service on our behalf accordingly.

2.) Relatively few women have direct military experience, but many of us vote for politicians who make decisions with military consequences, therefore I believe it is extremely important for women to seek experiential understanding of military realities. A film like *The Hurt Locker* offers us a chance to walk a mile in military boots with total personal safety. It may be the only chance many of us get. As wives, mothers, and friends, we owe it to the men in our lives; as voters, we owe it to ourselves.

While I'm on this subject, I should mention that another distinguishing feature of the War in Iraq is the relatively large presence of women in combat and support roles (including the appearance of women's names and photos in stateside death lists). Therefore, I am a bit surprised that Kathryn Bigelow didn't show any female combatants in *The Hurt Locker*, even though she has created powerful women characters in almost all of her prior films. There are no female characters in *Lawrence of Arabia* and it's still my all-time favorite film, so this is not a criticism of *The Hurt Locker*, just an observation.

3.) In 81 years of Oscar history, only three women have ever been nominated for a Best Director Oscar (Lena Wertmuller, Jane Campion, and Sofia Coppola) and no woman has ever received a Best Director Oscar. Now that Barack Obama is President and the Iraq War appears to be winding down, I believe Americans are ready for a strong film about Iraq. So far, the narrative films made about the Iraq War



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have been well-intentioned but fairly weak (e.g., *In the Valley of Elah*, *Stop Loss*, etc.), but *The Hurt Locker* is a very powerful film.

I sincerely believe that only one thing stands between Kathryn Bigelow and a Best Director nomination: box office. Critical buzz is already very strong, so if *The Hurt Locker* generates respectable box office returns, then Kathryn Bigelow will receive an Oscar nomination. So, women: we hold this in our hands. If we turn out for *The Hurt Locker*, (if we use our “power of the purse”), we can help Kathryn Bigelow become the 4th woman in history nominated for a Best Director Oscar. And if this happens, if Kathryn Bigelow receives a nomination, I also believe there’s a good chance she will then become the first woman in history to actually receive a Best Director Oscar.

Now, I suspect Kathryn Bigelow would find this addendum very annoying. She doesn’t want to be known as “a woman filmmaker,” she doesn’t want to answer questions about how her gender affects her POV, and she wants people to see her film on its own merits (that is, she would NOT want you to see *The Hurt Locker* just because it’s directed by a woman). But I’m putting myself on record anyway, because I sincerely believe there is more at stake here than the cost of a movie ticket, distress at on-screen violence, or any other reason you might have for NOT going. Kathryn Bigelow has put *The Hurt Locker* out there for all to see, and I urge each and every one of YOU to see it in a movie theatre as soon as you can! Kathryn Bigelow has done her job, now we must do ours.

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	<p>Lifelong movie buff Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of <i>FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples</i> (a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male & female audience members). She writes monthly columns for Chicago’s <i>JUF News</i>, as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. Her article on the 2004 Oscars for <i>Women’s eNews</i> received the award for “Best News Writing – Web” from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.</p>	
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To surf Jan’s database (with dozens of films written &/or directed by women), visit:

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Photo Credits

Photos from *The Hurt Locker*: Jeremy Renner as “Staff Sergeant William James.”
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Kathryn Bigelow Photo Credit: Alberto Pizzoli/AFP PHOTO/NewsCom.

Director Kathryn Bigelow at the Venice International Film Festival (September 4, 2008). *The Hurt Locker* won four awards at the ‘08 VIFF (including the Human Rights Film Network Award, the SIGNIS Award, the Sergio Trasatti Award, and the Young Cinema Award). It was also nominated for the prestigious “Golden Lion.”