



THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH, & THE WARDROBE

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe, director Andrew Adamson's imagining of the first book in C. S. Lewis' Narnia series, is almost childishly clunky, but it's nearly impossible to dislike. Geared, as it appears, toward a very young audience – I'd say seven or eight – the movie is sweet, and it's sincere, and it displays a welcome touch of fairy-tale simplicity. Despite the rather prosaic nature of its presentation,

Narnia

is one of those movies that, if it catches children at the right age, might linger in their memories for some time to come; it's just magical enough to suggest how magical it

should

have been. For kids who are finally seeing their beloved Narnia novel translated to the big screen, Adamson's

Narnia

will be good enough. It just doesn't have much to offer the

rest

of us. Adamson is co-director of the

Shrek

movies, and he does a fair enough job with the movie's CGI wonders; the lion Messiah Aslan (voiced, to the surprise of no one, by Liam Neeson) moves with regal grace, and the beavers who accompany the Pevensie children on their quest seem to be, for kids in the audience, enjoyably frisky characters. But all throughout the film, I had the nagging feeling that, if he was allowed, Adamson would have happily computer-generated his

humans

, too.

A couple of adult performers give the project some vitality – James McAvoy, as the faun Mr. Tumnus, is particularly charming – but the young actors assembled here, sadly, don't seem very connected to the material, or to one another. Adamson doesn't seem much interested in these children as characters, and subsequently, our interest in the story wanes – why care about *Narnia*'s

magical adventures when we're not connected to those on the adventures? There's nothing distinctive about the

Narnia

kids here; they don't relate to one another with any sense of familial bonding, and their line readings make the already flat dialogue sound perhaps worse than it actually is. Most damagingly, when the children take charge as warriors near the film's end, the finale becomes

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emotionally weightless – the young actors aren't strong enough to convey
experience

, and without a sense of how their characters have grown into the leaders the story demands, the climax provides no kick. The movie is like

Lord of the Rings

without hobbits.

Or majesty. Nearly scene for scene, *Narnia* feels almost distractingly cheap; the sets are supposed to be wondrous, yet they look more like leftovers from the filming of

The Princess Bride

. (Here, however, the tackiness of the backgrounds isn't being employed ironically.) Before we arrive in Narnia, Adamson pulls off a rather elegant unveiling of the wardrobe with slow-motion flourish, but amazingly, that's more magical than what happens to the kids once they're

inside

the wardrobe – from the start, the trees that greet the Pevensie children upon their entrance to this fantasy kingdom are too-perfectly covered in phony Movie-Set Snow, and the film's supposedly glorious vistas are woefully under-imagined.

Every once in a while Adamson comes through with a fine touch – there's a sequence in which Peter (William Moseley) does battle at a frozen waterfall that's rather majestic. Yet *Narnia* keeps aiming for grandeur, and it's saddled with a director who, put simply, isn't a visionary.

Some of Adamson's scenes strive so hard for the epic feel that the movie earns unintentional laughs; when a wannabe Enya begins warbling on the soundtrack, the film seems almost a
parody

of an epic. By the time that disappointing climactic battle does come, we're just relieved because there's finally some

spectacle

happening in the film, even if the imagery itself isn't memorable. The film's presentation is serviceable but uninspired – the grace of C.S. Lewis seems all but lost – and although

Narnia

is never dull, it's completely unsurprising; like

Harry Potter & the Goblet of Fire

, the movie is too literal-minded to boast much life outside its literary origins.

Except when Tilda Swinton is onscreen. Playing the nefarious White Witch, Swinton gives a performance of almost eroticized eccentricity; during her attack on Aslan, she seems truly turned on by her own power. Swinton spits out the witch's taunts and commands with true comic panache, and although her modern line deliveries don't match the period readings of her co-stars, you're grateful for the weirdness she brings to the movie. Despite its fantastical qualities, this *Narnia* is depressingly devoid of character; it might delight audiences for whom

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the book is still playing as a movie in their *heads*, but for those who haven't fully experienced the mysteries and adventures of Narnia previously, it's doubtful this film version will send a stampede of new fans C.S. Lewis' way.



SYRIANA

Syriana, by writer/director Stephen Gaghan, is an extremely tense and complex thriller involving American commerce with Middle Eastern oil concerns, and while I'm generally against the dumbing down of Hollywood movies, this might be an unusual case in which the work might have benefited from a *more* traditional narrative. As we travel across the globe in a series of subplots concerning resigned CIA operatives and shady corporate CEOs and the unscrupulous lawyers negotiating their deals, the sheer volume of information thrown at us is a little overwhelming, and characters' motivations oftentimes seem as hazy to the audience as they do – intentionally – to one another. *Syriana* is so laden with Machiavellian intrigue and reversals of character that you never quite get a grasp on it. Though all of the film's individual plot strands are well performed and gripping – one, involving two Pakistanis who become suicide bombers, is moving partly for being so unexpected – the film would probably have gained in power from being more streamlined; it's hard to connect to the film's moral outrage when you can barely glean who its participants are.

Yet if the movie, as a sum of its parts, is a disappointment, at least the parts themselves are mostly spectacular. Gaghan knows how to shoot scenes of violence and portent with maximum urgency – the kidnapping, and subsequent torture, of George Clooney's hired assassin is one of the more shocking sequences recent movies have offered us – but his true gifts appear to be on a human scale; he's a director who clearly loves actors, and despite the film's frenetic nature, he gives the audience plenty of time to luxuriate with the exquisitely subtle power of his cast. A whole slew of first-rate character actors – Jeffrey Wright, William Hurt, Christopher Plummer, David Clennon, Jamey Sheridan – seem to have an enormously good time playing sinister and untrustworthy, and Matt Damon, who plays a conflicted young analyst, gives one of his most focused turns in years. (In several scenes, he's matched sublimely well by Amanda Peet, who gives a heartbreaking performance as Damon's grieving spouse.) *Syriana*, as you can imagine, isn't a load of laughs, but there's so much extraordinary acting going on in the film that I, for one, felt nearly giddy.