

Issue 12: Film Reviews

The Spiderwick Chronicles

Dir: Mark Waters, US, 2008

A Review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

The Spiderwick Chronicles (2008), directed by Mark Waters, is a somewhat disappointing adaptation of five short fantasy novels for child readers by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, who were also executive producers for the film. The storyline of the film version, as in the books, offers a variant on a familiar trope: a group of children face and overthrow the supreme threat of a Dark Lord and his supernatural allies. The film takes up only about three-quarters of the books' episodes, in which the three Grace children discover and explore the supernatural dimensions of our world, face monsters and devise ways to save themselves and all other good denizens of earth, natural and supernatural. In reducing the number of episodes, the film also greatly reduces the number of deaths. Forces of evil are gleefully despatched to death in both books and film, but the film entirely loses the moral qualms expressed by the novels' children when they bring themselves to kill for the first time. This act of censorship leaves the film in danger of amounting to little more than a sensationalist quest-and-destroy fantasy.

The overall plot of film and books is the same. Nine-year-old Jared Grace (played by Freddie Highmore) discovers his great-great-uncle Arthur's hidden Field Guide to the world of faerie when his family (Mum, played tearfully by Mary-Louise Parker; sister Mallory, played by Sarah Bolger and Jared's twin, Simon, also played by Highmore) moves to a ramshackle house inhabited by a guardian Brownie (voiced by Martin Short). Opening this book triggers a quest by Faerie's evil inhabitants, led by Mulgarath (a shambling Nick Nolte) to gain possession of it so that they can dominate all other life-forms. Jared convinces his siblings, and eventually also his mother, that fairy folk exist. Inevitably the children prevail, with the help of their great-aunt Lucinda (Joan Plowright's twinkling-eyed wisdom is reminiscent of Rowling's Dumbledore) and her long-lost father Arthur (a cameo role for David Strathairn, who provides the strongest human characterisation in the film).

There are many more echoes of other fantasy novels and films to be found in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, to the point where its plot and special effects sometimes descend into cliché. Like C. S. Lewis's Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew* (the prequel to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), Uncle Arthur has devised gadgets that open a way between our world and that of the supernatural, with no consideration of the cost to his family. Like Bastian in the film version of *The NeverEnding Story* and also like Harry Potter in the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Jared is given an exhilarating ride on the back of a magical flying beast, in this case a griffin that is strongly reminiscent of *Azkaban's* hippogriff. Also vividly reminiscent of this Harry Potter film is the

climactic battle between the monster and child hero atop the house's capacious roof (the original novel located this last battle on a glorified rubbish dump).

As in *The Lord of the Rings*, forces of evil quest to gain possession of an item of magical power, in this case the book, to use it for supreme ill, while the forces of good attempt to hide or destroy it; especially Tolkienesque is the scene in which the children try, and fail, to burn the book. The film's evocation of these earlier quests is ill-advised in that its scale is so much smaller. Narnian quests involve the fate of countries and worlds. Tolkien's quest involves the whole of Middle Earth and Harry Potter's actions save the human race: in contrast, the action of *Spiderwick* is all very localised, taking place around the house and within comfortable walking distance of it. The one exception is the children's griffin ride to the realm of the sylphs, a clear candidate for reincarnation as a theme park ride. *Spiderwick's* monsters are almost all small and toad-like. All of this makes it difficult for the film to portray the evil Mulgarath as a credible threat to the world, since his entire army has so much trouble penetrating the defences of a single house.

The film begins strongly, with each of the three child characters given interesting characteristics: Simon is a pet-loving pacifist, Mallory a bossy fencer and Jared sullenly resents his father's absence. Any subtleties of characterisation become lost as the quest proceeds. Simon and Mallory are reduced to the role of helper and eventually vanish from the story (unlike the original book version of events). At the end, it is Jared who is acknowledged as quest-hero and defender of the family, as if it had been he alone who had produced all the clever ideas and brave deeds that defended the family and the world. Such an ending rings as false as the film's assertion that its Dark Lord poses a supreme threat to all of earth's inhabitants.

With a further change to the novels, the director steepens the film's ending in sentimentality. Lucinda Spiderwick, now in her eighties, has longed all her life for her father to return. The books provide a strong resolution to this subsidiary plot, when Arthur momentarily returns from an existence suspended in time to rejoin his beloved daughter in the full knowledge that he will now die, suddenly weighed with all the decades from which his faerie existence has preserved him. In the film version, he does not die; instead, his daughter chooses to join him in suspended time, regressing to her six-year-old self, and the two ascend to sylph-heaven, hand in hand. Not only does this new ending erase all her grief by erasing her years of living in the human world; it also denies the film's truth about how Arthur existed all those years with the sylphs, experiencing no passage of time at all. By this logic, reunited father and daughter will be able to experience only one suspended instant together—arguably a form of living death.

Such a conclusion invites a Freudian reading in which the daughter can be interpreted as fulfilling her Oedipal desire for the total possession of her father's affections. Mother has gone, presumably dead from natural causes, and when Arthur apologises to his child for having neglected her, he calls her his sole treasure: "I lost sight of the magical creature I had." There is no mention of any love for his wife or regret for the grief she may have felt when he disappeared. These Oedipal implications are reinforced in a curious sequence in which father places his youthful ringed hand in his daughter's aged hand, only to have her transform into a child holding his ringed hand in hers. It is far from clear in this rapid sequence whose hand is whose (some reflection on the relative ages of the characters is needed to make sense of it) and the confusion a viewer may well experience gives

some weight to the suggestion of a wedding exchange of rings between father and daughter, to the total exclusion of all other human beings for the rest of their existence.

The film also concludes with an Oedipal resolution for Jared and his mother. Jared's father (a brief appearance by Andrew McCarthy) is his son's ideal and Jared struggles to accept the idea that his dad has abandoned the family to live with another woman. Mulgarath almost succeeds in tricking Jared into giving him the book by disguising himself as ideal dad, but Jared recognises the deception just in time and stabs Mulgarath-dad to death. He is thus given the opportunity to kill dad-as-monster with impunity, indeed with the mother's full approval. At the end of the film, Jared's siblings have virtually disappeared from the action and Jared's mother apologises to him and asks him to stay with her, saying, "Who else is going to protect us?" This sequence unites Jared as a substitute dad with Mum, who embraces him as her new beloved. This Oedipal reading gives psychological grounds for the film's neglect of Simon and Mallory Grace's adventures in the novels. The books' Mallory is just beginning to explore extra-familial sexual relationships, moving beyond Oedipal constraints, and both children's exploits threaten Jared's status as heroic defender.

The two quest resolutions of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, for Jared and Lucinda, reinforce the domestic nature of this drama. What looked like a rather creaky version of child hero quest against Dark Lord ends up in unqualified endorsement of what might be termed psychological incest, especially in the case of Lucinda and her father. The fantasy quest loses its importance in comparison to the binding love between parent and child. The film's real quest, and the reason why its fantasy adventure is ultimately a disappointment, is not to conquer the Dark Lord and save the world but to supplant the same-gender parent and unite with the opposite-gender parent in Oedipal bliss guaranteed in perpetuity.

[ABOUT](#) | [EDITORIAL BOARD](#) | [ADVISORY BOARD](#) | [SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#) | [LINKS](#) | [ARCHIVE](#)

Institute of Film & Television Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
E-Mail: scope@nottingham.ac.uk | Tel: +44 (0)115 951 4261 | Fax: +44 (0)115 951 4270

CSS :: XHTML