

## “LET ME IN” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Monday, 13 September 2010 11:11

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Not since *THE RING* have I approached a remake with as much trepidation as I did *LET ME IN*. Both movies were inspired by standout foreign features I first caught at early festival screenings, which added the thrill of discovery to the excitement generated by the films themselves. Unlike *RINGU*, however, *LET THE RIGHT ONE IN* has had plenty of Stateside exposure prior to its redux's release (October 1 from Overture Films, with a premiere tonight at the Toronto Film Festival and an opening-night screening at Austin, TX's Fantastic Fest later this month), meaning that for U.S. audiences, writer/director Matt Reeves has a lot to live up to.

The good news is that, for the most part, Reeves has crafted an honorable and often moving Americanization of Tomas Alfredson and John Ajvide Lindqvist's standout Swedish vampire drama, which functions as much as a dark coming-of-age story as a horror film. There are the inevitable concessions to Hollywood expectations and conventions, beginning with the very beginning: Where Alfredson and John Ajvide Lindqvist gently and quietly eased us into the story, Reeves opens with one of the Big Scenes to grab the audience's attention, then flashes back to show how events led to that point.



The basic plot has been largely and wisely unchanged from the original: Owen (*THE ROAD*'s Kodi Smit-McPhee) is a lonely and somewhat disturbed 12-year-old living in a snowy mountain suburb, dealing with an often-absent single mom at home and vicious bullies at school. He's given to acting out revenge fantasies at night in the courtyard of his apartment complex, and that's where he is one evening when he first meets Abby (Chloë Grace Moretz), a newcomer to the apartment next door who's also 12...“more or less,” as she puts it. At first resistant to befriending Owen, Abby also seems odd—she smells kind of funny and walks barefoot in the

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snow, and Owen overhears strange sounds and violent arguments from the other side of their common bedroom wall.

But a bond slowly forms between the two—and between them and the audience, thanks to the remarkable performances by the young leads. Owen could be seen as a budding sociopath, but Smit-McPhee invests him with a sensitivity and depth of feeling that make it clear his emotional disturbance is a product of his environment, rendering Owen both a tragic and sympathetic figure. Moretz’s Abby is tragic too, but in a different way—as we soon learn, she needs to feed on blood to survive, and depends on a middle-aged man she lives with to provide it for her. Played very well by Richard Jenkins, he’s billed as The Father, and that’s at first who he appears to be...but anyone who saw the Swedish film knows that his and Abby’s relationship is more complicated than that.

While keeping things from becoming prurient or inappropriate given the protagonists’ ages, Reeves explores the story’s undercurrents of sexuality in a little more depth than Alfredson and Lindqvist did in their film (although certainly not to the extent that the latter did in his original novel). Owen’s pre-adolescent curiosity about sex, tied in with his voyeuristic spying on his neighbors, has replaced Oskar’s fascination with serial killers in the previous movie, and a new moment between Abby and The Father (who expresses jealousy over her friendship with Owen) strongly suggests a closer relationship in their distant past.

A quick shot explicitly revealing the gender identity of Eli, the vampire girl in LET THE RIGHT ONE IN, is unsurprisingly not reprised in LET ME IN. And while Moretz’s Abby is more conventionally pretty, lacking Eli’s otherworldly visage, the young actress (a world away from her KICK-ASS characterization) fully invests her with both sorrow about her existence and the hope that Owen might let a bit of light into it. She’s also very convincing when Abby plays the predator, albeit a reluctant one—which makes it a tad disappointing that Reeves felt the need to trick up her attack and bloodlust scenes with obvious CGI acrobatics and white-eyed ghoul contact lenses.

Elsewhere, there are shots and lines of dialogue that unnecessarily underline points that already speak for themselves just fine, and the score by gifted composer Michael Giacchino, while quite good in and of itself, is laid over a few of Abby and Owen’s quieter moments together that don’t need the accompaniment. At many other times, however, Reeves and cinematographer Greig Fraser’s imagemaking is quite evocative—the way they use focus to isolate Owen and Abby in their environments, and frame Owen’s mom (Cara Buono) half out of shots. They also catch rich, bleak atmosphere on the New Mexico locations, and Reeves doesn’t flinch when it comes to presenting the bloodshed wrought by Abby and The Father.

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And speaking of violence, anyone who saw and loved LET THE RIGHT ONE IN is sure to be wondering if That Shot is recreated in the new film. (If you're a RIGHT ONE fan, you know the one I'm talking about.) Without giving too much away, it can be said that the scene is still present, and staged in a similar way, but presented differently. Pretty effectively too, and it's probably for the best that Reeves didn't simply ape Alfredson's long-take version. Besides, the director stages his own fresh single-shot scene of mayhem earlier in LET ME IN, and it packs a helluva visceral punch.

Personally, the bit I miss the most from RIGHT ONE is the cat scene (fans will remember that one too), part of a lengthy subplot involving a group of suspicious locals that is nowhere to be seen in LET ME IN; instead, it's a solo cop (Elias Koteas) who looks into the dead bodies left in Abby's wake. Again, it's more Hollywood-conventional than in the previous picture, but again, Reeves makes it work. Those who love LET THE RIGHT ONE IN will appreciate how, for all the cosmetic changes, Reeves has kept its beating and bloody heart intact, while newcomers to this story will simply enjoy a horror film with a lot more integrity and guts than most coming out of the mainstream these days.



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