

Fantastic Mr. Fox

Fantastic Mr. Fox movie review.

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Fantastic Mr. Fox movie poster.

Getting my vote for one of the best movies of the year is Fantastic Mr. Fox, the latest from director Wes Anderson. Known for his quirky comedies of dysfunctionality, Anderson now turns his uniquely skewed eye upon the family of foxes inhabiting the 1970 Roald Dahl book of the same name.

I was very happy to learn that Anderson was making this stop-motion-animated film. I saw his first movie, Bottle Rocket, in 1996, and I have been a Wes Anderson fan ever since. I've enjoyed all of his movies to some degree, though I definitely prefer some over others. The Royal Tenenbaums (2001) is my favorite. Anderson was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for that one, which he wrote with his frequent collaborator, actor Owen Wilson. I liked Rushmore, too, but found The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou a disappointing misfire, especially considering Bill Murray starred (although Willem Dafoe was very funny in it). The Darjeeling Limited, his last movie before Fantastic Mr. Fox, I also found to be a bit of a yawner.

But I still consider myself an avid Wes Anderson fan. Heck, I even liked the "My Life, My Card" American Express commercial he directed and appeared in a few years back.

The warped though relatable world of Dahl, who also wrote James and the Giant Peach and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, is a perfect match for Anderson. Speaking of Chocolate Factory, we've seen two movie versions of that book -- how about somebody tackle the book's sequel, Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator? Dahl is most famous for his children's books, which usually feature a deliciously dark side, evident most prominently in the retribution the snotty, spoiled children who visit Wonka's chocolate factory are made to suffer. This dark humor, as well as outright horror, is also reflected in Dahl's adult fiction. I like the creepy short stories in Tales of the Unexpected, which later became the basis of a television series in the 1980s. The prolific Dahl also wrote screenplays, although apparently most were not used in the final shooting of the films. Two include the James Bond movie, You Only Live Twice, and another Ian Fleming story far removed from the adventures of Bond: Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Fantastic Mr. Fox is about a family of foxes: Mr. and Mrs. Fox, voiced by George Clooney and Meryl Streep, and their son Ash, voiced by Jason Schwartzman, another longtime Anderson crony who made his movie debut in Anderson's Rushmore in 1999 (and I highly recommend his current HBO series, Bored to Death). We first meet Mr. and Mrs. Fox in their younger days, when they have a close call while stealing chickens from a henhouse. As a result Mr. Fox promises to give up his poultry-stealing ways.

We then flash-forward to the present day -- Ash is now part of the landscape -- which finds Fox confronting his old urges as he longingly eyes three farms a few hills distant from his tree-based home. The farms belong to three farmers named Boggis, Bunce and Bean, and they are abundant in chickens, turkeys, squab and other delectables. Bean, the nastiest farmer, looked an awful lot like Roald Dahl to me, and he is voiced by Michael Gambon, who plays Dumbledore in the Harry Potter movies.

Soon Fox is enlisting his friend, an occasionally spaced-out opossum named Kylie, for late-night farm raids. These lead to an escalating series of farmer retaliations and, eventually, a snowballing battle royale between fox and farmer. There are many funny moments along the way, including farm dog encounters, panic-driven digging scenes, rat fights and the mind-bogglingly confounding rules governing the game of whackbat. Throughout all is very funny dry humor spoken not just by the primary actors, but supporting players such as Bill Murray as Badger and Owen Wilson as Coach Skip.

The stop-motion animation is purposely not as polished as other stop-motion movies such as Coraline, The Nightmare Before Christmas and The Corpse Bride. While still excellent, the slightly primitive look of the animation lends hugely to the movie's charm. Watching the animals' fur move by itself -- a result of the animators' hands touching it while positioning the models between takes -- reminded me of the original King Kong and the abominable snowman in Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The moving fur on those two creeped me out when I was a little kid.

Adding hugely to the fun, typical for a Wes Anderson movie, is the soundtrack, featuring music from the Rolling Stones,

Cole Porter, Mozart, the Beach Boys, Burl Ives and even The Ballad of Davy Crockett.

Don't pigeonhole Fantastic Mr. Fox as nothing more than a children's movie. It's more than that. Adults who avoid movies such as Fantastic Mr. Fox solely because they write them off as nothing more than dopey children's films are missing out on some prime movie-going experiences. Sure, some kids' movies are nothing more than shallow entertainment that exists more to sell toys and Happy Meals than to make a lasting impression or teach a lesson. But luckily some movies, such as Up, Fantastic Mr. Fox and others, offer more emotion and insight into the human condition than many of the other movies competing for our attention this holiday season.

Final verdict: Fantastic Mr. Fox well deserves the major praise being heaped upon it.

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