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[Yes, we're aware that this is the second week in a row in which the movie-review headline is some sort of "Superman" pun. Considering how many superhero movies have already been released this summer, we're impressed that we've kept the tally to merely two.]

HELLBOY II: THE GOLDEN ARMY

I found Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* considerably more entertaining than the writer/director's 2004 comic-book adaptation

Hellboy

, but let's keep in mind that I didn't really care for

Hellboy

much at all.

This time, at least, we're spared the devilish superhero's torturously incoherent origin story (a zippy refresher course is offered in the sequel's first few seconds), and the plot is slightly easier to follow (I'm pretty sure it's about a bad guy wanting to rule the world), and the pouting, petulant Selma Blair is a *little* less annoying here (having less screen time helps). Plus, of course, there are all those astonishing, and oftentimes wonderfully gross, del Toro-vian visuals to gaze upon, from the film's vicious horde of fanged, calcium-draining Tooth Fairies to the talking tumor to the skyscraper-sized plant that threatens to turn downtown Manhattan into the

Ew-w-w-perman: "Hellboy II: The Golden Army" and "Journey to the Center of the Earth"

Written by Mike Schulz

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world's largest botanical garden.

For the most part, though, I was still pretty bored. Like its precursor, *Hellboy II* uses its nifty effects and makeup to keep us from noticing how dull and unsatisfying the storyline is - a hissing albino wants a magical crown, Hellboy saves New York and *still*

gets no respect ... - and its script, co-written by Hellboy's creator, Mike Mignola, again seems to confuse personality with attitude. Just because Ron Perlman's ass-kicker scowls, drinks, and smokes a stogie doesn't mean he's Humphrey Bogart. (Nor does having lame punchlines delivered by characters in expensive Halloween outfits make the jokes themselves any funnier.)

If, however, you're in dire need of a cinematic-comic-book fix between last weekend and this, you could do worse than *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*. It's fun to look at and Seth McFarlane's vocal turn as a literally gaseous German scientist is enjoyable (though his

Young Frankenstein

-esque curtain line is an embarrassment), and I'd call this the only superhero movie of the summer in which you'll get to see a drunken, costumed freak sing along to Barry Manilow's "Can't Smile Without You," except it's too early to know exactly what Heath Ledger has planned for us in

The Dark Knight

.



JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

Is it finally time for the Motion Picture Association of America to establish a new film rating? I'm not talking about that proposed adults-only "A" rating that Roger Ebert has been shilling for these past two decades. I'm talking about one that can be safely snuggled between the "G" and "PG" - a "PG-7," perhaps? - so that early grade-schoolers don't have to feel dorky about attending a G-rated movie, and those of us *beyond* grade school can subsequently avoid films that most 12-year-olds would find moronic. (Suggested recipients of the PG-7:

Speed Racer

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,
Bratz

, and Ice Cube's
Are We There Yet?
comedies.)

Granted, I probably wouldn't have avoided the new *Journey to the Center of the Earth* even if it did get branded with this imaginary rating; I'm a fan of stars Brendan Fraser and Josh Hutcherson (that young man with the middle-aged-man presence), and I'm still immature enough to get a big kick out of 3D effects and menacing dinosaurs. But at least I wouldn't have been disappointed when director Eric Brevig's comic adventure didn't engender even a *whiff*

of danger or threat, or when our heroes would free-fall hundreds of feet - wisecracking all the way - and land on their backs without sustaining a major spinal injury, or when the seemingly savvy Hutcherson adopted a glow-in-the-dark, anthropomorphic bird as a traveling companion. (When the teen gets in a scrape, his winged pal shakes its head and looks at its feet, as if to say, "Ah, that poor bastard.") Certainly, children deserve their goofy, meaningless summertime diversions just as much as grown-ups deserve their

Iron Man

s and

Sex & the City

s. But for a movie that espouses the thrills of scientific discovery and the pleasures of reading - Jules Verne's 1864 novel is frequently referenced -

Journey to the Center of the Earth

is depressingly dunderheaded.

And how are the 3D effects, you might ask? Not bad - when the filmmakers remember to employ them. Yet the run-ins with Verne's prehistoric creatures are surprisingly few and far between, and long minutes pass in the film's second half without so much as an errant tree limb poking out at us. (We're occasionally reminded of the 3D when characters see something in the distance and, with an outstretched arm, point at it.) The best "Gotcha!" effects, in truth, occur well before the titular journey takes place, and the most enthusiastic crowd reaction came when Fraser brushed his teeth during the movie's prelude and, in full 3D glory, rinsed his mouth out. I shudder to think of what Adam Sandler or the Farrellys might do with this technology.