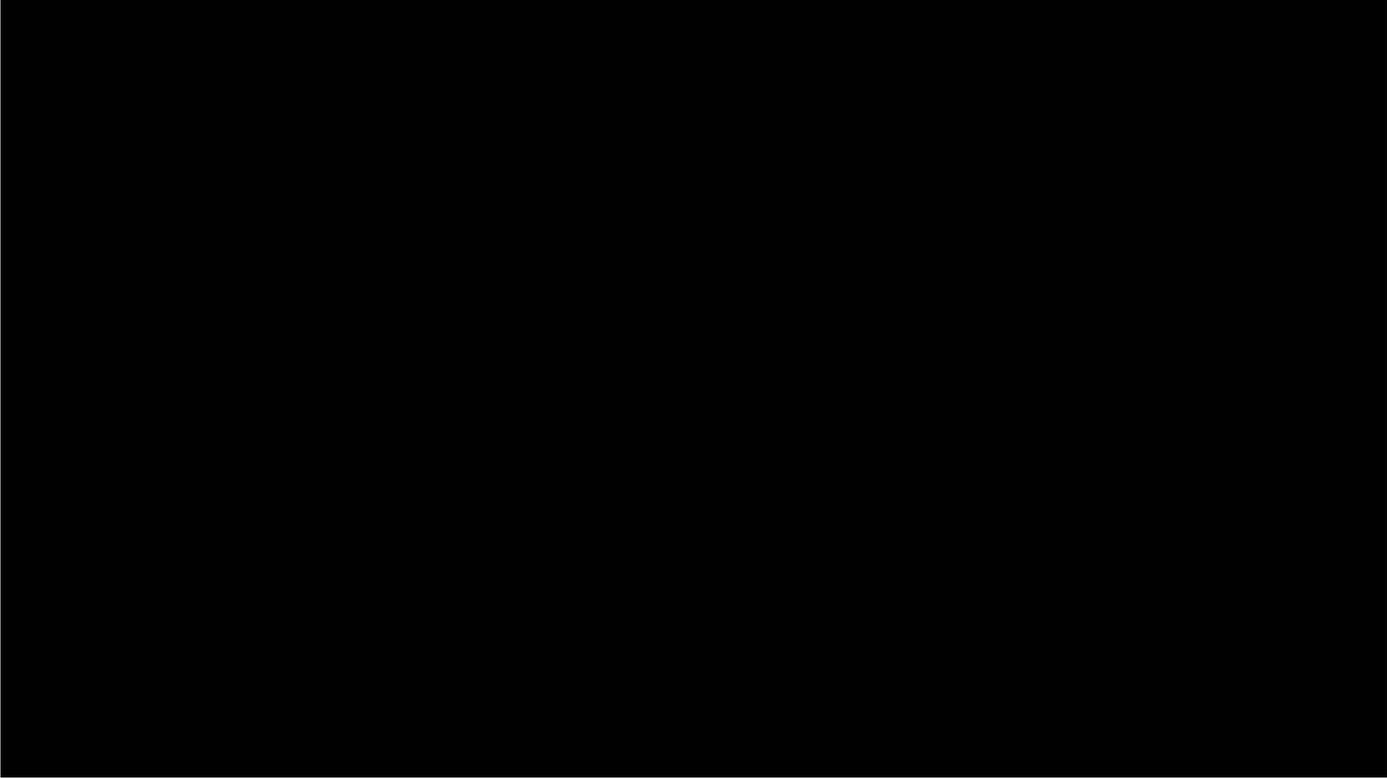


This film is the current front-runner for Best Picture

My favorite film at the Toronto Film Festival is probably also the Oscar front-runner at this moment: Tom McCarthy's "Spotlight," a crackling, important account of how the Boston Globe doggedly pursued its Pulitzer Prize-winning exposé of the Catholic Church's longtime system of covering up sexual abuse of minors by more than 100 local priests.

Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams and Brian d'Arcy James play the Globe's crack "Spotlight" investigative team, which reports to assistant managing editor Ben Bradlee Jr. (John Slattery), whose dad was the legendary Washington Post editor you may be familiar with from "All the President's Men."

Like that classic, McCarthy and Josh Singer's incisive script for "Spotlight" keenly understands how a newspaper works, which in the film's setting of 2001 is still remarkably similar to the early 1970s. With the Internet just starting to catch on as a news source, the main difference is the use of spreadsheets and the economic pressures on the Globe, which had been acquired by the New York Times in 1993.



The spotlight team headed by Walter Robinson (Keaton) was used to choosing their own projects, but when an outsider from Miami (played by Liev Schreiber) is named top editor to shake things up, he strongly urges Keaton to focus on the molestation allegations, a subject the Globe has historically never pursued with much vigor.

What the film gets brilliantly right is how journalists can get co-opted by the institutions they cover — in this case, the Archdiocese of Boston and the powerful Cardinal Bernard Law (Len Cariou) — when their interests converge. And just how much courage it takes to pursue a story that may alienate many of your readers (Schreiber, whose character is Jewish, is informed by the publisher that 53 percent of the Globe's readers are Catholic).



Michael Keaton (left) and Mark Ruffalo in "Spotlight." Kerry Hayes

Starting with allegations against a single priest who may have abused as many as 80 children over a period of decades, the reporters start digging in, talking to victims (Neal Huff and Michael Cyril Creighton, memorably, play two) they previously ignored and realizing the problem is much larger than they thought.

They learn that scores of allegations have been privately settled by the church outside the legal system, and those with legal paperwork have been sealed by judges — which means taking on the powerful cardinal in court.

There is no single Deep Throat in this quest for all the cardinal's men. True to my 47 years of experience working for daily newspapers — including stints as a reporter and high-ranking editor in news departments — is that the reporters (all lapsed Catholics, as it happens) have to repeatedly coax lawyers (Stanley Tucci, Billy Crudup) bound by confidentiality agreements, and one with close links to the cardinal (Jamey

Sheridan), for leads on where to search for smoking guns.

As it happens, the Spotlight team comes across the best single source of information in a series of dusty annual directories published by the archdiocese itself. This allows them to build a database of nearly 90 accused clerics who were moved from parish to parish, and in and out of church-run rehabilitation programs. (A psychiatrist who ran such a program — voiced by Richard Jenkins — estimates in a telephone interview that as many as 6 percent of priests may be involved in abusing boys and girls.)

The Globe ultimately published more than 600 articles, forcing the Vatican to reassign Cardinal Law and triggering worldwide investigations of the church's coverups of abuses by thousands of priests.

Brilliantly acted by the year's most carefully assembled cast, and flawlessly directed by Tom McCarthy, "Spotlight" is one of the year's best films, a timeless story of tirelessly uncovering uncomfortable truths. It hits US theaters on Nov. 6.