Next up on our tour of movies nominated for Best Picture is “Winter’s Bone”, the darling of last year’s Sundance Festival that has became much more popular as a DVD than it was in the theaters, where it only grossed $6.4 million, almost a third of what the next lowest film, “127 Hours” grossed. But its crawl towards the spotlight has been a steady one, and the film is now the Indie star of this year’s Oscars, garnering three major nominations; Best Picture, Best Actress (Jennifer Lawrence) and Best Supporting Actor (John Hawkes).

The story itself is relatively simple. Seventeen year old Ree Dolly (Lawrence) is the de facto head of her dirt poor family in the backwoods of the Missouri Ozarks. Her mother has had an emotional breakdown and is in a near zombie state, and her father is awaiting trial for manufacturing methamphetamine, seemingly the only way to make money in this cauldron of abject poverty. This leaves Ree as the only caregiver to not only her invalid mother, but also her ten year old brother and six year old sister.

As if this wasn't already enough of a burden for such a young girl, she receives an early visit from the sheriff (Garret Dillahunt, like Hawkes another recognizable face from "Deadwood"). It seems that her father, who was out on bail, has gone missing. If he does not show up for the trial, bail will be revoked, and the Dolly family will be put out, as the deadbeat father put the family farm down as collateral. Ree barely bats an eye as she immediately shows that she is made of sterner stuff than most. "I'll find him".

We are then taken on an odyssey through a part of America that I am ashamed to see exists. Meth dealing is a way of life in this god-forsaken area, and one of Ree's kin is the kingpin in charge of it all, and controls most of the rest of the clan. Ree has many tribulations to go through to try to crack through that redneck veneer to try to get some answers. Did Jessup Dolly run off? Is he dead? Ree seems to think that it's more likely the latter, but she doesn't seem all that torn up about it. Possibly because she's prepared herself for this moment for years, but more than likely it's simply because she doesn't have time for her own emotions.

The only minor help she seems to be able to solicit is from her uncle, called Teardrop (Hawkes), a meth addicted wildcard who might be the scariest man in the county. Many of us have met his type before; a slight build, but you can tell immediately by his looks and demeanor that this is an individual that you absolutely do not want to mess with. Teardrop is also upset that his little brother has gone missing, but for reasons of his own, he is reluctant to give Ree much help.

The movie is dominated by the performances of Jennifer Lawrence and Hawkes. Lawrence is in almost every scene in a very serious, very dark movie, and the 20 year old carries it off effortlessly. There is barely a smile that comes to her face for the entire movie, other than when she's dealing with her precious younger siblings. The rest of the time, she is all business; jaws clenched, eyes gazing ahead in an unblinking and unsympathetic stare, passing on life lessons to her brother and sister, including how to skin squirrels for their only supply of meat. Asking for help does not come easy for her ("you don't ask for something that ought to be offered on its own", she tells her little brother), and when she is forced to do it, you can see in her face how much it bothers her. It is hard to believe that this is the same young actress that played the precocious oldest child in the simplistic "Bill Engvall Show". There are not too many child actors from lame TV sitcoms that go on to be stars on the big screen, but Lawrence appears to be one of them.

Likewise, this was an unexpected performance from Hawkes, especially given how ingrained his performance of the quiet peacemaker Sol Star in "Deadwood" was to me. Teardrop is absolutely menacing. When he confronts several redneck cousins, at least two of them bigger

than him, they back down from him immediately, and it is completely believable that they do. But on the other hand, Hawkes shows him as much more than just anger; you can see the hurt in his eyes when he talks about his brother, as well as the compassion he harbors deep inside for Ree. It's probably too bad for Hawkes that Christian Bale has the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor locked up…because if it wasn't for Bale's splashier, higher publicized performance, I think Hawkes would and should win it.

In all, this is a tremendous character study, as well as an interesting take on the standard mafia movie. Director Debra Granik gets the mood set perfectly with her shots; the gray upon gray of the mountains in winter, the subtle pictures of poverty and desperation throughout the area, and the toll this all takes on the people who live there. There is absolutely nothing glamorous in this film, especially the people. Granik chose to use many locals to fill in the minor roles, and then hit gold by casting character actress Dale Dickey as Merab, the matriarch of the clan. She has been with Thump Milton, the godfather of all of this, for ages, and you can see the effect of this on her soul; a momma lion who does not care who she hurts in the process of protecting herself and the immediate family.

Despite all of the darkness and gloom of this film, I found it ultimately very uplifting. Yes, it is depressing for the most part, but what shines through is the determination and love of family exhibited by Ree. Perhaps the ending is a bit too stock and predictable, but if it ended up any other way, you'd want to slit your wrists by the time it was over. And I hope this doesn't end up being somewhat of a spoiler, but if I watch that much depressing stuff, and have to see little children suffer (not torture of the littlest ones though…couldn't take that), then by-gosh, I better have something at the end that makes me feel it was all worth it.

And this movie does. Which allowed me to go back a second time and watch it just for the performances, which were nothing short of incredible.

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)