

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

By Mark Bell

Filmthreat.com, December 14, 2012

(Abridged from the original article.)

- ¹ It's time for some pre-*Lord of the Rings* fun in Middle-earth with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*!
- ² Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) finds himself out of sorts when wizard Gandalf the Grey (Ian McKellen) drops by his hobbit-hole unannounced, which is just the beginning of Bilbo's unexpected visitors. Later that evening, Bilbo is visited by an increasing number of dwarves, all who come in and make Bilbo's home their home, trashing the place and eating all of Bilbo's food.
- ³ Their presence is not as random as Bilbo first suspects, however, when it is revealed that the company of dwarves, led by Thorin Oakenshield (Richard Armitage), is looking to re-take the dwarf kingdom of Erebor from the dragon Smaug, the violent creature who ran the dwarves out of the mountain in the first place, and who lives there still. The company needs a burglar, however, to assist in their endeavors, and Gandalf suggested Bilbo, as hobbits are easily ignored and overlooked.
- ⁴ At first Bilbo demurs, and the company leaves without him, but he comes to his senses (or maybe loses them) and sets out to join the crew on their adventure. Unfortunately for Bilbo, at least in this film, that adventure entails running from, and eventually battling, orcs and goblins, doing his best to not get himself or the dwarves eaten by trolls, and out-riddling Gollum (Andy Serkis), whose ring Bilbo has found.
- ⁵ While it can't be denied the film is long, it didn't feel tiresome or slow, at least not the entire time. Sure, the opening drags a bit, particularly the early sequence with the dwarves talking and singing, but after that, once the adventure gets underway in earnest, I found myself caught up in the film enough to not notice how much time was actually passing.
- ⁶ And I honestly appreciated that, when moments in the characters' pasts were mentioned, we actually got to see the stories fleshed out as opposed to just being told them. For example, the battle near Moria with Thorin Oakenshield: Sure, it could've stayed a campfire story, but the fact that I got to see the battle play out was that much more entertaining.
- ⁷ Oddly enough, however, for a film that revels in expanding on so much, I found the characterization of the dwarves to be almost indistinct, save for their make-up. Other than Thorin and Balin (Ken Stott), I couldn't tell you the name of any of the rest of them. I'm not saying I needed to know the back story of every dwarf on screen, but I did find it strange that, after the

Bored of the Rings: *The Hobbit* Looks Like *Teletubbies* and is Way Too Long

By Dana Stevens

Slate.com, December 7, 2012

(Abridged from the original article.)

- ¹ J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was a relatively slim book the fantasy author wrote as a gentler, child-friendly predecessor to his gargantuan *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It bore the pleasingly modest subtitle *Or There And Back Again*. Director Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Hobbit*—or rather, the first third of it, since Jackson has split the book into three parts—doesn't even get our hero all the way there, let alone back. As we say goodbye to Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) at the end of this first film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, he has just come within sight of his destination, the abandoned mountain city of Erebor, home to an abandoned castle piled throne-deep in gold that's also the lair of the fearsome dragon Smaug.
- ² If the phrase "the lair of the fearsome dragon Smaug" by itself constitutes a reason you'd never see this movie, I'm not sure you can understand the particular pathos of *The Hobbit*'s artistic failure. The beauty of the *Lord of the Rings* films was that they formed a bridge between fantasy fans and regular viewers just looking for a good movie—many people who didn't like Tolkien liked them. As someone with a lifelong resistance to fantasy literature, I was won over to Jackson's films by their own cinematic virtues. The gracefully staged large-scale action. The innovative use of CGI and motion-capture technology—especially Andy Serkis' funny, tragic performance as the miserable changeling Gollum. The New Zealand landscapes. When I heard Jackson was taking on *The Hobbit* as a three-parter, my first thought wasn't to snicker at his hubris but to look forward to the chance to spend more time in Middle Earth.
- ³ More time in Middle Earth is exactly what *An Unexpected Journey* provides—so much more that the movie starts to feel like some Buddhist exercise in deliberately inflicted tedium. Before we ever lay eyes on any of the main characters, there's a 20-minute, Bayeux Tapestry-length prologue about the fall of the dwarves' once-glorious homeland. Bilbo doesn't pack his bag and *leave* the damn Shire until an hour in to the movie, which clocks in at close to three hours.
- ⁴ As Bilbo, the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen), and a pack of very poorly differentiated dwarves make their way to Erebor to face the dragon, there's always time to pause for the little things—the *very* little things, like a protracted scene in which a lesser wizard struggles to resuscitate his dying pet hedgehog. Or a moment when the dwarves, gathered around the fire, spontaneously

film took the time to focus on something like a wizard nursing a hedgehog back to life, it still had so many characters who could be easily forgotten.

- ⁸ Overall, though, this is another Peter Jackson *Lord of the Rings* flick. It's epic in scale, the actors perform their roles as hobbit, dwarf, elf and/or wizard as they have in the past, and it's all a very comfortable and familiar experience. Much like when I first saw *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* wraps up, even after almost three hours of Middle-earth, I was ready and eager to start watching the next film.
- ⁹ And, yes, I did see *The Hobbit* in 3D at 48 frames-per-second. Much has been said and debated about the change-up in the frame rate, and often it's being hailed as an unnecessary change that requires an adaptation on the audience's part.
- ¹⁰ It requires adaptation by the filmmakers, too. As the higher frame rate is a way to present imagery in a new way, so too must the imagery utilize the strengths of the change. For example, in its worst moments, the film is so clear and crisp that it feels like you're watching actors on a set, or acting in front of a matte painting. In other words, the realities of the filmmaking process (these indeed ARE actors on a set) intrude and disrupt the experience. To mask that experience, all aspects of the set design, makeup and the like have to be spot-on and flawless. This therefore doesn't drop the bar as far as film-going experience so much as it forces a raising of the bar on the filmmaking side.
- ¹¹ And when that bar is met, *The Hobbit* is great. In its best moments, the 3D at 48fps is an entirely immersive experience that is like none before it. And, though I am not an advocate for 3D filmmaking, I think part of what makes the 48fps experience work so well here is the way the 3D pulls you in, while the clarity of frame rate makes it feel more real. Without the 3D component, I imagine the 48fps experience could be much more abrasive, and that sense of falseness more pronounced.
- ¹² More often than not, however, the imagery is handled well enough to not look all that much different from the previous *Lord of the Ring* epics, with some truly incredible visual moments thrown in to elevate the film.
- ¹³ Which brings me to my final thoughts on this first film in Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy. Simply, if you're a fan of the way Jackson has delivered Middle-earth to you in the past, and his style of extending stories you didn't know, or think, needed extending, then this is more of the same.

burst into a ballad of longing for their lost homeland. Truth be told, I kind of enjoyed the melancholy of that ballad, but did it need to contain so many stanzas? The film overestimates its audience's need to witness every micro-bump in the road to Erebor. It provides service for the hardcore, but no foothold for the casual fan.

- ⁵ Jackson's *Hobbit* also overestimates the amount of visual information the viewer needs crammed into her optic cavities. Many screenings of *The Hobbit* around the country will be shown not only in 3-D, but in a new super-high-definition format called 48fps, which unrolls at a frame rate double that of the average movie. It's possible this technology will one day develop into a tool that enriches our experience of movies. If so, I suspect *The Hobbit* will be remembered as an early, failed experiment in the medium.
- ⁶ At 48fps, *The Hobbit* looks like an '80s-era home video shot by someone who happened to be standing around on set. (Other analogies scribbled down in my notes include *Teletubbies* and daytime soap operas.) The effect is washed out and flat, yet unforgiving in its hyper-realism: Any imperfection or artifice in costumes or sets stands out. This expensive visual technology paradoxically conspires to make everything else in the film look cheap. I found myself fixating, for example, on Gandalf's staff, an elegant Art Nouveau-esque creation in the earlier *Lord of the Rings* films. At 48fps, it looked like a cast-resin prop you might order online.
- ⁷ I'm sure I would have found more to appreciate in *The Hobbit* if I hadn't been distracted by the eye-grating visuals. Ian McKellen as Gandalf has a knack for making inspirational bromides sound deep and wise. Freeman is delightful as Bilbo, a timid homebody who gradually proves himself a loyal and courageous comrade. But the truncated story gives Bilbo very little to do other than chafe at the discomforts of travel.
- ⁸ At least until a scene—the movie's best, but far too late in coming—when he engages in a game of cryptic riddles with Gollum, again played with great vibrancy by a motion-captured Serkis. In another wildly imaginative scene, the mountains come to life, transforming into brawling stone giants as the travelers struggle to cling to their perch on the mountainside.
- ⁹ These few set pieces aside, most of *The Hobbit* remains a blur in my mind. It's hard to overstate how much the 48fps format kept me from getting lost in this movie's story. I should probably see it again in regular format to give it another chance—but that would involve sitting through that whole dwarf ballad again.