

Have you seen Disney's new version of "A Christmas Carol"?



Jeff and I took our eight-year-old last week, and while we both found it spectacular – and still deliciously Dickensian – Amelia left the theater somewhat less enthusiastic.

"Was it too scary?" I asked her anxiously, having seen her cover her eyes a few times... and having shivered, myself, at some of the film's shockingly phantasmagorical images. (The ghost of Jacob Marley is a particularly nasty piece of work.)

"No. It was just too confusing," she replied, matter-of-factly.

Whew. What a relief. Once again I'd exposed my innocent child to a potential psychic trauma, and she'd come away merely confused. Incidentally, this was the same reason she'd given for not loving "Where The Wild Things Are" a few weeks earlier. I had fully expected a "too scary" then, too, but got a "too confusing," instead... along with a "too boring."

We parents don't worry much about our kids being bored, or even occasionally confused – that's life, right? – but we *do* expend a lot of energy trying to keep them from being afraid. Or sad. We

really

don't want them to be sad. We moms, in particular, tend to gnash our teeth over the prospect that a movie might be "too dark" –

we read reviews, compare notes with our friends, debrief our children after each exposure; and still, we can't quite get a handle on how dark is

too

dark.

In a recent *Newsweek* interview, “Where the Wild Things Are” author Maurice Sendak was asked, “What do you say to parents who think the “Wild Things” film may be too scary?”

Sendak’s reply: “I would tell them to go to hell. That’s a question I will not tolerate.”

Okey-dokey, then. Mr. Sendak may be overreacting a bit – his prerogative as an *artiste* – but I think I understand what he’s getting at. As well-meaning as we may be, there’s something a bit shallow – or is it callow? – in our obsession with protecting our children from dark images in books and films. Sendak claims this is a uniquely American tendency. “We’re squeamish,” he contends. “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.”

I agree with Sendak. When I think about the perfectly pleasant but utterly vapid tripe that makes up most of children’s entertainment these days, it occurs to me that Fear should be the least of our.... fears. And Sadness, a close second-to-last. Children, much like adults, need to have their minds and spirits nourished by great stories with Big Human Themes and high stakes. Popular pablum like “Hannah Montana,” “iCarly,” “The Suite Life of Zack & Cody,” etc. – while harmless enough in small doses – simply doesn’t cut it. Oh, sure... your kids won’t be scared. They won’t be sad, either. They won’t even learn any new cuss words. But they won’t learn much else, either, and they certainly won’t grow in imagination, empathy, or wisdom.

It seems to me that Darkness (with a capital D) is a fundamental part of all the best stories – the ones that open our hearts and curl up in there for the duration. This goes for children’s stories, too... or maybe *especially*. Sometimes, for their literal minds, a Monster or Beast is more effective at conveying the idea of evil than a Human Behaving Badly.

My daughter watched “The Wizard of Oz” not once, not twice, but THREE times last weekend. (There was some marathon on the Family Channel, and I couldn’t pull her away.) How vividly I remember being deathly afraid of the wicked witch, not to mention every kid’s worst nightmare – the flying monkeys. These sinister creatures certainly give my daughter pause, too, but she keeps coming back for more – just like I did – because those characters aren’t the final word in “The Wizard of Oz.” At the end of the day, “Oz” is about friendship, perseverance, and finding your way home. Without the witch and the monkeys and those creepy castle guards, there would be no need for Dorothy’s courage or loyalty or faith in the power of love. Because of the darkness in the movie, its light shines more brightly – not just literally (think of that magical moment when Dorothy steps from her black & white world into Oz!), but figuratively, as well.

Another perennial favorite when I was a kid was “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.” Remember that terrifying “Child Catcher” with the hideous honker? A necessary foil for gangly, goofy, *goodly* Dick Van Dyke. And, of course, a little later, Darth Vader became the famous foil for Luke Skywalker. (Can you imagine one without the other? They even turned out to be biologically connected!) These “bad” characters can be used for good in all sorts of interesting ways. In “A Christmas Carol,” for instance, Jacob Marley’s Ghost

is
absolutely gruesome – but not
gratuitously
gruesome. He’s a cautionary figure, a warning, a wake-up call to Ebenezer Scrooge... and to us. This well-worn tale of Scrooge and Marley is so resonant, and still so profoundly
relevant

, it seems destined to be told again and again. But let’s not forget
this

decade’s most prominent ghoul – Lord Voldemort. In the Harry Potter series – which is too new to be called a “classic,” but I’ll go there anyway – Voldemort has destroyed his own humanity in a quest for immortality, thus turning himself, quite literally, into a “monster.” Some older kids might grasp this on an intellectual level. Younger children, however, will merely see that Voldemort is sneaky, cruel, selfish and destructive, while Harry is brave, generous, honest and true. It’s Good vs. Evil. Darkness vs. Light. If –

and only if
– Little Johnny is old enough to make that connection, then he’s old enough to behold Voldemort’s horrible face.

He might even be old enough to witness the death of Dumbledore, which is very, very sad.

Soon after this crushing death, the students and teachers of Hogwarts gather 'round their beloved headmaster’s broken body, and one by one – tearful and grief-stricken – they raise their glowing wands to the sky, where the sign of Voldemort slowly fades to nothingness, unable to withstand such light and love. It

is a scene of shattering significance – and profound beauty – that will live in my heart forever. My daughter’s, too, I hope.

You see, I don’t worry so much about Amelia being scared. Or sad. I *know* she will be... if she digs into life the way I hope she will, that is. I worry more about her growing up in a culture that prefers, instead, to skate on the surface of life... a culture that can be petty and small of vision. I worry about her growing up in a culture that doesn’t cultivate her love of Big Stories – or tend to the Big Themes – but teaches her, instead, to focus on trivialities like her clothes, her hair, her social status, or the size of her house. I am very much a product of that culture, but I am desperately committed to freeing myself, because I want something different for my girl. Something better. Something more meaningful. I want her to see her life not

as some pointless, random series of disconnected people, places, and products... but as a great epic. A journey. A quest. I want her to know that, as the main character, she has been lovingly authored, but given the freedom to make of her story what she will. She doesn't have to settle for mere pleasure... she can have joy. She doesn't have to be popular... she can be loved.

She doesn't have to be cool... she can be authentic. She doesn't have to be superficial or self-centered, catty or small-minded. She can be noble and brave, generous and kind, serious of mind and light of spirit. With enough encouragement and the right role models, she can be a heroine.

So, yes, I take my daughter to "dark" movies. In every heroine's life, there will be fear. And sorrow. A heroine must learn to face those monsters head on. She must learn to stand in the darkness, that she might learn to raise her light to the sky.

And while she's learning, it helps to have Mom – a late blooming heroine-in-training, herself – sitting there beside her with a large box of Junior Mints.

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