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'The Hobbit' an entertaining and inspiring hero's tale

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Dec. 13, 2012 NCR Today

In the time before the great contests recorded in "The Lord of the Rings," the Shire, hobbit zone of Middle Earth, is a gentle place, and hobbit Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) is comfortable in his hobbit hole home. He loves his books and appears to be rather fussy. Enter the wizard Gandalf the Grey (Ian McKellan), who tries to entice Bilbo to come on an adventure. Bilbo is reluctant, but Gandalf has invited a band of 13 dwarves, led by Thorin (Richard Armitage), to gather at Bilbo's home. Bilbo does not impress the dwarves, especially Thorin, so Gandalf says the hobbit is a burglar and his skills will be of use to them on the journey. Gandalf also has a map that will help them achieve their goal. Rather than convince the hobbit to join them, the dwarves' antics and brawling at the dinner table more than put him off. He accepts, then refuses to go, then has a change of heart.

The adventure is a solemn task: to reclaim the dwarf kingdom at Lonely Mountain that was conquered by Smaug the dragon during the time of Thorin's father. The elves, led by Thranduil (Lee Pace), refused to come to the aid of the dwarves so they could preserve their own kingdom, and Thorin is still bitter and does not trust them. Gandalf tricks the band to visit Rivendell and consult Elrond (Hugo Weaving), an immortal elf who can translate the runes on swords taken from the cave of trolls. Elrond reads the map for them as well. Galadriel (Cate Blanchett), the "fairest of all the elves in Middle Earth," says she will be with the band when they need her most.

The adventurers trek across harsh terrain and meet hostile creatures all along the way. They help themselves to the gold and weapons the trolls have stockpiled. After harrowing skirmishes in the goblin tunnels, Bilbo meets the dark creature Gollum (Andy Serkis), who loses a golden ring that Bilbo pockets. The ring's power protects Bilbo Baggins and the band.

"The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" is the first of a new trilogy of films from Academy Award-winning director Peter Jackson. His previous "Lord of the Rings" swept the cinematic world between 2001 and 2003, to the delight of author J.R.R. Tolkien fans everywhere.

Those familiar with the original novel "The Hobbit" (1937) will note some subtle changes in this film version. However, co-writers Jackson, Philippa Boyens, Fran Walsh and Guillermo del Toro referenced additional source material Tolkien added over the years to his first hobbit story.

The press screening I attended featured the 3-D version in 48 frames per second (normal film is 24 FPS). Visually, it was a lot to get used to. At times, the action went so fast it seemed comical. For most of the film, it was like watching a play on PBS. The special effects and props are obvious, and there is no attempt to persuade the audience that the film might be real; its fiction is never in doubt except in the sweeping aerial shots of the stunning New Zealand landscape. This stilted look may disappoint fans of the fantasy universe created by previous films. I suspect that video gamers, however, won't notice much difference between the film and what they see on their computer monitors if they choose this format at the cinema. If 48 FPS in 3-D is the future, then the future is here.

I think there are only two females in this movie, Galadriel and a non-speaking lady hobbit in the Shire. This

dearth of female characters reflects the original story, true, but calls on audiences and filmmakers to ponder, once again, why Tolkien left us out of his Middle Earth stories, and why Hollywood has such a difficult time telling stories about heroic women. The answer is probably that Tolkien was emulating Norse and Anglo-Saxon myths, among others, in which stories of male figures dominate. As for the film industry, though more than 10 of the top 200 films released commercially in the U.S. this year featured females in heroic lead roles, it's really not good enough.

The themes of the story reflect those Tolkien took up in "The Lord of the Rings" series, from the macro -- the abuse of power, threats to the environment, racism, the effects of greed, isolationism -- to the micro -- anger, forgiveness, selfishness, pride, greed, humility, community, courage, harmony, generosity and heroism.

There is one almost-mystical scene when a colorful butterfly appears, a stark contract to the dark, ruined terrain. It is a breath of hope.

Overall, I liked Peter Jackson's movie. It's entertaining, inspiring and highly creative. The world of "The Hobbit" felt familiar to me, probably because so many characters from "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy return. There's even a brief appearance by Frodo, played by Elijah Wood. The story is complicated but smooth, and not so complex that I felt lost. There is quite a bit of humor, some of the adolescent male dwarf variety, so the peril, though intense, is not heavy and dark. The musical score, composed by Howard Shore, is quite beautiful and hints at motifs from "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, for which Shore also composed.

The key performances are Martin Freeman's slightly obsessive and believable Bilbo and Richard Armitage's compelling and conflicted Thorin. Andy Serkis brings to life, once again, the sad and deeply disturbed Gollum

"The Hobbit" is about three hours long, so skip your morning coffee. You can safely take a break, though, in the scene where the band of adventurers departs from Rivendell.

The ending is similar to that of the superhero movies we have become so used to, true. But this is the story of Bilbo Baggins, a gentle, simple hobbit who followed a call and went on an adventure to help his neighbors, to lay down his life perhaps, for those he didn't even know. Along the way, he changes. He is a hero -- but not the only one. Virtuous, authentic heroes have a way of making more heroes as they journey on, whether across a movie screen or the pages of a beloved book.

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