

Movie Review: Eight Below

Written by {ga=mitch}

Wednesday, March 08 2006 7:00 PM -



Disney has been on a pretty decent roll as of late, at least when it comes to movies that are not directed 100% at children. *Glory Road*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Miracle*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and even the entertaining popcorn flick *National Treasure* have all done well economically and critically in the past few years (and we'll all try to forget about *The Pacifier*). They are continuing the streak with their most recent film, *Eight Below*, an excellent family film that will entertain children over the age of eight, while captivating adults as well.

The film is set in Antarctica in 1993, which ended up being the last year sled dogs were allowed in that barren land due to fears of them passing distemper on to the native seal population. Jerry Smith (Paul Walker) and his sled dog team of six Siberian Huskies and two Alaskan Malamutes ("all brawn and no brains") act as guides in one of the outposts. With winter coming on, he has one last run to

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make, escorting a scientist (Bruce Greenwood) to a mountainous area looking for a meteorite. During this first third of the movie, the skill, personalities, and bravery of the dogs are established as they twice save the life of the scientist, getting him back to safety just before the Mother of All Storms! hits the outpost.

Since the good doctor needs immediate medical attention and the plane can't take the extra weight, they must temporarily abandon the dogs to fly the humans to the nearest hospital, with the intention of flying right back to pick them up.

Unfortunately, the storm gets worse, and all the outposts are to be abandoned for six months, leaving Jerry devastated at the fate of Maya, Old Jack, Shorty, Max, Dewey, Truman, Shadow, and Buck (and believe me, if you see the movie you'll get to know all their names).

The movie then alternates scenes of Jerry's attempts to get back to Antarctica to find them, and the dogs' attempts to stay alive in the forbidding conditions. When the film focuses on the latter, it is an extremely riveting look at pack animal behavior. Breaking loose from their chains and following the 'orders' of lead dog Maya, they find ways to secure food, some shelter, and provide protection and comfort for each other. Each time the movie shifts focus back to them, a graphic appears showing how long they have been alone. 5 days, 15 days, 90 days, 135 days...with each scene the tension mounts and your concern for their well being grows. Their adventures are the highlight of the movie.

SPOILER ALERT! Skip to the next paragraph if you don't want to learn a small hint about the fate of the dogs! OK...for those of you still with me for now, there are losses along the way, so make sure you bring plenty of Kleenex. But it is handled in a very realistic manner, without becoming too maudlin, overdramatic or most importantly, graphic. However, if you bring young children to the movie, be prepared to talk with them about it afterwards.

For those not wanting to read the spoiler paragraph, welcome back. I will let you know that there is one "jump scare" scene in this movie that rivals anything seen in *Jaws*. So be ready for popcorn flying up in the air amidst numerous audience

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screams at some point. But it's not just all tension and scares, as you can't help but fall for all the dogs as individuals, especially blue-eyed Max. He's the youngest, the screw up, and the obvious Omega Dog (low dog on the totem pole) of the pack, and his growing maturity over the six months alone is quite enjoyable to watch. For all this, the animal trainers deserve major kudos in getting their charges to convincingly portray the emotions and events without having to resort to cheap 'talking animal' tricks like in *Snow Dogs* or *Milo and Otis*.

If Director Frank Marshall had managed to keep the focus primarily on the dogs, then this would have been an exceptional film. Unfortunately, we have to continually flash back to the States and witness Paul Walker's wooden acting as he tries to find a way to either accept what has happened, or get back to see if they are still there. Worse than that is a rather boring love story between Jerry and his former girlfriend Katie (Moon Bloodgood), the bush pilot for the outpost. I haven't seen onscreen non-chemistry like this since Ben Affleck and anyone not named Matt Damon. Jason Biggs (*American Pie*) is also pretty much wasted screen time as the comic relief cartographer (and aren't they always a barrel of laughs?). The only two-legged actor that comes off well is Bruce Greenwood as Dr. McClaren. His part could easily have been the dog-hating villain of the story, but that's not the case. Greenwood manages to make him likable and noble while still being hell-bent for achieving his professional goals. The one great scene with him is when he's told Jerry to "let it go" and then sees a drawing from his young son of eight dogs, with the words "my heroes are the dogs that saved my daddy's life" on it. The expression on his face is heartbreakingly telling without going to William Shatner level gyrations.

Luckily, you have the canines that do more than pull their own weight in this movie; they carry the entire human cast as well. Marshall's direction of their near silent action gives it almost a documentary feel. The cinematography is also first rate, with Greenland, Canada and Norway standing in for the beautiful but deadly tundra at the bottom of the world.

As I stated in [my "Crystal Ball" preview of this movie](#), I'm a total dog person, so I'm obviously biased when it comes to a film that portrays these wonderful animals convincingly. Some reviewers who have called into question

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the animal's expressions or behaviors as unrealistic clearly do not understand dogs, especially intelligent working ones like Huskies and Malamutes. Yes, my spoiled Yellow Lab and Miniature Aussie Shepherd are literally and figuratively worlds apart from these types of sled dogs, but I see in them the same intelligence, loyalty, and love for each other and their humans that I saw in this movie. If you have a dog and see this film, you will definitely give them a big hug as soon as you get back home.

My grade: I have to do this as an average. The dogs get four paws up in the form of a Bernie Kosar (4 footballs), but the human aspect of it is no better than a Kelly Holcomb (2 footballs). So, the average is:

Frank Ryan (3 footballs).