

DVD Review: Oscar Nominee ‘The Gruffalo’ Generically Adapts Beloved Book

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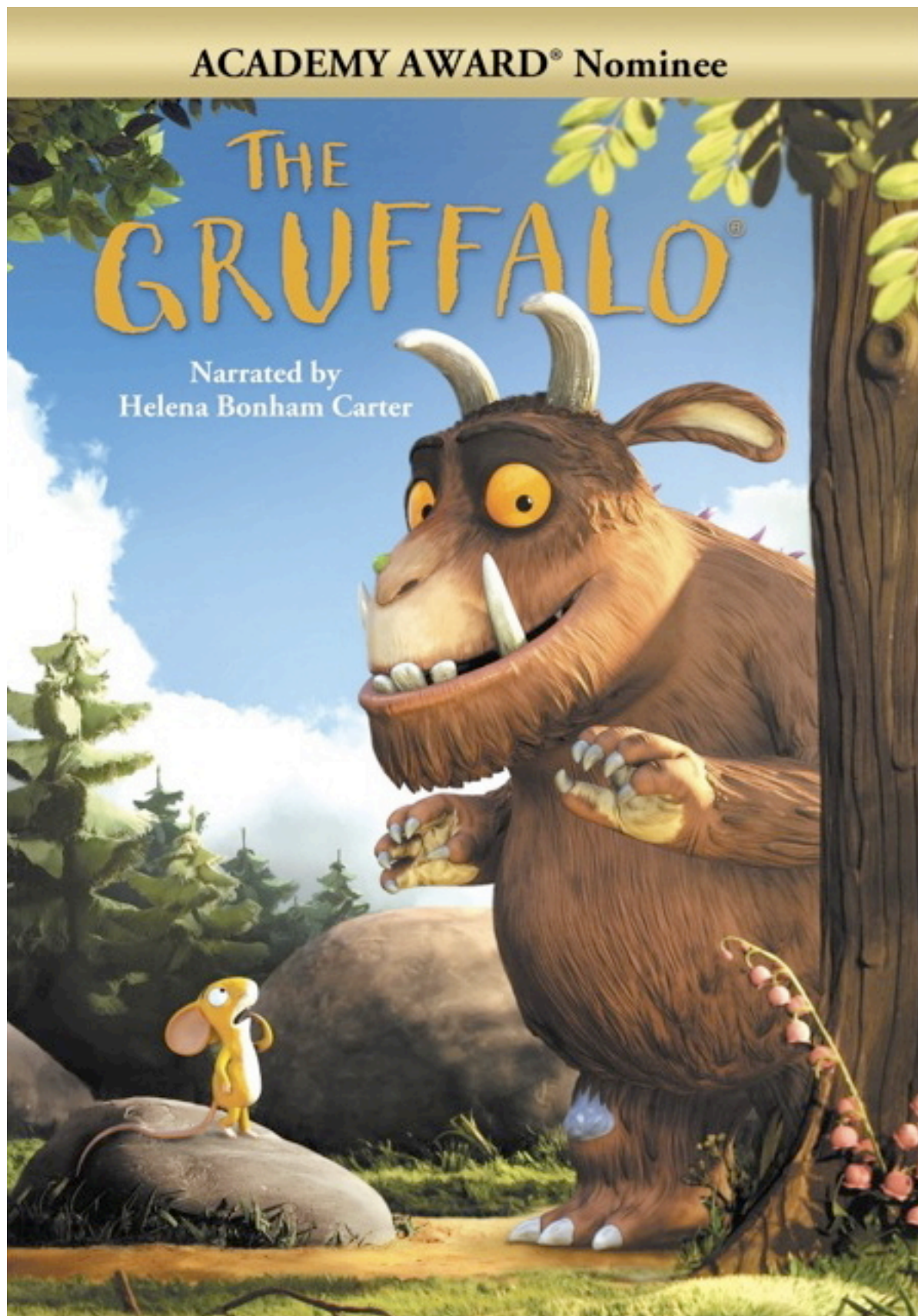
CHICAGO – It doesn’t take a child psychologist to figure out why British author Julia Donaldson’s 1999 book “The Gruffalo” has become a hit with families around the globe. It gives parents ample opportunities to portray various animal voices, while kids can take part in reciting the multiple catchy refrains. Best of all, Donaldson centers her tale on a tiny hero who uses his brains to outwit hulking predators.

Clocking in at a slim 25 minutes, Max Lang and Jakob Schuh’s Oscar-nominated animated adaptation has been hailed in some quarters as a family classic. I don’t think the film is nearly substantial enough to deserve such acclaim, though that’s not because of its limited running time. Several short films left an enduring mark on my childhood. I’ll always cherish the artistic exuberance of Stephan Martinière’s “Madeline,” the Broadway-worthy songs of Michael Sporn’s “Lyle Lyle the Crocodile,” and the awe-inspiring wonderment of Dianne Jackson and Jimmy T. Murakami’s “The Snowman.”



DVD Rating: **2.5/5.0**

Those marvelous films had two things in common: they were all adapted from children’s books and were each enhanced by the inventive approach of the filmmakers. Aside from a few witty flourishes, “The Gruffalo” movie is a thoroughly unimaginative take on a story that reads like a hodgepodge of older, better literary classics. The animation itself veers dangerously close toward Saturday morning cartoon territory, particularly in regard to its characters, which are generically designed and instantly forgettable. It was purely the popularity of the source material that attracted the film’s vastly overqualified cast of vocal talent, including Tom Wilkinson, Rob Brydon and no less than three “Harry Potter” co-stars. James Corden (“Gavin & Stacey”) is appropriately helium-voiced as a timid yet clever mouse who encounters several creatures intent on eating him. These hungry animals waste a great deal of time luring the mouse into their mouths until the little pipsqueak starts warning them about his even hungrier friend, the Gruffalo. This causes the carnivorous predators to clear a safe path for the mouse through the woods. Silly animals, don’t they know? There’s no such thing as a Gruffalo...right? Even at 25 minutes, this material grows tedious, and includes enough nightmare-inducing imagery (of animals getting eaten) to scare off the smallest tykes.



The Gruffalo was released on DVD on August 16, 2011.

Photo credit: NCircle Entertainment

Two elements nearly redeem the picture. The first is René Aubry's score, which has an enchanting resonance and richness of tone that the rest of the film lacks. It's so good that it could easily be appreciated on its own terms and is actually available for purchase online. The second is Helena Bonham Carter's narration in the role of a Mother Squirrel recounting the tale to her two frightened children. Her scenes provide an endearing framework for the central action, and Carter's exquisite voice evokes the magic parents desire to convey to their children through fantasies such as this one. Families already in love with Donaldson's book are guaranteed to automatically embrace this DVD, though I suspect that this will be one of those children's pictures that quickly dissolves from viewers' consciousness as soon as they grow past the age of 12. For all the major talent involved, "The Gruffalo" amounts to very little indeed.

"The Gruffalo" is presented in its original widescreen aspect ratio and includes a 14-minute mini-documentary featuring interviews with the authors and filmmakers. Donaldson says that the Gruffalo's appearance was largely dictated by the rhythm of her rhyming couplets. Illustrator Axel Scheffler insists that it wasn't his intention to make the fearsome beast lovable, though it must be said that his drawings bear a distinct resemblance to Maurice Sendak's immortal "wild things" in "Where the Wild Things Are" (come to think of it, Sendak's creatures were also stated to have "terrible teeth and terrible claws"). The filmmakers note that models were used to make the "deep, dark wood" appear more three-dimensional, and it's clear from the disc's gallery of concept drawings that more effort was put into fully realizing the backdrops rather than the characters. Though a TV series or Hollywood feature could've been made from her book, Donaldson was appreciative that Lang and Schuh's adaptation stuck to the original text, tone and length of her original work. Parents interested in purchasing similar entertainment for their families are advised to sample the disc's large array of commercials for children's shows including two from Jim Henson Productions: "Pajanimals" and "Sid the Science Kid."

'The Gruffalo' is released by NCircle Entertainment and features the voices of James Corden, Tom Wilkinson, John Hurt, Rob Brydon, Robbie Coltrane and Helena Bonham Carter. It was written by Julia Donaldson, Jakob Schuh and Max Lang and directed by Max Lang and Jakob Schuh. It was released on August 16, 2011. It is rated G.



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