



Written by on June 9, 2008

Back to Narnia With Prince Caspian

Then came Peter Jackson and *Lord of the Rings*, a film trilogy of uneven but undeniable magnificence that set the tone for a glut of new fantasy epics that tried to exploit the wizardry of computer-generated images (CGI) as Jackson's Weta Workshops had done. *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, *Harry Potter*, *Eragon*, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, among many others, have dazzled audiences with magical duels, CGI monsters, and computer-generated set-piece battles all cast in the mold of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* director Andrew Adamson is but the latest of Peter Jackson's epigones, and therein lies the problem. The unhappy truth is that the new *Narnia* film is long on spectacle but falls a bit short in the substance department, especially by contrast with the original novel that gave it life.



C.S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the rest of the *Narnia* series, is a warmhearted child's tale about faith and renewal, featuring, like most of the other books, the aloof and enigmatic lion Aslan, the Christ figure in the world of *Narnia*. In this story, in which the four Pevensie children, Lucy, Susan, Peter, and Edmund, return to *Narnia* a year older and a bit more jaded, Aslan is somewhat elusive and *Narnia* itself changed almost beyond recognition.

It turns out that 1,300 years have passed since the Pevensies, now the stuff of mythology and rock carvings, last frolicked with satyrs and tree spirits in *Narnia*'s pristine glades. The magnificent palace of Cair Paravel, where Lucy and the others once reigned as monarchs, is fallen into ruin, and *Narnia*'s original residents — talking animals, centaurs, griffins, and the like — have hidden in the deep forests, and a war-like race of humans, the Telmarines, has conquered and spoiled the land.

One of the Telmarines, young Prince Caspian, is a good-hearted lad and heir to the throne of *Narnia*, but his wicked uncle Miraz has usurped the throne and, having just produced a son of his own, tries to have Caspian assassinated. The young prince, warned by his tutor, who has told him the truth about *Narnian* history, flees into the forest and stumbles upon a redoubt of *Narnia*'s fugitive talking animals and assorted fairy-tale creatures. Needing help to overthrow the Telmarine tyrants, Caspian blows a magic horn to summon the kings and queens of old — none other than the four Pevensies. Lucy, Susan, Peter, and Edmund are yanked out of war-torn England and eventually join with Caspian to fight the Telmarine armies — with the help of Aslan, naturally enough.

All of these plot elements the film retails faithfully enough. But director Adamson, in the interest of making *Narnia* a "dirtier, grittier, darker place" as well as more "realistic" (his words), has thrown in



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entire, decidedly non-Lewis-esque plot elements to recast the story in the mold of modern Hollywood expectations. There's a gratuitous raid on the Telmarines' stronghold, fueled by the hubris of Peter, that goes disastrously wrong after Caspian becomes blinded by a desire for bloody revenge on the man who killed his father. There's also a sometimes bitter rivalry between Caspian and Peter, whereas in the book, the two become immediate friends.

And there are the battles. In contrast to the book, in which bloodletting plays a diminished role and the Telmarines are routed fairly quickly, the latter third of the film is little more than nonstop swordplay, clanking mangonels, and clashing battle lines — in a word, the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in Tolkien's masterpiece, but without the ringwraiths or the gravitas. Maybe the tastes of 21st-century movie viewers have adjusted to take in longer and longer tranches of CGI mayhem without pining for plotlines or character development. But for this viewer, the exaggerated conflicts, in which four frail children somehow survive an onslaught of flying boulders and heavily armored professional infantry and cavalry, was too much to take seriously.

On the plus side, *Prince Caspian*, like its predecessor but like precious little else emanating from Hollywood these days, is utterly devoid of compromising material that has invaded even the most innocuous children's fare (see the *Shrek* series or almost any Pixar film, for example, for unwelcome contrasts), like sly double-entendres aimed at the adults, crude humor related to bodily functions, and so forth. Absent too is the stifling political correctness that hobbles so much modern cinema, although some viewers may find the deliberate parallels between the wicked Telmarines and the Spanish conquistadors hard to take. Possibly the presence of Lewis' adopted son, Douglas Gresham, in a consulting role helped to moderate Hollywood's more intemperate instincts and maintain an elevated tone.

The unmistakable Christ allegory in Aslan is kept intact, all of Hollywood's knee-jerk anti-Christian biases notwithstanding. As for *Narnia's* overall feel, the look of the film, filmed in New Zealand and scenic eastern European mountains, is breathtaking and the dialog, while stilted in parts, at least attempts to capture the book's high-mindedness.

Nevertheless, Hollywood always seems to miss the mark, however slightly, when presented with genuinely high-concept material like the *Narnia* books. The highest of themes and subject matter — God, divine redemption, faith, and so on — are simply too much for Hollywood's talented secularists to get their minds around. Whenever they try, as in *Prince Caspian*, the presentation always feels forced, as if actors like Liam Neeson (who voices Aslan) are struggling to keep a straight face. This is not too surprising coming from the corrupt guild whose summer blockbusters this year include the likes of *Sex and the City*. Giving *Narnia* to Hollywood is akin to asking the Rolling Stones to cover Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. A show you will certainly get, but the spirit of the original will be greatly diminished, to say the least.

This, then, is the sum of *Prince Caspian*: a visually and technically magnificent family-friendly film, as perfect a homage to C.S. Lewis as modern Hollywood is likely to conjure, but withal a flawed, top-heavy, needlessly drawn-out epic that will leave many theatergoers, especially those familiar with the source material, exhausted from sensory overload.

With modern computer graphics, there is literally nothing that the imagination can conjure that cannot be represented realistically on the silver screen. For that reason, longtime fans of epic fantasy, like this writer, have been waiting anxiously for Hollywood to do for the fantasy film what *Stagecoach* did for the Western, *Rear Window* for the thriller, *The Maltese Falcon* for film noir, or *Gone With the Wind* for the



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historical epic. We are waiting, in a word, for a fantasy tour de force for the ages, which even *Lord of the Rings*, for all its just-deserved accolades, did not quite accomplish. After *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, we are still waiting.



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