

Fantasy & Feelings Comingle in ‘A Monster Calls’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 6, 2017 - 7:41pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The nature of dying, especially in process with a close loved one, is a testing ground for unwieldy and alien emotions. When, why and how we’re challenged does not have a timetable, nor a convenience. All of this is played out as fantasy in the vital “A Monster Calls.”

The origin of this story, which began life as a novel, even traces its source to a situation with dying. The conceiver of the story, Siobhan Dowd, was a terminal patient and passed away before she could write it. The novel was formulated and completed by Patrick Ness – who also wrote the screenplay for the film version. It is a very unusual type of fantasy, in which a monster is sprung from a tree, and visits a young boy whose mother is dying. It’s full of that grief, symbolism and the nature of our own reaction to the inevitable. It’s notable in its maturity, how all of the pieces in the narrative are scattered like a puzzle, and slowly put together to make a virtuous whole. It is also remarkably presented by an older veteran performer and a young actor making his major film debut, and they each bring a certain something to their characters that generate vulnerability and heroism. “A Monster Calls” is an original and remarkable journey.

Conor (Lewis MacDougall) – described as not a boy, but not yet a man – is having a recurring dream, where a graveyard opens up and swallows his Mum (Felicity Jones). It is then learned that this parent is dying, and preparations are being made for his future, and its not necessarily in the British town where he lives. This involves his local Grandma (Sigourney Weaver) and his Dad (Toby Kebbell), who had years before moved to America.



Conor (Lewis MacDougall) Can't Bear the Creature (Liam Neeson) in 'A Monster Calls'

Photo credit: Focus Features

The pressure with his Mum and his situation calls up a demon, a tree Monster (voice of Liam Neeson) who appears at 12:07am on random days, there to tell Conor some stories. There are three tales the Monster will tell the boy, and there is one he expects in return. These are all designed to move Conor through his difficulties, but the Monster remains a mystery to unravel.

The atmosphere of a loved one dying does breed a certain dread within every human being experiencing the process. To have that dread symbolized as a Monster, especially a tree monster – with its roots and life connotations – is mystical inventiveness. And since the novel's original author also structures the screenplay, every drop of the story's moral intuitiveness is evident. The director, J.A. Bayona ("The Orphanage"), ups his game by using unique animation derived from the book's illustrations, and the surreality of fever dreams to generate the story's environment.

The juxtaposition of Sigourney Weaver (Ripley is playing a grandmother!), with her imposing presence and confusion as to what Conor needs, versus the separation that the boy feels toward her, is deftly communicated in their interaction. Weaver is glorious in this role, she has an understanding of her persona that comes from somewhere the audience can't fathom. Lewis MacDougall as Conor projects his feelings back to her as if the actors are playing tennis, but instead of a ball it's a stake in what they both have to lose.



Sigourney Weaver as Grandma in 'A Monster Calls'
Photo credit: Focus Features

The "Monster" is a bit trickier, but stays mostly in the background. There are parallels, interestingly enough, to the 1933 "King Kong," where the creature is believed to have a certain set of characteristics because of its presence, rather than the truth of its existence. Liam "Tree-son" as the voice is perfect casting, he never overplays the gravity of what he has to say.

I rarely say this, but "A Monster Calls" may not be for children younger than the pre-teen range. Not because of the scariness of the Monster, but in the frank depiction of a parent dying. For those who may of gone through it, it might be too much all together, and for those who haven't, it might be too much to understand. The Monster lies dormant in all of us, and how it emerges has either been determined...or is yet to be known.

"A Monster Calls" opens everywhere on January 6th. Featuring Sigourney Weaver, Felicity Jones, Lewis MacDougall, Toby Kobbell and Liam Neeson. Screenplay adapted by Patrick Ness, from his novel. Directed by J.A Bayona. Rated "PG-13"



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 1:21am):

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