

## A Sinking Heart Over "Atlantis": "Hearts in Atlantis" and "Don't Say a Word"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 02 October 2001 18:00

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### **HEARTS IN ATLANTIS**

Given current events, are audiences now so hungry for nostalgic, nonthreatening entertainment that they'll happily accept something as profoundly awful as *Hearts in Atlantis*? If so, you certainly can't blame them, but Lord knows they deserve better than this mawkish Stephen King adaptation, a gooey and incoherent fable that gets more maddening as it progresses. I have friends who swear by the greatness of King's novel (unread by me), but the film version comes off as a mixture of the feyest aspects of the mostly terrific

*Stand by Me*

(based on King's novella

*The Body*

) and the metaphysical hokiness of King's

*The Green Mile*

. It proves to be a nearly unbearable combination, and yet something tells me that this wimpy, unfocused film could turn into a big hit among those who believe, as its author apparently does, that America died right about the time King turned 13.

Set at the tail end of the '50s, *Hearts in Atlantis* introduces us to 11-year-old Bobby Garfield (Anton Yelchin), who lives with his brittle, money-conscious mother (Hope Davis) and Ted Brautigan (Anthony Hopkins), a drifter who rents out the Garfields' attic. Mom distrusts Ted immediately, but Bobby develops a bond with the man, one made more pronounced when it is

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revealed that Ted has psychic abilities and is occasionally able –

*The Green Mile*

, anyone? – to transfer his powers to Bobby. So begins this coming-of-age tale, in which Bobby will, in one fateful season, stand up to the local bully, share a first kiss, and protect Ted from the shadowy figures called the Low Men, who want Ted for their own sinister purposes.

With the exception of that derivative, let's-share-the-psychic-wealth subplot, there's nothing inherently offensive about this, but it's amazing how director Scott Hicks and screenwriter William Goldman manage to muck up just about everything in sight. You can tell in the first 20 minutes that Hicks is going to hideously overdo the autumnal incandescence of it all – with golden-hued leaves falling in scene after scene, the movie doesn't need a director so much as it needs a rake – and his staging is so clumsy that the scene in which Bobby finally kisses the girl of his dreams (Mika Boorem), which is the one moment that *should* have a breathless, fairy-tale quality – we're told by Ted that it will be "the kiss by which all future kisses will be measured" – feels as drably awkward as something out of

*American Pie: The Pre-Teen Years*

.

Having said that, though, it's unclear how any of the film's scenes should be directed, given the unintentional nuttiness of Goldman's script. Generally, I enjoy movies in which everything isn't explicitly spelled out for the audience, but you have to do so much work in *Hearts in Atlantis* that it's as if the filmmakers, Goldman in particular, didn't do

*any*

. The movie opens, à la

*Stand by Me*

, with the adult Bobby (David Morse) grieving at the death of a childhood friend named Sully, but when we finally meet this friend in the film's extended flashback, his relationship with Bobby appears unrealized and completely trivial; you can't believe Bobby and Sully shared anything more than a casual acquaintanceship. Crucial scenes seem to be missing from Ted's and Bobby's bonding sequences – Bobby appears to discover Ted's psychic abilities off-camera – and the character of Bobby's mother is so badly established that when this neurotic harpy is eventually revealed as merely naive and misunderstood, it's rather ridiculous.

Worst of all is the presentation of the Low Men, whom Ted asks Bobby to watch out for. I don't mind that we're not told specifically what their agenda is – they have the vaguely menacing air of governmental spooks – but one scene in particular continues to trouble me: While hiding from the Low Men in the back seat of a car, Ted tells Bobby to "clear his mind," as if that's the only way the Low Men won't find them. Doesn't that imply that the Low Men themselves are psychic? And if that's the case, (a) shouldn't we at least be told why psychics would want to terrorize and hunt down a fellow psychic, and (b) isn't this a much more interesting story than the blasé

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pre-pubescent fantasy *Hearts in Atlantis* is giving us?

Thank God for Anthony Hopkins, whose soothing vocal rhythms clash with his slightly venomous unpredictability, creating the only drama in the film. Like Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile*

, he's trapped in one of those saintly magician roles that an actor can't possibly redeem, but also like Duncan, he certainly gives it a good shot. Young Anton Yelchin uses his eyes expressively, but he and Miss Boorem are stuck enacting King's worst failing as a writer, which William Goldman faithfully reproduces (and which

*Stand by Me*

's screenwriters deftly sidestepped): He can't write believable dialogue for children. Every word that comes out of their mouths sounds brazenly phony, as faux-lyrical as the film's slow-motion swimming sequences or its bizarre wrap-up in which Bobby, in voice-over narration, explains how his friendship with Ted "opened up the future for me" (another off-camera occurrence, I'm guessing). The film's heart may be in Atlantis, but its brains are somewhere even less accessible.



### ***DON'T SAY A WORD***

The Michael Douglas thriller *Don't Say a Word* is a typically ludicrous and unpleasant Michael Douglas thriller, meaning that the storyline – which involves the kidnapping of Douglas's young daughter and his attempts to save her – is nearly as distasteful as the sight of Douglas giving his onscreen wife (the half-his-age Famke Janssen) a sponge bath and dancing around the kitchen making French toast. But coming on the heels of the tragedy of September 11, the movie's release feels all the more inappropriate; now is not the time to watch panicked New Yorkers being indiscriminately terrorized and attacked by men with guns, nor a time to watch one of the film's bad guys meet his end by being buried alive under tons of dirt and rubble for a rousing "Yeah, Douglas *got* that sonofabitch!" effect. Hollywood has shown surprising sensitivity in terms of what films they refuse to release at present; how did this one slip through?

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*Don't Say a Word* itself is directed in competent-hack fashion by Gary Fleder, and shows co-stars Janssen, Oliver Platt, and Brittany Murphy trying their best to give it some human dimension. (Murphy, as a dangerously smart nutjob, gives a potent performance by doing less scenery-chewing than we expect her to.) But while the film is quickly paced, it isn't *fun*

(unlike the current guilty pleasure

*The Glass House*

), and it wouldn't have been even a month ago; in addition to the critically poor timing of its release, the movie's unwavering mediocrity would, in itself, make the movie easy to avoid.