

# CITY SLICKERS [1991]

by

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# SUMMARY

Mitch and Ed are facing a midlife crisis and decide that, as a birthday present to themselves, they will go for a two-week holiday consisting of a cattle drive from New Mexico to Colorado. They meet a crusty, “real” cowboy, Curly, who, through a series of comedic adventures teaches them about life. Fifteen years ago, Rath did the same to his mentor, Nicolai Anatoli Davydov, and has felt guilty ever since. Rath and Electra fall in love. Nicolai unexpectedly reappears, only to be killed. Rath kills Bain. The contract killer and the thief go off to live happily ever after with their \$20 million. (Rated R)

The film's beginning is unfortunate. The introductory bit about the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, is disorienting to most viewers. It is used to establish, very clumsily, that the boys do something weird every year in a desperate attempt to hold on to their now obviously ebbing youth. At the symbolic level, this bit of clunky film making fares far better. The final scene in Spain is when Mitch, having been slightly gored by a bull in the butt, is in a doctor's office being sewn up. We can only see the top half of his body on the operating table, the bottom half being draped. The doctor is working behind the drape. His friends are there urging him on to be brave. He comments to the doctor, "Don't sew up anything that should stay open." It does not take too much imagination to convert his operation into him giving birth. And birth is, after all, what this film is all about – the birth of a new man.

As portrayed by the film, the solution to the three buddies' problems of mid-life crisis is an interesting combination of masculine and feminine.

Each is missing a father figure: Ed threw his alcoholic abusive father out when he was sixteen and took care of his mother and sister himself. This did not leave him much of a childhood. The other could only communicate with his father by talking about baseball. Mitch's father's only comment on Mitch's birthday is that he is losing feeling in his left leg. The fathers are either absent, wimpy or noncommunicating. What is missing in each man's life is a father figure and spending a childhood with that father doing the customary father/son things.

Curly, the crazy professional cowboy, provides such a figure, especially for Mitch. There is good evidence in the film that Curly himself is the ultimate father – God. He first appears coming out of the sun. He has supernatural skills with weapons – knives, guns, and ropes – much as the Greek warrior gods. He produces fire from his body by lighting a match on his cheek. He magically stops a stampeding herd of cattle with a single shot from his gun. But more important, he is the archetypal font of wisdom. He tells Mitch that the key to life is finding out the one thing that you can commit to. Just after this he shows Mitch how to midwife the birth of a calf. Curly then kills the mother cow because she is dying and suffering.

Later there is another birth sequence that allows the three men to establish an adult relationship between them. Mitch again gives symbolic birth by rescuing a calf stuck in the river. But to accomplish this he needs the help of his friends. This is the first time in the film that they touch physically. They metaphorically birth each other and the cow from the river, they lay back exhausted and laugh. Suddenly the movie cuts to bringing in the herd and all three men's problems are solved.

The feminine way is one of giving birth – Mitch learns to be a physical midwife to a calf and learns to be a symbolic midwife to bring into existence his own commitment to a meaningful life. Another aspect of the feminine way is demonstrated during a discussion of baseball. The woman on the trail drive tells them that instead of discussing a ball game, women would talk about relations, about how emotional things are getting along, about an internal life.

This too the three men learn to do: they talk about the worst and their best days, and so on.

The masculine way is the way of the father. Especially Mitch receives wisdom from the magical father archetype and is cured. The others also resolve their problems at least partially from being exposed to his presence. And like the mythological God masquerading on Earth as a man, once the message is given, Curly dies a unique death – sitting up with his boots on.

Compared to other films of the genre, this is a genial if simplistic comedy that dispenses good, but ultimately shallow wisdom.