

Are You My Mother?: "Definitely, Maybe," "The Spiderwick Chronicles," and "Jumper"

Written by Mike Schulz

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DEFINITELY, MAYBE

If anyone's keeping track, writer-director Adam Brooks' *Definitely, Maybe* is the third romantic comedy of 2008 to climax with its protagonist taking a hasty cab ride to an inevitable romantic clinch and subsequent Happily Ever After. And that's about the only conventional element in it. I'm a little staggered by just how wonderful this movie is, as nothing about the film, from its cutesy setup to the presence of leading actor Ryan Reynolds, appeared to suggest anything more than the latest spin on a tireless (and, by now, tiresome) genre. Yet

Definitely, Maybe

is sensational, so smart and witty and refreshingly

grown-up

that, hours after seeing it, you may still find yourself in a great mood; the only times I stopped smiling at the movie were when I was laughing out loud.

I'm assuming you know the hook, which finds Abigail Breslin asking papa Reynolds for details on how he and her mother met and married; coyly, Reynolds tells the story through a flashback involving three women he loved - a sunny blonde (Elizabeth Banks), an alluring brunette (Rachel Weisz), and a feisty redhead (Isla Fisher) - any one of whom might be the child's biological mother. Despite the sitcom premise and convenient color-coding of Reynolds' paramours, though, nothing in *Definitely, Maybe* happens the way you expect it will.

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Showing as sharp an instinct for human interaction as he has for time and place - the Clinton era of the mid-'90s is deeply felt - Brooks is attuned to the magical unpredictability of romantic entanglements, and is careful to make each of Reynolds' affairs enticing, complicated, and incredibly specific. (And none of the movie's three gorgeous and gifted actresses - or the marvelously self-effacing Reynolds - has ever been better on-screen.) There are moments here, as when Reynolds and Fisher bond over cigarettes, or Weisz placates a former lover (a ferociously funny Kevin Kline), that seem almost startlingly real, and the continually sharp dialogue is oftentimes as insightful as it is clever; I could easily go on about the movie's nearly limitless supply of charms, but *Definitely, Maybe* is the absolute finest surprise of the young movie year, and deserves to surprise many others.



THE SPIDERWICK CHRONICLES

I caught *Definitely, Maybe* back-to-back with the *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, and strangely, both offerings concerned children coming to terms with their parents' divorce. Even more strangely, both were unbelievably good. If, like me, your eyes instantly glaze over at the prospect of another youth-oriented, CGI-laden fantasy involving heroic tykes, imaginary creatures, and the word "Chronicles" in the title, know that director Mark Waters' film is everything that 2005's

Narnia

adaptation isn't: namely, quick-witted, thrilling, funny, and oftentimes scary - and shocking - as hell. (Not every movie finds a father telling his son he loves him, only to have the little boy knife him in the stomach.)

Beginning with its zippy, 90-minute running length, *The Spiderwick Chronicles* seems determined to get right what so many children's entertainments of this sort get wrong. The adults, usually treated as ciphers, are seen as flawed but well-meaning three-dimensional figures, and given welcome interior life by the likes of Mary-Louise Parker, David Strathairn, and Joan Plowright. The scores of CGI monsters, who generally provide little more than visual diversion, are vicious and threatening, and lend the film true rooting interest - you're eager to see them vanquished. And with

In America

's Sarah Bolger as a sword-wielding teen and

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Freddie Highmore as her twin brothers (and consequently giving *two* first-rate performances), the youthful stars make an unexpected emotional connection with the material, and make you connect with it, too; the film *earns*

its sentimental asides.

The Spiderwick Chronicles

is a spellbinding entertainment, and easily the best work of its type since *Bridge to Terabithia*

-

albeit a

Terabithia

with

really

sharp teeth.



JUMPER

Doug Liman's *Jumper* is about a young man (played, if that's the correct word for it, by Hayden Christensen) with the ability to transport himself anywhere on the planet, and the problem for reviewers isn't so much detailing the film's flaws as it is determining which jokes to make about it. Do you go with "So why can't he transport himself into a decent script?" Or maybe "If only I could've transported myself into another auditorium ... "?

Sadly, whatever gags are invariably made about this hyperactively edited yet wholly inert quasi-superhero saga, they'll probably be more enjoyable than the movie itself, which finds our devil-may-care teleporter romancing a high-school crush (Rachel Bilson, a perfectly vapid partner for a soulless leading man), evading a merciless bounty hunter with a Q-tip hairdo (Samuel L. Jackson, sadly), and ... that's about it. *Jumper* feels like a setup for a sequel that no one wants anything to do with; even the insouciant, talented Jamie Bell - he who was once Billy Elliot - can't save this incoherent mishmash of insubstantial effects. And not for nothing, but it's probably too soon after

Awake for more snide, affectless voice-over narration by Hayden Christensen. "I used to be a chump," he

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explains. "Just like you." I hate to break it to you, pal - you still are one.