

## Review #57 : *NARNIA* (2005)

### *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

William Moseley, Georgie Henley and Skandar Keynes

#### TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWKj41HZBzM>

One of the most magical effects in Andrew Adamson's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) isn't rippling computer-generated fur, ice castles, or battle scenes. It's the **wide-eyed wonder and delight** on the face of young Lucy Pevensie (adorable Georgie Henley) as she passes beyond the wardrobe for the first time into the winter wonderland of the Narnian wood.



## SYNOPSIS

Based on the beloved first volume of C. S. Lewis's **faith-inflected fairytale series** *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* tells the story of four children swept up into a war of good versus evil in a magical fairyland, with the great Lion Aslan (**Liam Neeson**) versus the evil White Witch (**Tilda Swinton**), whose magic holds Narnia in the thrall of an eternal winter and whose house is full of stone statues, once her enemies.

## REVIEW

The arrival of *LWW* on the big screen is a cultural milestone of sorts, in some ways a crossroads of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Passion of the Christ*.

- As a tale of a war of good versus evil in a **fantasy land with mythic creatures**, *LWW* recalls Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, minus its large-scale and PG-13s battlefield mayhem.
- As an ensemble story of 20th-century British **schoolchildren caught up in a world of magic and danger**, it evokes the *Harry Potter* stories, though without the moral debates about witchcraft and rule-breaking.
- And with its central motif of a **divine being who faces down a chilling icon of evil and brings salvation by laying down his life before triumphing over death and evil**, it recalls *The Passion of the Christ*, without its almost unbearable brutality.

At the same time, Adamson's film is neither **as daring nor as visionary** as Peter Jackson's or Mel Gibson's films. Nor is the screenplay, by Adamson and three credited co-writers (none with any notable credits), as faithful to the source material. Nevertheless, the film brings Lewis's story to life with **sufficient fidelity and movie magic** to make it one of the best and brightest family films in some time...

## THE VERY GOOD

### 1 – Ideal Casting

Generally speaking, the actors are **more than up to the challenge**. All four Pevensies are **ideally cast**. Georgie Henley particularly shines as Lucy, and Skandar Keynes makes Edmund human without undercutting his nasty streak. William Moseley's Peter manages to project

compassion for Edmund even as he scolds him, and ideally Anna Popplewell's Susan is self-possessed and cool-headed. The supporting actors and actresses are actually my favourites : **James McAvoy** brings just the right **naivete and otherworldliness** needed to put viewers at ease with his spontaneous friendship with Lucy, while **Tilda Swinton**'s disconcertingly aloof White Witch is at once **chilling and strangely compelling** in her scenes with Edmund. The atmosphere here, if not always the dialogue, is nearly perfect.

## 2 – Good visual effects

**Aslan himself is another triumph.** An astounding digital creation, he doesn't exactly look like a real lion — he's somehow too perfect for that — yet he doesn't look like a hokey special effect either. He's more like the quintessence of lionness than an ordinary lion, which is perhaps exactly right. As the voice of Aslan, Neeson hasn't got the growly *basso profundo* I've always imagined, but he actually fits the bill surprisingly well, with just a hint of digital tweaking. And Aslan, of course, is Jesus' Narnian alter ego.

## 3 – Beautiful filming locations

Like Peter Jackson's Middle-earth, Adamson's Narnia has been created in New Zealand, yet the Narnian forests and plains feel **more intimate and less expansive** than Jackson's immense vistas and endless mountain ranges. At times Narnia actually seems a bit *too* cozy ; the Witch's house seems just around the corner from the Beaver lodge, so we miss out on Edmund's miserable trek in the snow.

## 4 – Faithfulness to the books' themes

**The film follows the basic plot and structure of the book and its most important themes** — guilt and expiation, sacrifice and redemption, death and resurrection, the triumph of good over evil — are preserved. Yet widespread reports of the film's '*slavish*' or '*religious*' fidelity to the book are just flat wrong. The truth is that the filmmakers have taken significant liberties — some good, some bad, some indifferent.

Change in itself isn't necessarily a bad thing ; some of the film's departures from the book **honour or even enhance the story** while adapting it to the needs of the screen.

Some of the filmmakers' better ideas include an **unexpected glimpse of Aslan's power** in an early scene which provides a moment of grace for Lucy and Tumnus, additional insight into **why Edmund tells a particular lie** in a way that makes perfect emotional and narrative sense, and a twist on a **case of briefly mistaken identity** which is merely suspenseful in the book but exciting in the film. Purists will object to a number of added **action scenes**, but let's be fair : those don't harm the essence of the story.

One of the film's most creative bits is a clever line from a fox (**Rupert Everett**) who is part of the Narnian resistance. And for all the downplaying of the religious themes (*see below*), at least this touch, a strategically deployed echo of the sixth of Christ's seven words from the cross, suggests a beautiful and **deliberate nod to the story's redemptive meaning...**

### **THE LESS GOOD**

On the whole, though, *Narnia's* filmmakers were safest sticking close to Lewis's story. **They tended to go awry in the minute they departed from it**, which they did more often and more seriously than they should have.

#### **1 – Reluctant Peter**

Take the depiction of Peter Pevensie, the eldest sibling, whom Lewis depicts as a **natural leader who intuitively grasps the obligations the siblings have to Narnia**. In the film, Peter becomes a **reluctant participant** who is always trying to back out of Narnian affairs and get his siblings safely back to England. Even in the climactic battle, as Aslan's army clash with the forces of the Witch, Peter continues to be preoccupied with getting Edmund and the girls to abandon the conflict and return home. Besides than being a pale copy of what we could call the '*Aragorn Complex*' it adds nothing to the plot here and becomes tedious in the end.

This characterization makes no sense, **dramatically nor thematically** :

- **It makes no sense thematically** because by now it's been well established that the defeat of the Witch and the triumph of good requires **all four children** — two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve — to be enthroned at Cair Paravel. If three of them go home prematurely, the prophecy won't be fulfilled. The filmmakers seem not to notice this conflict. Even Mr. Beaver seems ready to go along with Peter's plan to divide the children, even though he's the one who taught them the prophecy !

- **Peter's diffidence makes even less dramatic sense** because he's supposed to be the leader all along — Aslan himself said so. If the filmmakers had wanted to show **Peter growing into leadership**, a natural turning point would have been the scene in which Aslan knights him after he kills the wolf. Yet they miss even this opportunity, depicting Peter as continually reluctant and misunderstanding his mission right up to the climax.

Other changes are even more ill-advised, and **sap Lewis's story of much of its underlying meaning and thematic richness**.

## 2 – Evanescent Aslan

Most seriously, Aslan, the *Great and Terrible* Lion, is robbed of much of his **awe-inspiring majesty** — not by inherent limitations in translating the book into the screen, but by **specific alterations in the screenplay** that consistently eliminate references to Aslan's **power** and his **effect on others**.

- No longer do the children and the Beavers speak tremulously at the Beaver lodge about how **intimidating it will be to meet a Lion**, or hang back at Aslan's camp before approaching him, nudging one another and trying not to be the first to step forward. No longer does Mr. Beaver utter what is arguably the single greatest, most resonant line in the entire book : *“Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you.”* The crucial notion of Aslan not being 'safe' has been jettisoned.
- No longer does the Witch find the mere mention of **Aslan's name unendurable** and **threaten to kill anyone who uses it**. Nor do Aslan's enemies repeatedly balk in terror before venturing to bind, muzzle and shave him at the Stone Table.

The screenplay systematically **elevates the role of the children and the Witch herself at Aslan's expense**. In the book, when Father Christmas arrived, he said : *“She has kept me out for a long time, but I have got in at last. Aslan is on the move. The Witch's magic is weakening.”* In the film, a curiously un festive, brown-clad Father Christmas offers a contrary explanation, attributing his arrival to the Pevensies rather than to Aslan : *“The hope brought by Your Majesties is starting to weaken the Witch's power.”*

Perhaps the single gravest change to the story is one that greatly **empowers the Witch at Aslan's expense**. It is simply the eradication of the whole motif of the Witch's *overt fear of*



*Aslan*. This is absolutely crucial to the book's emphasis on the utter **lack of parity between the omnipotent Aslan and the powerful but limited Witch**. The whole **vision of good and evil** at work in the book turns on the fact that the Witch is *never even close to being a rival* or threat to Aslan, any more than Lucifer to Christ himself.

The filmmakers, motivated by a very contemporary **misguided dramatic notion of parity between good and evil** and of needing the villain to be a credible threat to the hero, augment the Witch's powers to Aslan's expense — in the process jettisoning much of the point Lewis was making about the nature and relationship of good and evil. Not that Lewis's point is lost entirely. By the end, certainly, it's unambiguously clear that Aslan's power are far beyond the Witch's. I just think it isn't *as clear* throughout the story as Lewis intended it to be.

The problem of the **apparent parity of Aslan and the Witch** is nowhere more glaring than in the parley or summit meeting, which the film begins and ends very differently from the book :

- In the book, Lewis makes a point of having the Witch send her Dwarf to **beg safe conduct** from Aslan before she will dare to approach him. In the film, by contrast, we're told that the Witch has '*demande*d' an audience with Aslan. In fact, the film depicts her fearlessly entering Aslan's camp on a royal litter with her dwarf acting as herald proclaiming her arrival, rather than as emissary requesting safe conduct.
- The **end of the parley** scene, a highlight of the book, is even more glaringly changed. In the book, when the Witch expresses doubt whether Aslan will keep his word, he lets out a terrible roar, striking the Witch's dumb with terror and causing her to flee abjectly for her life. In the film, since the Witch has come in a litter, she can't very well pick up her skirts and head for the hills, as Lewis had it ; instead, she merely looks a bit shaken and sits down kind of hard before being carried off. *Lame*.
- Even **during the parley**, the film subtly undermines **Aslan's control of the situation**. In the book, when the Witch brings up the Deep Magic, Aslan remains supremely calm, even toying with her : "*Let us say I have forgotten it. Tell us of this Deep Magic*", causing her to shriek angrily. In the film, on the other hand, it's **Aslan who gets angry**: "*Don't tell me about the Deep Magic! I was there when it was written!*" Aslan is no longer supremely in control. In interviews, Tilda Swinton spoke about not wanting to portray the Witch getting angry and '*hot under the collar*', which she felt would diminish her character. Ironically, no one seems to have cared that Aslan was diminished in precisely this way.

### 3 – Muted Visuals

Visually, Adamson has obviously been influenced by Jackson's trend-setting work in *LOTR*. As a storyteller, though, Adamson **lacks the poetic and dramatic sensibilities** that made Jackson's films so effective. The visual and emotional impact of some of the most important sequences, which a more gifted or experienced storyteller would have played for maximum impact, has been **muted or lost**.

- Take the **transition from the Witch's winter to Aslan's spring**, a major motif in the book. It wouldn't be going too far to say that the changing of the seasons — a process of profound mythological significance — is one of the central organizing principles of the book ; that in a word *LWW* is precisely a Christian *mythopoeia* of the end of winter (*representing the fallen state of the world*) and the coming of spring (*representing redemption and re-creation*). Lewis devotes pages and pages to melting snow, running water, the appearance of various varieties of flowers, and so on. The film, however, has no time for all this, and gets it out of the way with an action scene, a few brief effects shots, and a quick transition.
- Or take **Aslan's Agony** and *Via Dolorosa* walk to the Stone Table. In the book, the omnipotent Lion alarmingly stumbles, moans, and confesses to being sad and lonely, even asking Susan and Lucy to comfort him – as the angels did in Gethsemane – by placing their hands on his mane so he can feel them. A film-maker like Peter Jackson would have zeroed in on the emotional impact of this scene like a heat-seeking missile. Alas, here Aslan seems merely somber as he walks to the Stone Table ; of the pathos and passion of Lewis's scene, there is no hint. Why ? Having diminished Aslan in so many other ways, why cheat on the *one scene* in which Lewis *actually* allows him to be **emotionally vulnerable** ?
- Perhaps most inexplicable is the film's half-hearted approach to the **reanimation of the enchanted statues** in the Witch's courtyard. This is precisely the kind of scene for which God created 'special effects'. One can hardly imagine a filmmaker coming across that scene and not yearning to linger over all those statues gradually coming to life. Why, then, does Adamson give us only **one** token onscreen reanimation, and consign the rest to off-camera action ? *What was he thinking ?*



These aren't the objections of a purist unwilling to accept departures from the text. The problem is not the filmmakers' departures from the letter of the book, but their **insensitivity to its spirit**, not to mention the sometimes **slapdash quality** of their storytelling even on its own terms. I don't mind early scenes establishing Lucy's apprehension regarding the unseen Professor at whose country estate the children are staying. Yet, having established that dramatic tension, shouldn't the film have somewhere to go with it? Didn't anyone notice that it makes no sense to introduce the Professor by having Lucy actually cling to him for comfort during a quarrel with her siblings?

All these missteps add up to the difference between what could easily have been **one of the greatest family films of all time**, and what is, instead, **merely a good one**. Though the film misses greatness, even in this very diminished form Lewis's story is *still well worth seeing*, and the film adds enough to the experience to keep things fresh.

For those of you who've never read the books, or who remember them only dimly, the taste of Lewis's story and themes afforded by the film may well be a revelation, and they may wish to seek out the books after seeing the film. Viewers who know the books, too, will return to them after seeing the film, grateful to the film for what it adds to them, and to the books for what the film leaves out...