

Review #58 : *Prince Caspian* (2008)

Ben Barnes, William Moseley and Georgie Henley

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icnmPD3QitY>



SYNOPSIS

Coming between the formidable **creative and allegorical** achievement of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the **bracing, poetic odyssey** of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C. S. Lewis's second book follows up the Narnian **passion and redemption story** with a vision of post-Enlightenment skepticism, in which the very existence of the omnipotent Lion Aslan and of High King Peter and his siblings has been largely forgotten, suppressed or dismissed as a fairytale. Lewis thus leaps forward 1300 years into Narnia's future — the first of a series of bold forays exploring the Narnian world in all conceivable directions and dimensions.

For filmmakers in post *Lord of the Rings* Hollywood, *Prince Caspian* (2008) is something of a challenge, a hurdle between more cinema-ready adventures. For better and for worse — and it's quite a bit of both — *Prince Caspian* takes far more **creative license** than its predecessor. There is definitely an up side : not only is *Caspian* a better-made film, but it also manages to translate Lewis's plot without violating its spirit.

Director Andrew Adamson and co-writers Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeeley make choices that, in terms of **plot and spectacle**, are generally defensible and helpful.

THE GOOD CHANGES

1 – Addings to the Plot

- **An early conflation of events gets the action going faster** in the film than in Lewis's book (which has a slow start), first opening with Caspian fleeing from his murderous uncle Miraz, and then drawing the Pevensies into Narnia much earlier in the story.
- **Additional sequences in Miraz's court** add helpful context to Narnian and Telmarine politics and to the plight of the Old Narnians.
- **Two of the film's most successful sequences** — one at Miraz's castle and the other in the depths of Aslan's Fort — are also two of its **boldest departures** from the book.
- Fans may take umbrage at the **sparks between Peter and Caspian** over which of them is in charge — as well as the quite different sort of **sparks between Caspian and Susan** — though the spirit of Lewis's story perfectly survives either of these revisionist touches.

2 – An improved portrayal of Peter

- The portrayal of Peter — a significant drawback in the first film — is considerably improved in *Prince Caspian*. The film does get off on the wrong foot at first, introducing Peter in the middle of a fight with another schoolboy and Edmund coming to his rescue. More galling still is the apparent reason for Peter's interpersonal issues : he's living in the **shadow of his own former glory** and having difficulty **adjusting to life as an ordinary schoolboy**. That's a very interesting link to the former film.
- Generally speaking, Peter comes off **much better here** than in *LWW*. The High King makes **good leadership decisions** as well as questionable ones this time around, and the decision that turns out to have the gravest consequences of all — the attack on Miraz's castle — seems at least defensible as a risk worth taking. In interviews, Moseley has made much of Peter's **ego and failures** – too much, I think. He seems more complex than that.
- The film-makers have also improved since *LWW* about **competent heroes**. In the earlier film, Peter's climactic battle with the White Witch was completely one-sided, with her kicking him all over the battlefield and his being completely out-classed. Not only is that not how Lewis wrote it, but it was mostly **poor drama** ; the audience wants a **hero to**

root for, not just a victim to fear for. This time, Peter's climactic action scene does him much better justice, with well-staged derring-do and a balance of power comparable to what Lewis wrote.

None of this, though, mitigates the fact that while the essence of Lewis's plot is preserved, the themes and ideas behind the story are largely lost. If the first *Narnia* film got perhaps two-thirds of Lewis's intended meaning, *Prince Caspian* is lucky if it gets a quarter.

THE ILL-INSPIRED CHANGES

1 – Trumpkin and Reepicheep

Less pardonable is the wrong-headed depiction of two of Lewis's most delightful characters : Trumpkin the Dwarf (**Peter Dinklage**) and Reepicheep the Mouse (**Eddie Izzard**). At least *LWW* did justice to Mr. Tumnus. Here *Caspian* misses the whole flavour of both characters.

- With his **knit brow and thoughtful gaze**, Dinklage gives Trumpkin an inappropriate air of **existential quandary**. He's played in the film with a phlegmatic rather than a sanguine humour, introverted rather than extroverted. As fine as Dinklage is, the spirit of the character is about as wrong as it could be. The **playfulness and affection** of Trumpkin's ultimate come-uppance is also missing, to the diminution of all involved.
- As for Reepicheep, as written by Adamson and voiced by Izzard, he's **sarcastic rather than courtly in manner as in the book**, with lines like "*How original?*" and "*Was that supposed to be irony?*" rather than "*I place all the resources of my people unreservedly at your Majesty's disposal*" or "*If anyone present wishes to make me the subject of his wit, I am very much at his service — with my sword — whenever he has leisure.*" Izzard has cited **Errol Flynn** as a touchstone for the characterization, which looks good on paper. However, concepts like chivalry and honour tend to get flattened and drowned in irony as in a dry martini. The kids will laugh at it, but Monty Python would have done a far better job with the spirit of the character !

That may not directly detract from its **merits as escapist fantasy**, but Lewis fans (with already regrets about the first film) will feel betrayed by the second — and not just because characters have been changed :

2 – Faith vs. Skepticism

Thematically, the book *Prince Caspian* may be said to be about the **Triumph of Faith and escapist mythic imagination over Enlightenment rationalism and skepticism**. The movie almost entirely omits the skepticism, and greatly diminishes the triumph of imagination.

- The film-makers have eviscerated the crucial theme of **skepticism about the existence of Aslan and the Kings and Queens of Cair Paravel** as well as the whole world of Dwarfs, Talking Beasts, and spirits of wood and water. No longer do we see Caspian's nurse dismissed for telling the young prince stories of Old Narnia, nor his tutor Dr. Cornelius daring to instruct Caspian in these matters only in private. This might not matter so much if the film had other ways of making the point — but it doesn't. The whole notion that stories of Old Narnia are anathema in modern Narnia is simply omitted.
- Worse, Trumpkin — in Lewis an **archetypal lovable skeptic** whose heart knows better than his head — no longer shows any sign of disbelieving the old stories in the film. This Trumpkin appears to believe that Aslan and the Pevensies were real in their day, but abandoned Narnia long ago, leaving the Narnians to fend for themselves. This fatally undercuts the theme of skepticism which is basic to the whole point of the book.
- On the other hand, the total **absence of Bacchus, Silenus, the Maenads** and the whole **mythological riot of the final act** is a much more serious omission here than in *LWW*, which similarly excised Tumnus's stories of the revelry in the old days when Bacchus came to Narnia. While Lewis's inclusion of these pagan elements may be discomfiting to some of his pious Evangelical admirers, and while the film-makers may be sincere in finding rivers flowing with wine inappropriate for a family film, the romping and rioting represents the climax of the book's theme of the **vindication of mythic imagination** over Enlightenment rationalism, and its omission severely undermines the spirit of the book.
- Almost as seriously diminished is the **Theme of Faith and Sight** with faith opening one's eyes to the extent that one believes. We do get the scene in which Lucy sees Aslan when no one else does — but not the rest of the plotline, in which Aslan is at first invisible to the children until one by one they begin to see him in proportion to their openness and willingness to see him. The scene in which Lucy disputes with the others about which way to go is passed over incidentally, with none of the momentousness that it has in Lewis.

3 – Aslan’s hiddenness

Here at least there is some effort to get at the point by an alternate route, with brief moments of **soul-searching by Peter** and **Susan pondering Aslan’s hiddenness**. Still, in a tale of this sort, to replace a visual fairytale metaphor with introspective dialogue seems an odd choice to say the least. Film is a visual medium, fantasy a visual genre. A choice like this makes the story *less* cinematic, not more.

Hidden as Aslan might be in the book, he’s **hardly in the film at all**. Visually, when he’s on the screen at all, Aslan is more impressive than ever ; even in close-up, with Lucy embracing him in the woods, he looks **utterly real and warm and solid**. Yet the filmmakers turn this crucial meeting into a dream sequence, deferring the dialogue and Aslan’s active presence until the very end. In the book, he’s invisibly present, leading the children ; here he doesn’t seem to be around at all.

As in the first film, whether deliberately or cluelessly, Aslan’s dialogue has been altered in ways that subtly undivinize him.

(1) Consider the following exchange from the book :

- **Lucy** : You’re bigger, Aslan.
- **Aslan** : That’s because you are older, little one.
- **Lucy** : Not because you are ?
- **Aslan** : I am not. But every year you grow, *you will find me bigger*.

In the film, when Lucy comments on Aslan’s size, he merely replies : “*Every year you grow, so shall I.*” This revision subverts the idea behind the exchange in Lewis, that the **infinite mystery of God does not itself change**, but is always revealed to be greater than we previously supposed **as we grow and our capacity to appreciate it increases**. Likewise :

(2) In the film, Aslan tells Lucy about the future : “*We can never know.*” What ? In the book, the line is : “*No one is ever told.*” It’s fundamentally different : in the first case, Aslan himself doesn’t know ; in the book, it’s like God : he’s **omniscient – just not telling us**.

(3) A similar line from LWW had Aslan explaining how the Deep Magic “governs all our destinies — yours and mine.” Huh ? Lewis never would have written that !



GENERAL REVIEW

1 – A fast-paced visually engaging and thrilling action movie

Prince Caspian is a **good-looking fantasy** film with appealing filming locations, lots of action scenes and comparatively little to do with the book, beyond basic themes of good versus evil, oppression and resistance, *etc.* If you can put Lewis out of your mind, it's a pretty good ride. There's quite a bit to like here, including the **strong opening scene** and the **well-choreographed nocturnal assault** on Miraz's castle, which is like no siege sequence I've ever seen before. The strategic and logistical tactics are both **clever and visually engaging**, and I particularly liked a moment of **heroic sacrifice** on the part of a Minotaur.

2 – Excellent newcomers

- For the title character, while 26-years-old Barnes is obviously too old for the boy Lewis envisioned, he is yet appropriately **ingenuous, noble and heroic**, and a good role model.
- Castellitto makes a suitably villainous Miraz ; I was reminded a little of Ciáran Hinds's Herod in *The Nativity Story* because of the Mediterranean accent used by the Telmarines.

3 – A nice screenplay

The screenplay, fidelity aside, includes a few nice lines. I like the Hollywood piety of Lucy's response to Peter when he wonders why Aslan didn't give them '*proof*' of what he wanted : "*Maybe we're the ones who have to prove ourselves to him.*" And you also get some funny lines comparable to the first film's "*Nice of you to drop by*" or "*Put that sword down. Someone could get hurt.*" This sequel is definitely worth a watch +++