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THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER

In the third cinematic installment of C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, the clumsily titled *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

, we're introduced to a character new to the franchise – a grouchy little snot named Eustace Scrubb. The pre-adolescent cousin to the young heroes of 2005's

The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe

and 2008's

Prince Caspian,

this kid, played by Will Poulter, is truly a piece of work – closed-minded, miserly, cowardly, and prone to explosively motor-mouthed bouts of hysteria. With his constantly knit brow and the voice of an aggrieved, middle-aged schoolmarm, Poulter's Eustace is about the most obnoxious, potentially alienating figure that you could ever imagine popping into this fantasy saga. He's also so side-splittingly funny that he almost singlehandedly makes

Dawn Treader

not just enjoyable, but easily the most surprising screen

Narnia

to date.

And lord knows this series needs all the surprise it can get, because even with the gifted Michael Apted assuming the directorial reins from the previous films' Andrew Adamson, *Dawn*

Lewis and Lark: "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader" and "The Tourist"

Written by Mike Schulz

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Treader

is frequently bland to the point of total irrelevance. Slack-jawed Pevensie children (albeit only Skandar Keynes' Edmund and Georgie Henley's Lucy this time) stare at CGI landscapes, men and beast-men natter away about meaningless battles to come and the *e-e-e-evil*

that lies ahead, lessons about Bravery and Courage and Trusting in Talking Animals are learned – you know the drill. In fairness, we are treated to occasional visual wonders; despite a predictably murky 3D presentation, the images of rolling green fog and the climactic, "*Release the Kraken!*

"-esque sea monster are pretty cool. But as with its predecessors, Apted's movie, for too much of its length, seems to take its cue from the dulcet, baritone growl of Liam Neeson's Aslan;

Dawn Treader

is less a rip-roaring adventure than a soothing, dull, vaguely nonsecular bedtime story.

At least, that's what it generally is whenever Poulter's Eustace is off-screen – which, thankfully, isn't very often. Apted can't do much with Keynes, Henley, or Ben Barnes, who plays the stalwart, now-King Caspian; the young actors are, once again, wholly earnest and unfaillingly uninteresting. (William Moseley's Peter and Anna Popplewell's Susan Pevensie make mere cameo appearances here, which does alleviate some of the expected boredom.) Yet he proves positively masterful in his direction of Poulter, who inches perilously close to completely over-the-top without ever once tumbling. I'm a little hesitant about describing just how marvelous I think Poulter is, since he might seem absolutely unbearable to viewers who

like

their

Narnia

youths pleasant and vapid. But whether he's defending himself against accusations of rank odor ("That is an

outrageous

lie! I won the school hygiene award two years running!") or grounding the bizarre goings-on in a pique of real-world incredulity ("For reasons beyond my comprehension, we are taking the advice of an old fool who doesn't own a razor"), Poulter's Eustace is a stunningly singular, and hilarious, creation. He may first appear to be a clichéd, over-privileged drip, but you soon realize that you've never before encountered anyone quite like him.

Happily, there are other random pleasures to be found in *Dawn Treader*. There's a rather lovely subplot in which Lucy, reciting a magic spell, greedily transforms herself into the most beautiful girl in the world – which, for Lucy, turns out to be her older sister. A cadre of invisible, comically unthreatening forest ruffians delivers some fun, as does Simon Pegg, who takes over for an absent Eddie Izzard, and offers plenty of vocal amusement as the computer-generated warrior mouse Reepicheep. Plus, for all of 15 total seconds, Tilda Swinton – bless her seductive, malevolent soul – returns as an apparition of the villainous White Witch. (It would no doubt end badly for him, but when this spectre tempted Edmund to ditch his pals and join her in a life of

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unapologetic

e-e-e-evil-

ness, Swinton cooed the offer with such devilish panache that it took all of my strength not to cry, "Do it, Edmund!

Do it

!") For as little as I look forward to the

Chronicles of Narnia

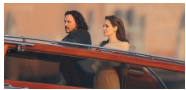
adventures, I'm delighted, at least, that the series appears to be gradually improving with each new offering. And with

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

, I'm

really

delighted to make the on-screen acquaintance of Will Poulter, who just might be reason enough to keep going to the movies over the next 70 years.



THE TOURIST

Director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's suspense thriller *The Tourist* is a great-looking achievement. Scratch that: It's a

ridiculously

great-looking achievement. From the opening scene that finds radiant mystery woman Angelina Jolie boarding a train to Venice, to the brazen flirtation between Jolie's vixen and Johnny Depp's dweebish math professor, to the pair's arrival at a chi-chi luxury hotel via water taxi, you may feel like drowning in the movie's luxurious visuals, and that includes the faces of its stars; the movie is practically a cinematic overdose of gorgeousness. So why, when Jolie offered Depp another of her elusive smiles some 15 minutes into the picture, did I find myself praying for just one shot of the actress with lipstick on her teeth?

Despite its seemingly featherweight plot – in which Depp's Wisconsin native is misidentified as the man who stole \$2.3 billion from a burly European gangster – *The Tourist* doesn't offer playfulness, exactly. It offers the

illusion

of playfulness, with its exotic locales and dreamy actors only partially succeeding in masking the film's leaden, clunky heaviness of spirit. There are a few overt jokes, including a running gag that finds Depp continually conversing with Italians in Spanish, but overall the film is too

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carefully composed and sluggishly timed to be much fun; given the staging, it's even difficult to tell if numerous scenes are meant to be funny or are just kind of inept. (During one Venetian escape, Jolie and Depp make a getaway from murderous thugs in a boat that reaches speeds of up to one knot, and nothing about the sequence suggests that we should be laughing, even though several of us

are

.) For all of its beauty,

The Tourist

is a pokey drag, and for all of

their

beauty, the film's leads don't share even the slightest romantic rapport; Jolie appears more turned on by herself than by her co-star. (Given how fabulous she looks, you can't really blame her.) Watching Jolie and Depp exchange come-hither glances should be a blast, but their relationship here is so under-cooked that you can't fathom what, beyond the understandable surface appeal, could possibly connect the two; after the sex and five minutes spent discussing how pretty they are, what in hell would these characters ever

talk

about?