The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

PG-13

169 Minutes

Rating: **** out of ****

Peter Jackson’s long awaited adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s beloved fantasy novel is finally here, nearly a decade after the last installment in Jackson’s magnificent Lord of the Rings trilogy was released to cinemas in 2003. That’s quite a wait. The question is, was it worth it?

It would be hard to say no. Jackson’s film is a fine one, boasting many of the same strengths invested in the Lord of the Rings movies. The script tries hard to capture the vital essence of Tolkien’s classic prose, and quite a bit of time is spent developing the story’s characters, particularly Bilbo Baggins (the eponymous Hobbit) and a very angry and frustrated dwarf prince named Thorin. The fantasy world of Middle Earth is brought to a wondrous semblance of life courtesy of impressive special effects and brilliant set design, and the many terrific races and monsters of Tolkien’s imagination (brutish orcs and trolls, stalwart dwarves, angelic elves, etc.) are realized so perfectly that it takes almost no suspension of disbelief to get caught up in their otherworldly drama. Acting is terrific, and includes several of the cast from the Lord of the Rings (notably Ian McKellen as Gandalf and, Andy Serkis as the benighted Gollum). Martin Freeman is a fine Bilbo, and captures the conflicted spirit of the little Hobbit destined to redefine the very concept of heroism.

But all the same, The Hobbit is a different animal than Jackson’s previous Lord of the Rings films. The tone, for instance, is quite altered. One must remember that the source novel is actually a children’s book, and as such rather more lighthearted than the Lord of the Rings trilogy to which it is a precursor. Jackson has to some degree emulated the book’s more innocent spirit, and the film has a high humor factor as a result. The script also incorporates several of the rather silly songs that Tolkien interspersed throughout his books, musical interludes that would have seemed out of place in the darker milieu of the Lord of the Rings but which ring more true here. More, while The Hobbit includes quite a bit of violence, the action is at times given a more freewheeling, slapstick feel than it ever had in the Lord of the Rings.

Also, lovers of the book should be aware that some changes have been made. These do not spoil the original plot, by any means, but are designed to strengthen the ties between this film and the Lord of the Rings trilogy. They do, however, take that original plot down a few unnecessary tangents here and there, and make for a film that is somewhat longer and more convoluted than it really needs to be.

But if The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey is not quite as good as, say, The Fellowship of the Ring, it is still a very good film that fans of the Lords of the Rings trilogy and lovers of quality cinema in general should certainly enjoy. And if it inspires a new generation of fans to go back and read Tolkien’s inimitable original novel, so much the better.