

Lyra's Entangled with Bears. Oh, My!: "The Golden Compass" and "Noelle"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE GOLDEN COMPASS

I would love to give an account of how the little kids in the audience reacted to Chris Weitz's *The Golden Compass*

, but as school was in session during the Friday-afternoon screening I attended, there wasn't a single kid to be found. And I'd give you an account of how the *adults*

reacted, but in all honesty, I was too busy trying not to fall asleep to notice.

It's not that this adaptation of Phillip Pullman's fantasy novel - the first in the author's acclaimed *His Dark Materials*

trilogy - is bad, as there's nearly always something onscreen to tickle your eye; the film is certainly more stylish than 2005's indifferently designed

Chronicles of Narnia

. But for all the imagination on display,

The Golden Compass

shares with

Narnia

(and with four-fifths of the Harry Potter

movies) a dismaying lack of personality. The film's magical flourishes are weightless because

Weitz's work is pretty much

all

magical flourishes; the movie throws so many conceits and sub-plots and peripheral figures into

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the mix that you're given no reason to care about any of them, and even less reason to care about how the tale ends. (A good thing, too, as the tale

doesn't

end, which may peeve audiences not expecting to sit through two more movies just to get a proper finale to

this

one.) Much of the film takes place amidst slow-covered landscapes, and that seems fitting -

The Golden Compass

, too, is fluffy, chilly, and colorless.

The irony, of course, is that the one element that would almost certainly have given the film some character - Pullman's notorious, thinly veiled attacks on organized religion - has been all but completely excised; *The Golden Compass* is less *Narnia's* atheist *doppelgänger* than its vaguely agnostic cousin. Like the C.S. Lewis adaptation, Weitz's offering finds a pre-teen girl (the fine, unexceptional Dakota Blue Richards) trying to save fellow youths from the machinations of a wicked female ruler (Nicole Kidman) while participating in treacherous exploits and communicating with talkative animals. W.C. Fields would have

loathed

this movie, but in the opening scenes, at least, there's enough for the rest of us to enjoy; the mammal and bird "daemons," who serve as humans' ever-present sidekicks (and consciences), are a great idea beautifully visualized, and the Machiavellian intrigue is somewhat involving - at first.

Yet as Richards' Lyra is shucked from one set of bizarrely incongruous circumstances to another - among those she encounters are a motley group of buccaneers called Gyptians, a drawling cowpoke (the inevitable Sam Elliott), a sexy Glinda the Good Witch (an under-used Eva Green), and a grumpy polar bear (voiced by Ian McKellen in full "*You shall not pass!*" growl) - it's easy to find your mind wandering. Weitz keeps layering the film with more and more spectacle, to the point where it simply melds into one Greatest Hits montage of fantasy tropes - you can walk into the film with no prior knowledge of Pullman's works and still feel like you've been here many times before. (

The Golden Compass

feels just as generic as its trailer, only 40 times longer.) And the fact that, at almost two hours, the movie turns out to be just a preamble to adventures yet to come is a tad infuriating; you leave annoyed that you even

bothered

to expect answers to such questions as, "So just what the hell is 'Dust' supposed to represent?" (Daniel Craig, who portrays Lyra's uncle, actually has an unintentionally hilarious response to that query, when he tells his niece, "Dust is none of your business.")

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Nicole Kidman, at least, is a hoot. Her natural imperiousness and icy stare haven't been put to such good use in years, and Weitz's movie is a richer, more suggestively malevolent entertainment when she's around. (The actress performs the same rescue mission that Tilda Swinton did in *Narnia*.) Unfortunately, she's not around as often as you'd like. If any parents are concerned about *The Golden Compass'* anti-religion overtones, don't be; Weitz has handily erased them, like the profanities in an in-flight movie. You should be more concerned about staying alert for the drive home.



NOËLLE

Perhaps intended as counter-programming to *The Golden Compass'* anticipated heresy, this weekend also saw the debut of

Noëlle

, a non-secular, holiday-themed drama about a northeastern fishing community and the spiritual re-birth of the town's conflicted priest (played by writer/director David Wall, who boasts Robert Redford's hair and Luke Wilson's face). The film is a simple - but never simple-minded - story of charity and forgiveness, and far more enjoyable than Chris Weitz's movie; the relaxed, frequently funny banter among the mostly non-professional cast, coupled with a clear-eyed view of modern Christianity, is refreshing as all-get-out, and even when

Noëlle

turns melodramatic, the unadorned sincerity of the piece wins you over. For family audiences, it's the perfect antidote to the over-scaled whimsy of

The Golden Compass

, yet I encourage you to not, as I did, catch the films in a double-feature - two hours of *Compass*

' winter followed by 90 minutes of

Noëlle

's winter is, this early in December, almost too much to bear.