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## Rounders by Bostin Christopher

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If *Rounders* is any indication of the movies we'll see this fall and winter, it'll be a great year — this movie is terrific! I was with it from the opening hand to the final showdown. Director John Dahl (*Last Seduction* and *Red Rock West*) has assembled one of the finest casts seen in film this year. Matt Damon, Ed Norton, John Turturro, Gretchen Mol, Martin Landau and John Malkovich are all excellent. Any of them could stand out at Oscar time.

*Rounders* is the story of Mike McDermott (Matt Damon), a law student putting himself through college playing poker player in New York City underground poker establishments. In the opening of the film we watch as Mike tells us why he no longer plays poker; a great sequence which sets up much of the pay-off later in the film. Trouble begins for Mike when his best buddy Worm (Ed Norton) is released from jail. Worm needs to find some poker games and raise some quick dough. Seems he owes some folks big time money and he draws on Mike's help to solve his problems.

Is Poker a game of luck or skill? Is life? The great questions this film raises are ones many people struggle with. That's what holds our attention. The fact that this film uses poker gives it a compelling focus, but you don't need to know much about poker to enjoy it. It would help to review what hands win over others, but even without that, you'll enjoy this film. Director Dahl pulls the viewer into the gritty underworld of New York, and the actors bring to life these wonderful characters.

Matt Damon is perfectly cast as Mike, with his never ending good intentions. Norton's Worm is one of those characters we hate to love; He continually screws up and drags Mike along for the ride. Martin Landau's scenes are some of the best in the film: Playing a judge who mentors Mike, his stories of finding his true calling are the heart of this film. John Turturro finds the same kind of emotional restraint in his acting that Anthony Hopkins has perfected. And then there's the ever-magical John Malkovich, who plays to perfection a Russian Mafia poker club owner. When he's on the screen with Damon, sparks fly.

I never lost interest in this film. When it was over — and I didn't want it to be — I felt I'd just been dealt a royal flush. The best movie so far this year is here — go see it! And don't be surprised if the urge to grab your savings and head to Vegas takes hold.

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