

could honor Stone for his direction and still not feel like they were endorsing his message or his approach. And Stone has won twice before, which means he has the respect (if not the affection) of the industry.

"Stone provides the blood rush and pageantry that people like. Also, he's stuck on the '60s and most of the population is too, so he's stuck in the right groove," says a "JFK" fan. "I feel like I went to college with Oliver Stone. Like he lived down the hall and smoked a lot of dope."

On the other hand, a Levinson supporter says, "Stone just shot his mouth off too much and it turned people off. His publicity job after the film came out was one of the greatest in movie history, and it helped the film. But people just got sick of him."

The Demme supporters point to his winning the Directors Guild award as a good omen. Though he's not a Hollywood mainstreamer, they say, the box office success of "Silence" caused his stock to rise. And if he wins, it'll be as much for his earlier films ("Melvin and Howard," "Married to the Mob") as for this one.

But he won't win. Stone's film is somehow just thought to be more important, more relevant. He's the safer bet.

This year, the Best Actor and Best Actress competition is wide open too, and that's because, as my most loquacious crystal-ball reader explains, there's no sympathy vote. "There's no old person, no cripple, no baby, no dwarf," she says. "Based on merit, Geena Davis should win. But, then again, she dumped Jeff Goldblum, so she misses out on the sympathy points. If Goldblum had dumped *her*, then it would be different. Now I think it'll be Susan Sarandon, because she's older and more respected."

Most of the people I talked to liked both Sarandon and Davis in "Thelma & Louise," but feared they would split the vote and cancel each other out. That leaves Jodie Foster for "Silence," Laura Dern for "Rambling Rose" and Bette Midler for "For the Boys." No one gives Midler a snowball's chance.

As a Foster fan dryly put it, "I'm assuming that Bette Midler's nomination is the Academy's way of showing that it has a sense of humor."

At this point, Foster, who won the Golden Globe, seems to have the best shot, simply because she played the strongest female character of the year. And, in contrast to Davis and Sarandon, her performance was more seri-

ous and actorly. Dern, on the other hand, was equally impressive, but she is perhaps too much of a newcomer to be taken seriously. If more people had seen "Rambling Rose," she might stand a better chance, but not enough did. (Only one of the people I interviewed had seen it.) Also, Foster has already won once (just three years ago, for "The Accused"), and this year she became a director too. She should be the winner.

The Christmas season caused a real turnaround in the Best Actor category.

THE WASHINGTON

For most of the year Anthony Hopkins was thought to be a sure thing for his portrayal of the insatiable Hannibal Lecter in "Silence." When he made an appearance on "The Tonight Show," the audience squealed as if he were a rock star. Then Nick Nolte and Beatty weighed in with stellar performances in "Prince of Tides" and "Bugsy," and the currents shifted. For many, Beatty gave the performance of his life as the mercurial Ben Siegel. And while many may have had reservations about "Prince of Tides," they were enthusiastic over Nolte's caustic but sensitive football coach. Robin Williams ("The Fisher King"), who's been nominated now three times, and Robert De Niro ("Cape Fear") don't seem to be in it.

Though there's some argument among my group, the consensus seems to be swinging in Nolte's favor. "I think Nolte is a sturdy sentimental favorite," one expert says. "He's a good actor who's never gotten his due and he's overcome personal hardship. Hopkins has the Brit thing going for him [the last two Best Actor awards went to Englishmen], and he was dazzlingly good. But I wouldn't be surprised if any of those three won it."

Another observes, "Beatty was perfectly suited for his part, but Nolte had the harder role. Harder to carry off. Also, I just can't stand Beatty."

They're on the right track, I think. It is Nolte's year, but also, Nolte will win because it will be a painless way for the Academy to recognize "Prince of Tides" and soothe its guilt over not nominating Streisand. That will spread the wealth around. Beatty and the "Bugsy" fans will have the Best Picture award, "JFK" will get Best Director,

and "Silence" can point to Foster's Best Actress award. The only real forgotten man will be "Boyz N the Hood" director John Singleton, who will have to settle for the nomination as his token prize.

Even "Rambling Rose" will walk away with a feather in its cap when Diane Ladd wins the Best Supporting Actress award. That's if sentiment comes through, as it will when Jack Palance wins the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. "How bad does Hollywood feel about aging? Just think of all the skin that has been cut away in the audience," comments one wit.

Palance's only real competition comes from Harvey Keitel and Ben Kingsley for "Bugsy," who will most likely steal votes from each other. Still, if you were casting the age vote on the women's side, you could choose Jessica Tandy for "Fried Green Tomatoes," but most people feel she's out of it because she won just two years ago for "Driving Miss Daisy." Juliette Lewis ("Cape Fear") is too young. Kate Nelligan ("Prince of Tides") has a slim chance. But if anyone's going to beat Ladd, it will be Mercedes Ruehl for "The Fisher King." That would be nice, but I think sentiment will win.

But anything could happen. You just watch, it's nuts out there. And you don't have to be an expert to know that.