

## Movie Review: The Golden Compass

Written by {ga=mitch}

Monday, December 10 2007 7:00 PM -

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Many of our newer readers likely know Mitch for his excellent &quot;Random Thoughts&quot; Browns column that we run every Wednesday night, but Mitch made his bones here at TCF reviewing flicks and shows like &quot;The Sopranos&quot; and &quot;24&quot; for us. This past weekend, we dispatched the trusty Mitch to the theaters to review one of 2007's most controversial films, &quot;The Golden Compass&quot;. New Line Cinema dumped over 250 million into making this fantasy film ... was it on par with some of the other great fantasy films of this decade? Mitch tells us ...



Six years ago, New Line Cinema gambled its entire future on a fantasy trilogy that few people thought could be made. Almost \$3 billion dollars later, &quot;The Lord of the Rings&quot; trilogy was one of the most successful franchises of all times, with a Best Picture Oscar to go along with all the loot. Two years ago, another fantasy series made its debut, and the first of &quot;The Narnia Chronicles&quot; films, &quot;The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe&quot; grossed over \$750 million worldwide, spawning more sequels.

And let's not forget about what will eventually be the biggest moneymaking fantasy franchise of all times...Harry Potter (for those of you saying &quot;What about 'Star Wars'?'&quot;, I'm under the opinion that the seven Harry Potter movies will eventually overtake the six Star Wars films).

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So New Line once again jumps into the fray, committing an estimated \$250 million in making the first of a planned trilogy to Phillip Pullman's popular, but controversial, "His Dark Materials" books, starting with "The Golden Compass". Let's just hope that New Line still has some Lord of the Rings loot laying around, because they are going to need it, as "The Golden Compass" is no LOTR...and actually not even close to a Narnia.

Is it bad? No; not at all. It's an often fascinating film that can at times get you to think, and you will be entertained by its special effects. But you will also often be saying to yourself "what the hell are they talking about?" or "who is this person?" or "this makes no sense whatsoever."

The trick to a fantasy is to get the audience indoctrinated into the mythology of the story, accepting the impossible as real without too much work or eye rolling. In "Lord of the Rings", this was aided by a five minute prologue delivered by Galadriel (Cate Blanchett). But from that point forward, the mythology unfolded as the story went along, and you picked up bits and pieces as you went. Harry Potter and Narnia also progressed in the same manner.

The mythology of "The Golden Compass" is so complex that it was impossible to really wrap your hands around it. It was like a cram course in the first thirty minutes of the world that exists in a parallel universe, learning about such things as "dust", "ice bears", "the Magisterium", and most confusing, "daemons", a physical representation of a person's soul in talking animal form. Oookkaaayyyy.

So we follow this young girl named Lyra (an exceptional newcomer, 13 year old Dakota Blue Richards), an orphan being raised by her uncle (Daniel Craig) in a university setting by the other masters and servants, as dear uncle Lord Asriel spends most of the time out exploring a possible wormhole from their world to thousands of parallel worlds.

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Asirel's discoveries don't sit too well with the Magisterium, which is portrayed in the movie as basically a totalitarian quasi-government bent on eliminating free-will. Of course, the controversy is that in Pullman's books, the admitted agnostic author makes the Magisterium out to be The Church.

Lyra is, like Harry Potter, Frodo, or the Pevensie children, a "chosen one". She is entrusted with the Last Alethiometer, a "truth seeker" in the form of a compass. She is taken under the wing/taken prisoner by Mrs. Coulter (Nicole Kidman), a feared ice queen working for the Magisterium. Lyra manages to escape, however, and sets about on her First Quest, finding all the children from the area that have gone mysteriously missing.

Just when you think it can't get more convoluted, we run into Gyptians (war-like gypsies), flying witches (the queen of which is "Casino Royale beauty Eva Green), a cowboy with a small airship (evidently their only method of flying), and a 10 foot talking polar bear named Urik. As head shaking as that might be, this is when the movie finally starts to get very interesting...mostly due to the fact that the old cowboy is played by Sam Elliott, and the Ice Bear is voiced by none other than Ian McKellen.

Once things get humming, the action is great, the special effects spectacular, and the story zips along as you finally might have 50% of the terminology/mythology down. By that time, I was pretty comfortable with the whole daemon thing, and found it a very interesting concept. The fact that children's daemon's can shape shift into any animal, whereas once they reach adulthood, the daemon settles into a permanent creature, was quite thought provoking. Daniel Craig's is an impressive leopard, while Nicole Kidman's is a monkey that's every bit as scary as the flying ones chasing Dorothy and Toto, while Sam Elliot's is an old notch eared jackrabbit, appropriately voiced by Kathy Bates.

Unfortunately, unlike most first episodes of a trilogy, it ends rather abruptly, leaving a sense of "that's it?". However, one could also point that out as a fault of "Fellowship of the Rings". The difference, I guess, is that

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by far the majority of the people going into that film knew it ended as a cliffhanger (as did "The Two Towers"), whereas not as many people have that level of familiarity with the "Dark Materials" books. As I've never read the Pullman books, you can take my criticism of the ending with a grain of salt that could satisfy Secretariat.

The acting in the movie was excellent across the board. Miss Richards must carry this movie far more than was expected of Elijah Wood or even Daniel Radcliffe, and she comes through in her motion picture debut with flying colors. Lyra is a feisty, stubborn firecracker, but nonetheless possesses inexhaustible faith in the inner strength and goodness of others. Not an easy trick to pull off, but Miss Richards does so in a performance that seems effortless for someone her age.

Nicole Kidman also shows of her skills, as her Mrs. Coulter is chillingly nasty, but still possessing just enough compassion to make you know that there is something else to her. Elliott and McKellen are wonderful as the old cowboy and the gruff bear-prince in exile, and possibly the best casting in the movie.

Unfortunately, Daniel Craig has only about 15 minutes screen time, despite being featured predominately in the promotions. We don't learn much about his character, and he certainly doesn't have much opportunity to show his talents. And what fantasy movie would be complete without Christopher Lee showing up at some point as an evil entity?

All in all, it's not a bad film, and worth watching. However, the bar for fantasy fans has been set extremely high. "The Golden Compass" doesn't completely fail, but given the budget, the stars, and the expectations, it doesn't fly very high either.

My Rating - Kelly Holcomb (2 footballs). Disappointingly inconsistent, but a few bright spots. Rent it on DVD.