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‘Spotlight’ joins ‘All the President’s Men’ in the pantheon of great journalism movies

By [Ann Hornaday](#) November 12, 2015

"Spotlight" tells the true story of the Boston Globe's Spotlight investigation team that uncovered the Boston Archdiocese's cover up of sexual abuse within the Catholic church. (Open Road Films)

In 2002, the Boston Globe published an explosive series of articles about the decades-long scandal of [child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church](#), involving 70 local priests, more than 1,000 victims and the collusion of Cardinal Bernard Law in covering up the crimes. As a piece of journalism, it was a barnburner, one that garnered the paper a Pulitzer Prize the following year for its airing of truths long suppressed within the Catholic hierarchy.

Named for the team that reported and wrote the Globe stories, the movie "Spotlight" chronicles the shoe-leather investigation conducted over several months prior to publication. But before we get to the review, a few disclosures are in order: For one, the film's chief protagonist, Globe editor Marty Baron, is now executive editor of The Washington Post.

For another — and perhaps even more important — the film depicts a profession this reviewer has pursued for 30 years and held in near-worshipful esteem for far longer. For journalists, watching "Spotlight's" meticulous portrayal of their vocation is a surpassingly gratifying experience, one that former Baltimore Sun reporter David Simon, at the film's local premiere in September, only half-facetiously compared to watching porn.

With "Spotlight," director Tom McCarthy has fulfilled his first duty, which is to create a world that is utterly, convincingly immersive, down to the last granular detail. After a brief prologue set in the 1970s, the film opens in 2001 with a "caking," an all-too-familiar newsroom ritual whereby departing staffers are celebrated with a heavily frosted sheet cake and some colorful war stories. Having nailed that scene — and its attendant whiff of economic insecurity — with anthropological care, McCarthy proceeds to get everything else uncannily right, from the overstarched shirts and pleated khakis worn by the Globe's male reporters to the drudgery of looking up old clips and cranking microfilm. It's not a stretch to suggest that "Spotlight" is the finest newspaper movie of its era, joining "[Citizen Kane](#)" and "[All the President's Men](#)" in the pantheon of classics of the genre.



“Spotlight” features a strong ensemble cast: Rachel McAdams, Mark Ruffalo, Brian d’Arcy, Michael Keaton and John Slattery. (KERRY HAYES/Open Road Films)

In its precision, modesty and restraint, “Spotlight” even does its most famous predecessors one better. McCarthy and his fellow [screenwriter, Josh Singer](#), did their own reporting to create the film’s script, revisiting the reporters’ methods and even breaking a crucial piece of news of their own, revealing that the Globe missed a chance to advance the abuse story as far back as 1993. If “Citizen Kane” was a monumental narrative of operatic scope and visual ambition, and “All the President’s Men” a tautly paranoid thriller attuned to the dawning cynicism of its time, “Spotlight” has achieved something far more difficult, marshalling a pure, unadorned style in the service of a story that rejects mythologizing in favor of disciplined, level-eyed candor.

[\[“Spotlight” celebrates a vanishing form of journalism and filmmaking\]](#)

Consistent with that pared-down ethos, McCarthy has made “Spotlight” an ensemble piece rather than a showy star vehicle. Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams and Brian d’Arcy James virtually disappear into their roles as the members of the Spotlight team: editor Walter Robinson, reporters Mike Rezendes and Sacha Pfeiffer, and data researcher Matt Carroll. For his part, Liev Schreiber delivers a crafty, masterfully understated portrayal of Baron, who assigns the abuse story the very first day he arrives at the paper as its new, slightly enigmatic editor. It’s Baron’s status as an outsider — as one character puts it, “an unmarried man of the Jewish faith who hates baseball” — that gives him the distance necessary to ask uncomfortable questions of an institution with which the Globe historically had a cozy relationship.

A solitary, soft-spoken, ultimately poignant figure, Baron is the closest thing “Spotlight” has to a hero, no more so than when he resists the temptation to run with a particularly juicy piece of information, preferring to keep the team’s focus on the system rather than on one individual. If “[Truth](#),” which dramatizes the disastrous “60 Minutes II” episode investigating George W. Bush’s National Guard service, is a cautionary tale about rushing a story, “Spotlight” is its antidote. Fully embracing the hiccups and bureaucratic roundabouts that reporters hit on a regular basis, McCarthy and Singer have created an improbably gripping account of how the best journalism can often entail sitting on a story rather than going to press.

[“Truth” revisits a story that nearly tanked Bush’s reelection]



Michael Keaton and Mark Ruffalo in “Spotlight.” (Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films)

Restraint isn’t just one of the subjects of “Spotlight.” It defines the film’s aesthetic as well. Cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi has created a subtle, slightly washed-out palette for “Spotlight.” In defiance of the close-up-centric grammar of most mainstream movies, the filmmakers insist on pulling the camera back, letting the actors play off each other in the newsroom and its cluttered, nondescript offices. An actor himself — he played a reporter in Simon’s HBO series “The Wire” — McCarthy has evinced a knack for casting in previous films he’s directed, including “[The Station Agent](#),” “[The Visitor](#)” and “[Win Win](#).” His instincts are similarly on point in “Spotlight,” which co-stars Stanley Tucci and Billy Crudup as victims’ attorneys. Some of the film’s most searing scenes are delivered by a group of little-known supporting players, including Jimmy LeBlanc, Neal Huff and Michael Cyril Creighton as abuse survivors, and Eileen Padua as Pfeiffer’s devout grandmother.

Like the reporting at its center, “Spotlight” derives its power from the steady accumulation of moments that gain momentum and meaning as they accrue.

For all of its modesty and dedication to process, “Spotlight” winds up being a startlingly emotional experience, and not just for filmgoers with intimate knowledge of the culture it depicts. The look and tone of “Spotlight” may initially feel like an affectionate throwback to the stripped-down aesthetic of the 1970s, but there’s genuine moral force behind McCarthy’s method. His integrity as a filmmaker not only echoes the shared sensibility of the journalists he admires, but it also allows pain, betrayal and sadness to surface organically, without facile manipulation. The film’s resolute gaze invites viewers to share McCarthy’s high

regard for daily journalism, his alarm at its possible obsolescence and his wariness of tribal loyalties and institutional deference. Most cathartically, though, it gives us space to grieve.

R. At area theaters. Contains some crude language, including sexual references. 127 minutes .