Written by Mike Schulz
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THE LOVELY BONES

The Lovely Bones, director Peter Jackson's long-awaited take on Alice Sebold's beloved novel, is a stupefyingly bad movie, the kind of big-screen debacle that makes you wonder if its entire creative team wasn't suffering through some hideous, collective blockage of talent all throughout filming. You can feel it going wrong in the first minutes, when a car's quick swerve results in an unconvincing and inappropriately comedic loss of a hubcap, but the shock of Jackson's endeavor is that practically nothing in it goes *right*. Tonally, just about every scene here feels a little bit off, and the rest feel way, *way* off; it's almost as if Jackson, screenwriting collaborators Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, and a (usually) wildly gifted cast purposely set out to make the absolute worst *Lovely Bones* adaptation possible.

Since I have friends who swear by the greatness of Sebold's work (which I haven't read), I'm prepared to give the author the benefit of the doubt. But let me see if I have this right: It's 1973, and a 14-year-old with the unlikely name of Susie Salmon (played here by Saoirse Ronan) is brutally murdered by a local creep (Stanley Tucci) with a strangled croak of a voice and ill-considered comb-over. From her vantage point at heaven's gates - which resemble a watery wheat field as seen through a *What Dreams May Come* filter - Susie watches as her dad (Mark Wahlberg) obsesses over her death, her boozy, chain-smoking grandma (Susan Sarandon) wafts from room to room, and her mom (Rachel Weisz) ditches town to pick fruit alongside migrant workers in Santa Rosa. Susie also watches as a dedicated cop (Michael Imperioli) fails

to notice Tucci's creepiness, even though he's all but signaling it with semaphore flags and a bullhorn. And when not weepy over the earthly goings-on, Susie actually has a great time in her other-worldly condition, dancing and sledding and giggling with new friends, and enjoying a tacky photo shoot out of the pages of a flower-child edition of
Glamour
magazine.

Surely Sebold's novel isn't as laughably awful as that description suggests. But with the exception of the preternaturally poised and accomplished Ronan, Jackson's movie is still laughably awful, a queasy and senseless blend of emotional manipulation, distractingly twee visuals (generally accompanied by cringe-inducing, Enya-esque wailing on the soundtrack), incoherent continuity (spring turns to winter over the course of a few *hours*), hopelessly phony dialogue, and shamefully overwrought acting. (Wahlberg and Tucci have given weaker screen performances than these, but only a couple, and the movie might mark new career lows for Weisz and Sarandon.)
The Lovely Bones
is a stultifyingly embarrassing experience, and in one scene - when granny "comically" upends the house by burning dinner and overloading the washing machine - you'd swear that Jackson just threw up his hands and walked away from the whole damned project. I wish I could've joined him.

THE BOOK OF ELI

In the post-apocalyptic thriller *The Book of Eli*, our sunglasses-sporting hero of the title (Denzel Washington) is first seen wandering through a gray and somber landscape, and comes upon what is, hand to my heart, the most ungodly-ugly cat I've ever seen in my life. It looks a bit like
Austin Powers
' Mr. Bigglesworth crossed with Gollum, yet before this hissing horror has the chance to take residence in our nightmares forever, Washington's Eli whips out a bow and arrow and delivers it a fatal shot through the heart. I liked the guy immediately. Granted, he lost some of his appeal when he cooked and ate the feline in the film's subsequent scene, but at least he had the decency to share a few morsels with a nearby mouse.

So begins *The Book of Eli*, a crass, largely ridiculous, and thoroughly entertaining neo-Western by directing brothers Allen and Albert Hughes. Combining a little of *Mad Max*, a little of *Deadwood*, and a whole lot of *The Road* - the recent film version for which this movie largely resembles - the Hughes' first feature since 2001's *From Hell* is one of those B-movies that you can't rationalize enjoying as much as you do; even its most derivative and distractingly stylized hooks are part of its charm. The nomadic Eli attempts to get the titular tome to the West Coast, a sneering heavy with bad skin (the gloriously hambone Gary Oldman) tries to steal it, and it's all as silly and satisfying as you could want, especially when Mila Kunis shows up as the feisty sidekick to Washington's dour loner. (The staggeringly pretty Kunis may be miscast here, but it's heartening to see that a world recovering from nuclear catastrophe is not necessarily a world devoid of hair conditioner and access to eyebrow-waxing.) The Hugheses pull off some wonderfully inventive action scenes - the best is a silhouetted, unbroken shot of Eli dispatching a half-dozen assailants with a knife, their limbs sailing from their torsos - and happily, they're genre helmers with a true feel for character; given plenty of breathing room, performers as diverse as Jennifer Beals, Ray Stevenson, and Michael Gambon make sizable impressions. (Tom Waits, bless his gravelly soul, plays an engineering whiz who'll happily loan out his services in exchange for ChapStick and some KFC wet naps.) Sure, it's dopey, and its climactic plot twist feels like a terrible cheat. But the film is a more-than-easy way to pass two hours during the January doldrums, and, it's almost a shock to discover, it isn't alone; taken with the 2010 releases *Youth in Revolt* and *Daybreakers*, *The Book of Eli* suggests that we may have to re-think that cliché about this month being a traditional dumping ground for Hollywood's worst. True, I haven't yet caught the Amy Adams romance *Leap Year*, but otherwise, so far, so fine.

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