

MOVIE REVIEW

'It Chapter Two' is a soulless, overlong sequel

BY JOHN BATTISTON

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A lot has happened to the Losers Club in 27 years.

After incapacitating the terrifying, shape-shifting, child-gobbling entity that plagued their small town in 1989, seven middle-school outcasts — Bill, Richie, Beverly, Ben, Eddie, Stanley and Mike — took a blood oath, swearing that they would all return to Derry, Maine, should the monster return.

"It Chapter Two," the sequel to 2017's smash-hit Stephen King adaptation, fast-forwards to 2016. Most of the Losers have managed to escape Derry and have subsequently forgotten the horrors they endured at the hands of the being to which they've only ever referred as "It." Many of them enjoy successful careers, particularly now-renowned novelist Bill and stand-up comic Richie, and a few of them are married.

But deep down, It's grip on them has never loosened. And when fresh corpses begin to litter Derry once more, Mike, the only member of the gang to stay behind, calls the rest, imploring them to stay true to their childhood vows. Still, It is prepared to pull out every spine-tingling stop necessary to sustain its historic reign of terror.

Released almost two years to the day after its predecessor, this film had a lot to live up to. "It," though of course marketed as an out-and-out horror flick, is one of the best coming-of-age movies this century, careful to dig deep into the hearts and minds of its young ensemble and to capitalize on the many strengths of its perfectly-selected cast, all without skimping on the scares.

Similarly, the greatest strength of "Chapter Two" is its star power. A number of recognizable names top the film's call sheet, including this decade's breakout character actor James McAvoy as Bill and two-time Oscar nominee Jessica Chastain as Beverly. Particularly delightful as Ritchie is "Saturday Night Live" legend Bill Hader, who gets to flex his uncanny balance of physical humor and bare-bones humanity — a dichotomy that made HBO's "Barry" one of the best things to happen to TV in a while. And, as is to be expected, Bill Skarsgård is pitch-perfect as the deliciously disturbing Pennywise.

Still, a great cast can only do so much with what it's given, and just like the grown-up half of King's source novel, this film manages to feel both cluttered and paper thin. While the first entry thrived on the simplicity of its story and spent much-needed time on developing its characters, this one crams characterization into the first 20 minutes or so, bogging down the remaining two-and-a-half hours with excessive world-building and over-explanation. It ignores part of what made its predecessor so enjoyably digestible by re-

fusing to eschew the most alienating, out-of-place elements of the 1,138-page book.

Further disenchanted are an array of strange — sometimes plain bizarre — filmmaking choices by returning director Andy Muschietti that often rob the movie of its creepiness. Between wince-inducingly obvious use of de-aging technology, baffling music cues and a few incredibly on-the-nose cameos, this movie can't resist the urge to remind you that it's a movie, a tendency less suited to a supernatural horror-thriller than an "Anchorman" sequel.

The climactic action sequence is generally excellent, featuring some of the best special effects and cinematography to grace a big-budget Hollywood film this year. Unfortunately, getting to it means enduring an uninteresting slog that runs out of surprises too soon. One of 2019's most highly anticipated movies, "It Chapter Two" is also one of 2019's most disappointing.

RATING: 2.5/5

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MOVIE REVIEW



Facebook/Jojo Rabbit

'Jojo Rabbit' blends savage laughs with harsh reality

BY JOHN BATTISTON

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He may be unpopular, but 10-year-old Jojo has all the friends he needs ... including Adolf Hitler.

OK, so that particular friendship is all in his head, but Jojo (Roman Griffin Davis) — an ardent supporter of the Nazi party and a recent Hitler Youth inductee — is determined to eventually work his way to becoming the Führer's trusty second-in-command. He and his imaginary, khaki-clad, semi-mustachioed companion (Taika Waititi plays Hitler) spend their days childishly gallivanting around Jojo's small, German town, imagining the paradisaical empire that will one day thrive under the Third Reich — that is, when they aren't conspiring against those outside the Aryan race.

Then Jojo finds a Jewish girl in his attic.

Sure, he knew his loving, spirited mother (Scarlett Johansson) harbored some anti-Nazi sentiments, but he never would have guessed she'd go so far as to hide a refugee like Elsa (Thomasin McKenzie). Well, no matter: He figures he's of superior descent, the strongest bloodline, and was thus born with the upper hand. But it doesn't take long for Elsa to show herself to be more fierce, more intelligent ... more human than Jojo ever would have given her credit for. And before he can do anything to stop it, the young fanatic's prejudices slowly begin to fracture, throwing his entire worldview into disarray.

Waititi — in addition to hilariously caricaturing the modern world's most famous autocrat — writes and directs "Jojo Rabbit" splendidly, taking a savagely funny look at the delusion of the Axis powers in World War II while also unafraid to expose the harrowing consequences of systemic oppression. Opting to portray a deeply problematic regime from a child's naïve perspective, the film knows and fully embraces its limitations, unafraid to keep its methods simple as well as its message: With hate there is no hope, only destruction.

Branded as an "anti-hate satire," the writer-director's vision may not accomplish the complexity of other noted lampooners, and some might consider it a missed opportunity in eschewing even

somewhat explicit references to current world events. But it still lands more than its share of jabs, effectively portraying Hitler's cronies as sectarian imbeciles whose aggressive behavior is largely compensatory in nature. Almost every joke succeeds — quite a few in gut-busting fashion — thanks to the impeccably timed, snappy verbal and physical dynamic among Waititi and other supporting cast members, including Sam Rockwell, Rebel Wilson and Stephen Merchant.

The real winners here, however, are adolescent leads Davis and McKenzie, whose relationship is the beating heart every comedy needs but most don't care to develop. From their initial blind hostility to the heart-melting rapport they eventually form, every scene they share offers an insightful, intimate look at the damaging effects of deep-seated enmity and the beauty that can emerge when it's set aside. Johansson, who isn't on-screen nearly as much as she should be, paints a delightful yet incisive portrait of empathy, an effective foil to the uniformed malcontents that populate the local government buildings.

That isn't to say that "Jojo Rabbit" is saccharine. Thanks to several major events, Jojo's belief that his political ideals are at all benign is snatched away mercilessly, resulting in genuine, knock-the-wind-out-of-you shock. Likewise, the viewer is stripped of any inkling that the film's often lighthearted demeanor excuses Nazism in any capacity — by no means does it do so.

Yet even after you're put through a ringer of eye-opening events, "Jojo Rabbit" will leave you laughing and applauding with the unmistakable flutter of hope in your chest. It's in a time that lends to ever-growing cynicism that films like this are most needed, reminding us that even at the height of its power, hate has been — and can be — overcome.

RATING: 4.5/5

John Battiston, who screened "Jojo Rabbit" at last weekend's Middleburg Film Festival, is a Times-Mirror reporter and founder of the Reel Underdogs podcast. Contact him at jbattiston@loudountimes.com. Reel Underdogs is not affiliated with the Times-Mirror.

'Dark Waters' is a purposefully bleak legal drama

BY JOHN BATTISTON

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It's 1998, and Parkersburg, West Virginia, owes its livelihood to DuPont. Well, that's what local employment statistics would suggest — the American chemical giant is responsible for the majority of the city's jobs.

Cincinnati corporate defense attorney Rob Bilott's paycheck is another that DuPont virtually signs. Having just made partner at his high-rise law firm, Rob (Mark Ruffalo) — himself a Parkersburg native — specializes in defending a number of chemical companies and has worked with DuPont lawyers several times in the past.

This reality is lost on Wilbur Tennant (Bill Camp), a Parkersburg cattle farmer who struts into Rob's high-rise office and claims dozens of his livestock are falling dead after drinking water contaminated by DuPont. Though adamant he can't take on a plaintiff against his established client, he takes the three-hour drive to his hometown to see if there's any case to be made.

The evidence is as damning as it gets. Tennant's land is spotted with an alarming number of makeshift cow graves — 190 to be exact — and his fridge holds rows of blackened teeth and softball-sized tumors taken from the carcasses. Before Rob heads home, he and Wilbur are even charged by a deranged member of the herd, which the farmer is forced to shoot dead on the spot.

Rob's seen enough to know that the entire Parkersburg community is at risk, and with his lucrative career and office reputation on the line, he sues DuPont. "Dark Waters" documents the real-life, nearly 15-year legal chess game that follows, doing



From left, Bill Camp and Mark Ruffalo star in Todd Haynes' new biopic, "Dark Waters."

so in a manner that's purposefully and expectedly bleak, though the film's predictability hardly stops there.

A film by Todd Haynes will inevitably carry some level of somber humanity, though as with 2015's "Carol," the director doesn't let the heaviness of this film's subject matter interfere with the beauty of his craft. Working with his usual cinematographer Ed Lachman, Haynes effectively employs space and color to visually establish an environment that, though impeccably photographed, is inescapably dreary. Setting this tone is essential for telling a story about a corporate and legal system betraying its dependents without remorse.

But a viewer can only fully buy into a film and sympathize with its characters when the on-screen world feels convincingly lived in, an illusion screenwriters Matthew Michael Carnahan and Mario Correa can't quite seem to pull off. Though information necessary to understand the story's many legal and scientific machina-

tions is conveyed clearly and effectively, the characters delivering that information are portrayed as largely colorless. Much of the expository dialogue is delivered completely cut-and-dry, as if the actors are merely rewording encyclopedia entries.

When the script tries to break this mold, it more often than not dips into cliché and constricts film's exceptional cast. Playing Rob's wife Sarah, the talented Anne Hathaway embodies the one-note concerned housewife who laments her husband's obsession with work at the expense of his family, while the film itself gives little acted-out evidence of this plight. Tim Robbins, as Rob's boss, delivers a vein-popping speech decrying the evils of corporate greed that, because it's so predictably penned, forces him to overact so the scene might stick.

Critiquing a script based on real events is tricky, as the veracity of words spoken and confrontations enacted is always in question. It's to be assumed that at least

some creative license was taken in making "Dark Waters," but the purpose of artistic freedom in crafting a biopic is to tell a true story in a way that flows on the screen and gets viewers engaged with the people involved. At no fault of the performers — Ruffalo, as usual, is particularly great here — this portrayal of an historic legal dispute has little more life breathed into it than a Wikipedia article.

"Dark Waters" boasts plenty of technical prowess thanks to Haynes' steady behind-the-camera work, and it relays important, timely information to the audience in a concise and graspable manner. But as far as legal dramas go, this film sorely lacks lasting power.

RATING: 3/5

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