**The Shawshank Redemption**

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SEPTEMBER 23, 1994

If you think that's a turnoff title, remember all the smartass things people said before [***Forrest Gump***](http://www.rollingstone.com/../movies/reviews/forrest-gump-19940706) happened. *Shawshank* — the name refers to a maximum-security prison in Maine — is already being touted to join *Gump* in the Oscar race. Why not? The academy regularly drops its drawers for films that celebrate the triumph of the human spirit. And this baby strums that theme hard as inmate Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), a Shawshank newcomer in 1946, strikes up a 20-year friendship with a lifer named Red (Morgan Freeman). They're both in jail for the Big One: murder.

Robbins and Freeman have the juice as actors to make figuring out whether Andy and Red really did it a riveting guessing game, especially if you're a sucker for prison melodramas. Writer Frank Darabont (*The Fly II*), in his feature-directing debut, doesn't skimp on the caged-bird cliches, sadistic and sentimental, but he plays enough hardball with the formula to evoke memories of such goodies as *Cool Hand Luke, Birdman of Alcatraz* and *Riot in Cell Block II.*

Stephen King wrote the novella *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption,* on which the film is based. (Andy's cell is bedecked with a poster of Hayworth in all her *Gilda* glory.) You can find the novella in a 1982 King collection, *Different Seasons,* along with a story, "The Body," that became the, basis for the 1986 Rob Reiner smash *Stand by Me.* Both tales are said to represent the gentler side of King, meaning the side that doesn't sell as well, though the torture, rape and killing in *Shawshank* qualify as horror in my book.

Darabont stays mostly true to the source, except for shooting in Ohio instead of Maine, expanding a few scenes and characters and casting the always welcome Freeman as a prisoner King described as a red-headed Irishman. King is a master at creating a whole world out of small details. Darabont tries to match him visually. The everyday agonies of prison life are meticulously laid out by cinematographer Roger Deakins ([***Barton Fink***](http://www.rollingstone.com/../movies/reviews/barton-fink-19910821)). You can almost feel the frustration and rage seeping into the skin of the inmates.

There is humor, too, as Red brings the painfully introverted Andy out of his shell. Andy, a respected banker before being convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, wins favor and permission to expand the prison library by offering financial advice to the Shawshank elite. That includes Hadley (Clancy Brown), the cruel captain of the guards, and Norton (Bob Gunton), the fanatically religious warden. We've seen these types before. There are also cobwebs on Brooks Hatlen (James Whitmore), the aged parolee who can't adjust to the outside, and Tommy Williams (Gil Bellows, in a role once earmarked for Brad Pitt), the young thief who can't live inside.

It's the no-bull performances that hold back the flood of banalities. Robbins and Freeman connect with the bruised souls of Andy and Red to create something undeniably powerful and moving. Instead of selling bromides, as lesser actors would do, they show the wrenching struggle required by any human being in a trap simply to keep hope alive.

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