

'The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug' Solidifies Franchise

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 12, 2013 - 11:46am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Peter Jackson and Bilbo Baggins find their groove in the entertaining “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug,” an improvement over “An Unexpected Journey” in every single department. Whereas the first one suffered from a tumultuous pre-production process and the fact that it was all prologue, “Smaug” expands this universe in ways that are narratively engaging, while also providing enough of that gorgeously shot and perfectly choreographed fantasy action that made “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy such a phenomenon. It’s still more bloated than it should be but we’re finally to the meat of the storytelling here and the improved entertainment value makes for a ride worth taking.

The film opens with a flashback to a meeting between Thorin Oakenshield (Richard Armitage) and the legendary Gandalf (Ian McKellen). It is meant to remind viewers where we are in this story, one that has been reworked greatly from its source material and expanded to three films from one relatively small book. Thorin and Gandalf devise a plan to get the Arkenstone back from the Lonely Mountain and the clutches of the dragon Smaug. But they’re going to “need a burglar.” Enter Hobbit Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman), the outsider on this journey to reclaim the lost glory of Thorin’s people.



The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Jackson then moves back to the current narrative with Bilbo and his merry band of Dwarves continuing progress from the Shire to the Lonely

Mountain. There are a few stops along the way, including a forest dominated by deadly spiders, imprisonment by Wood Elf King Thranduil (Lee Pace), and the arrival in Laketown, the waterfront village at the base of the mountain and a glorious feat of art direction. Meanwhile, Gandalf leaves the group to find the truth behind the growing darkness in Middle Earth.

Jackson and his co-writers (Phillipa Boyens & Fran Walsh, primarily, but Del Toro, who worked on the franchise with an eye to direct at one point, is also credited) carefully expand this narrative beyond the frustratingly simple one of the first film. While the Dwarves seemed interchangeable in that movie and the enemies dull, "Smaug" gives us the kind of ensemble piece that fans of the first trilogy adored. No, there are no characters as engaging as Aragorn, but Freeman finally gets some help in this installment as Bilbo & Gandalf are no longer the only characters worth caring about. Armitage shines as his role is expanded and Benedict Cumberbatch delivers a great vocal performance as the dragon Smaug. Orlando Bloom returns as Legolas, ably assisted by a charismatic turn from Evangeline Lilly as Tauriel, an Elf who may be falling for a Dwarf named Kili (Aidan Turner). Luke Evans does great work as the bargeman who helps the group get into Laketown and even small roles like those filled out by Stephen Fry as the village's power-hungry leader feel more complete than in the last movie. The sense of world creation here, with characters that have back stories and individual identities, makes one realize how much that was missing from "An Unexpected Journey."



The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

"Desolation of Smaug" also has some marvelous action set-pieces that rival the award-winning ones from the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. There's a sequence down a rushing river as the gang escapes their Elven imprisonment that is absolutely breathtaking in terms of its sheer B-movie insanity. It is the kind of joyful action that Jackson used to produce more often and reminds one that these movies can be, dare we say it, fun. Yes, there's still too much talk of prophecies and destinies but there's a sense of joy that returns to the franchise in "Smaug" in both the characters and the filmmaking. The river sequence, the spider attack, the art direction of Laketown, the design of Smaug – these are carefully crafted, incredibly enjoyable stand-outs of the entire series.

There's a crucial sense this time around that these films won't merely be callbacks to the "Lord of the Rings" series. Whereas "Unexpected Journey" reeked a bit of desperation in the way it pushed familiar faces like Elijah Wood and Cate Blanchett into the story just to try to remind viewers of what they loved a decade ago, "The Desolation of Smaug" both stands on its own and actually serves as the intended thematic prologue for "LOTR." Bilbo is starting to become the character he will be in those films and we see the pull of the ring on him, along with the political and social themes that would be more developed in that trilogy than here.

There are times when the monologuing gets a bit too intense for anyone's good. Smaug is an amazing creation (and in any year in which "Gravity" wasn't released this would be a slam-dunk for Best Visual Effects) and so perhaps that's why Jackson spends WAY too much time with him in the final act and the piece loses a bit of its pacing up to that point. Still, the stage is masterfully set for "The Hobbit: There and Back Again" next year. After "An Unexpected Journey," I had little interest in where this series was going. Now, I kind of can't wait to see the end.

"The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug" stars Martin Freeman, Ian McKellen, Richard Armitage, Benedict Cumberbatch, Evangeline Lilly, Lee Pace, Luke Evans, Stephen Fry, Aidan Turner, and Orlando Bloom. It was written by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Peter Jackson, & Guillermo Del Toro. It opens on Friday, December 13, 2013 and is rated PG-13.

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