

Where the Wild Things Are—a thoughtful, sensitive look at childhood

By Hiram Lee
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Directed by Spike Jonze; written by Jonze and Dave Eggers, based on the children's book by Maurice Sendak

Where the Wild Things Are is the first feature film directed by Spike Jonze (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*) in seven years. It is also quite possibly his most satisfying to date. Jonze and co-writer Dave Eggers have created an impressive work, one which expands on the themes of Maurice Sendak's classic children's book of the same name, while remaining faithful to the original work's spirit and the visual qualities and textures of Sendak's illustrations.

The film, like the book, concerns Max (played by Max Records), a young boy who is experiencing certain difficult facts of life for the first time and struggling with his emotions. Max feels very small. Things are changing around him. His sister is getting older and wants to spend time with her friends; she ignores him. In one scene, Max lies at the feet of his mother (Catherine Keener) while she takes a worrying phone call. Seated at her computer she asks why a client didn't like a report she'd prepared and tells the co-worker on the other end of the line, "I can't afford to lose this."

In school, Max is frightened by a science teacher's lecture on the eventual burning out of the sun. Apparently a rather demoralized individual, the teacher informs his young students not to worry about the demise of the sun, because "any number of calamities" will already have befallen the human race by then anyway. It's all very frightening to Max.

When it gets to be too much for him, he dons a homemade wolf costume and goes roaring around his house, disrupting his mother's visit with a boyfriend. As she struggles to calm him, he bites her in a fit of rage. His mother tells him he's out of control as he

runs from the house. Max doesn't stop until he arrives at the seashore near a wooded area. Here he finds a small boat and sets sail. Traveling day and night, he finally reaches the land of the Wild Things.

Jonze and his crew have done a remarkable job of bringing Sendak's original drawings from the 1963 book to life. The Wild Things are strange creatures, very large, weird hybrids of fur and feathers. Some have horns and sharp teeth. Each of these creatures embodies a different aspect of Max's personality, or represents an emotion we have seen him experience in the earlier sequences. Their behavior and words reflect the difficult experiences in Max's life, and often incorporate direct quotes from his mother or himself. The entire sequence in the land of the Wild Things is essentially the depiction of a young boy working through his feelings, reconsidering his behavior and learning to empathize with others, especially those he has hurt.

While they are at first suspicious of Max and consider eating him, the Wild Things are soon won over by his quick thinking and imagination. He rapidly becomes their king and leads them on a "wild rumpus" through the forest. Closest to Max is a Wild Thing named Carol (voiced by James Gandolfini). Carol is sensitive and also capable of frightening outbursts. He is upset that the family unit of the Wild Things seems to be disintegrating. Carol is most angry with KW (voiced by Lauren Ambrose), a character representing either Max's sister or mother at different moments, for leaving the group to be with other friends.

As Max and the Wild Things set out to build an enormous fortress for themselves, under Max's direction, tensions rise, and the fun and freewheeling creatures become angry and sad. They begin to question their new king who had promised to bring

them nothing but happiness. Young Max will do his best to set things right and make amends with the creatures he has come to love. His experience in the land of the Wild Things will change the way he views and interacts with his mother and sister.

Max's journey from being angry and unreasonable to more understanding and responsible is well done and feels genuine. To the filmmakers' credit, they never "scold" the Max character. His anger early in the film is never dismissed. It is presented as something that must be worked through. Max must learn to understand certain things, but he must also be understood.

In one of the more remarkable scenes in the film, Max is being chased by an angry Carol when he runs into KW. Seeing that Max needs a hiding place, she tells him to jump into her mouth. He does and she swallows him whole. We see Max inside, resting in KW's body as if in a womb. While there, he listens as KW confronts Carol about his anger, reenacting the scene in which Max's mother had tried unsuccessfully to calm him earlier.

It's a moving scene in which the camera lingers on Max's face as we see him truly begin to empathize with his mother, to place himself in her shoes for the first time. This is just one of numerous moments that will no doubt resonate with viewers.

Spike Jonze and Dave Eggers, basing themselves on the picture book by Maurice Sendak, have created a work of considerable sensitivity. If this is not earthshaking material, it is nevertheless honest and intelligently made. Jonze has drawn a fine performance out of young Max Records (born 1997). The cinematography by Lance Acord is impressive, always contributing to the story and never simply ornamental or picturesque. The decision by the filmmakers to use a combination of puppetry, larger than life costumes, and animation to create the Wild Things, and avoid characters that were entirely computer generated has also paid off. This is a serious and thoughtful work.

Much has been made in the media over whether or not *Where the Wild Things Are* is a film suitable for children. Perhaps the "monsters" are too frightening, or the emotions too complex. Commentators question whether it would be possible for children to grasp the subtler elements in the work. Jonze has said his intention all along was to make a film about childhood, rather than a "children's film." But he also never

intended *not to see* it. children

When asked by *Newsweek* in October about the criticism the work had received in this regard, Sendak (born in 1928 to Polish-Jewish immigrant parents) discussed the failings of contemporary American children's films. He noted that "Europeans have done films about children, like *The 400 Blows* or *My Life as a Dog*, which is one of the most wonderful movies ever. It's tough to watch his suffering when his mother is dying and he scoots under the bed. That's the kind of way they have of dealing with children and they always have. We are squeamish. We are Disneyfied. We don't want children to suffer. But what do we do about the fact that they do? The trick is to turn that into art. Not scare children, that's never our intention."

This is a healthy approach, and one which is at odds with so much of the material being presented to children and parents alike today. For example, prior to the screening of *Where the Wild Things Are*, one finds oneself subjected to several trailers for upcoming children's films. Virtually every one looks to be a noisy, mindless, brightly colored confection. Each of the films advertised looks harmless to the point of sterility.

Thankfully, Jonze, Eggers, and Sendak all trust their viewers, whatever age, to engage with their material. They never condescend or insult the intelligence of their spectator. *Where the Wild Things Are* encourages critical thinking and selflessness. It's no wonder the corporate media finds it so inappropriate.

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