

Review #40 : *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013)

Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPVWy1tFXuc>



I went to see *The Hobbit : The Desolation of Smaug* with Camille and Mum today. The special effects and wild landscapes – enhanced by gorgeous 3D – are blowing away as usual, and the storyline is quite thrilling. After all, it's a Tolkien/Jackson production so it can never be disappointing...

'Fantasy is a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and (when achieved) so the most potent.' (J.R.R. Tolkien)

THE GOOD

Tolkien's parenthetical '*when achieved*' is the kicker of that statement, the acknowledgement of how **difficult and rare successful fantasy really is**. *You know it when you see it*. The Desolation of Smaug is about a half-hour too long, and the final third splits the story up into three pieces, weakening the narrative thrust that had been building, but no matter. By the time we get to Bilbo Baggins' confrontation with the dragon Smaug, the real work has been done. The thematic elements are in place, the emotional tension is highly strung, and the action unfolds in a wave like the fire erupting from the dragon's mouth, overtaking all in its path.

Except for a flashback which shows Gandalf and the exiled dwarf king Thorin Oakenshield (Australian actor **Richard Armitage**, *North and South*) joining forces in a dark and beer-soaked pub straight out of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, The Desolation of Smaug picks up where the last one left off, with Bilbo (**Martin Freeman**) and the posse of rowdy dwarves deep into their journey to reclaim the Lonely Mountain and the dwarves' lost kingdom.

Bilbo, dragged reluctantly from his comfy hole-in-the-ground in the Shire in the first film, is now resigned to his fate, and shows resourcefulness and pluck in one harrowing situation after another. He's also got that mysterious golden ring he found in the goblin tunnel — the one that seems to make him invisible, the one that nobody else knows about, not yet. It will come in handy. Gandalf tries to keep the team together, but forges off on his own solitary spell-breaking mission — which Tolkien's book suggests is undertaken by Gandalf to force Bilbo to gain the trust of the dwarves on his own.

Along the way, the heroes find shelter in the home of a shape-shifting Giant-Bear, and are pursued by a galloping army of Orcs. To save time, they cut through the Mirkwood Forest and run into a terrifying herd of gigantic attacking spiders, in a scene **doomed to give me nightmares for months**. Some fans have barely recovered from reading that scene in the book when they were 10 years old. Saved and then imprisoned by the isolationist-minded elves, the dwarves and Bilbo find a way to escape in a bunch of barrels down a river, being attacked from the banks by Orcs and Elves alike.

Some old friends show up : Legolas (**Orlando Bloom**) and Galadriel (**Cate Blanchett**). There's a new Elf in town, Tauriel (**Evangeline Lilly**), who is drawn to one of the Dwarves, Gili ; the romantic triangle she sparks has nothing is nice, and it's thrilling to see Tauriel act

as a *deus ex machina* on a couple of occasions to save her beloved. **Stephen Fry** has a great cameo as the Master of Lake-Town, a despicable and gout-ridden person lording it over his fearful constituents from on high : it's a Dickensian piece of scene-chewing.

Jackson and his team have a lot of fun creating these three-dimensional worlds, overwhelming us with **different moods, energies, and personalities**. Some of the images are **brehtaking** such as the Long Lake swathed in mist with mysterious structures rising out of it; the misty dark wood filled with shadowy waiting creatures; the elegant vertical fortress of the Elves, soothing and yet rigid, too, indicating the Elves' unwillingness to get involved in the larger dark forces overtaking the outside world. The final confrontation with the Dragon, when it comes, is worth the wait. The Dragon's lair is **gorgeously imagined, an undulating and ever-changing landscape of coins and gold**. There are lots of great moments: a gigantic tapestry falling from the wall in a rippling wave; huge collapsing columns; tiny walkways over the abyss; the dwarves' visible awe at their ancestors' ingenuity and power. Throughout, you get the sense that you really are in a **lost and glorious world...**

And yet for all its scope, there's also a kind of **homespun silliness** in Tolkien's book — one for those a **stereotypically British energy**, which was less visible in *The Lord of the Rings*, overwhelmed as they are by portent and meaning.. The barrel scene, for example, goes on for what feels like forever, yet every second is justified. It has its own momentum, chaotic and jubilant, reaching an almost screwball climax, as events catapult out of control and nobody is sure which end is up, least of all the Dwarves. Smaug is a fearsome beast, but you still laugh at the detail of Bilbo wincing at the breath emerging from the dragon's mouth...

There's a moment before the spider attack that perfectly aligns us with the overall intent of Tolkien's fiction. Bilbo is told to climb one of the trees to peek out of the top of the forest and see how much further they have to go. When he pushes his head through the top, all he can see is a **carpet of autumn leaves** spreading almost as far as the eye can see, with **blue butterflies flitting about** along the leaf-tips. The sun shines brightly, and for a moment Bilbo is **awestruck**. We know that what happens next is bound to be grisly and terrible. But beauty is there to be appreciated, and the Hobbits, with their love of homey nature, pretty colors, and comfort, know this as well as we do. It was the love of home that kept people going in the dark years during which Tolkien wrote these volumes, when the shadow of war overhung Europe. The sunlight-drenched green fields of the Shire are long gone by that point in Bilbo's story, a distant memory, but the memory gives Bilbo his power. **It is worth fighting for +++**

THE LESS GOOD

The only thing is that it is actually difficult to identify with any of the character here – contrarily to *The Lord of the Rings*, and although I do love him very dearly, Martin Freeman's Bilbo is definitely not going to replace **Elijah Wood** as THE Hobbit. Thorin's definitely not up to Aragorn's level either, and generally speaking the whole cast hasn't got the same wonderful chemistry as the *Fellowship of the Ring* did. Without even comparing both trilogies, I think it's because the characters are less attractive as well. Thorin is a lusty coward and a bad leader (who doesn't trust his followers) : he's definitely not the charismatic prince we'd expect any hero to be, but at the same time, he's not a real villain either. The Forest Elves are shamefully egocentric and protective of their little peace...



You have Thranduil, menacing and mysterious, trying to be helpful without really being it – unless he serves his own purpose. The **Lake Man** is brave but mostly concerned about his personal interest and his people's. Even the Mayor of the Town is devoured by greed. No one is really a saint in here. They are all afraid for themselves in this war for power and domination. Therefore *The Hobbit* is really calling for *LOTR* and it demands a genius's writing to link both sagas so deeply. The Mountain of Gold and Greed, from where the desolation of Smaug spurts... and Mount Doom, where Frodo, half-naked, is about to throw away this alliance materializing the devouring quest of mankind for power and domination, this evil gold under the spell of which so many fell in the past...



THUMBS UP for Benedict Cumberbatch as the Dragon +++ Our own Sherlock Holmes has definitely got a few tricks up his sleeves yet. By the time Smaug makes his dramatic entrance, voiced to perfection by the multi-talented Benedict Cumberbatch, *The Desolation of Smaug* succeeds like only a Peter Jackson film can, in making you feel like a little kid again, remembering what it is like to be in pure awe of the imagination brought to life on screen...

The star did not only have to voice the Dragon, but also to embody him somehow, as CGI motion capture technology was used to help bring the creature to life, — which yielded some intense facial acting. That's why the Dragon looked so human. I especially loved the way Smaug was looking at the giant gold statue of the Dwarf Lord, too ! So childish and greedy^^