

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue



The third installment in the film adaptation of C. S. Lewis's beloved series of children's parables features a new director. The veteran Michael Apted takes over from Andrew Adamson, who made the splendiferous films of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*. The good news is that *Dawn Treader* is a worthy successor to Adamson's entries.

The opening half hour, though, is a little disappointing. Keeping to the convention established in the first film, the setting is the Second World War. (Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, who worked on the screenplays for both the other Narnia pictures, collaborate here with Michael Petroni.) The two oldest Pevensies, Peter and Susan, have moved to Cambridge with their father, while Edmund (Skandar Keynes) and Lucy (Georgie Henley) are stuck at their aunt's, where they have to put up with their officious, whining cousin Eustace (Will Poulter).

The three children are called to Narnia when a ship in a painting comes alive. It turns out to be the *Dawn Treader*, captained by the Pevensies' old comrade Prince

Caspian (Ben Barnes), on a quest to find seven lords who never returned after being dispatched by Caspian's late father to the far islands. Apted's too-broad direction of the early episodes gives rein to Poulter's tendency toward mugging, and the scene on the first island they visit, in which pirates attempt to sell Caspian and the others into slavery, is both unimaginative and clumsy.

But on their second stop, when Lucy is blackmailed by a team of invisible adversaries into entering an enchanted mansion to locate a magician's spell book (so they can become visible again), the movie takes off, both visually and emotionally.

Perusing the volume for the requested charm, Lucy is waylaid by another volume that promises beauty; the book is transformed into a mirror, and the face that stares back at her is that of her older sister Susan (Anna Popplewell), whose elegant looks she has always envied. She tears out the page and later recites the charm, finding herself transported to an alternate reality where there is no Lucy—and no Narnia either. After all, as the Christlike lion Aslan (voiced by Liam Neeson) points out (after rescuing her), it was Lucy who first brought the Pevensie children into the world of Narnia, when it was still under the power of the cruel White Witch.

The movie is a kind of juvenile rendition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with Caspian and the children encountering one temptation after another. Edmund and Caspian find a lake that turns everything that touches its surface into gold, and greed and lust for power set them immediately against each other. Eustace's selfishness traps him when he stumbles upon a valley stocked with treasure and, placing a gold band around his arm, finds himself turned into a dragon. (Fans of the book may miss the melancholy detail of the dying dragon who has hoarded the treasure and is actually one of the vanished lords, doomed by his own greed.)

The dragon has skin like ancient brass, accordion wings and wide, anguished eyes; the image of it pulling the magnificent ship across the water makes you grin. In a particularly wondrous scene we see Aslan (at his second entrance) reflected in one of the dragon's immense eyes. There are other visual treats, too: the overgrown, woodsy cliffs that frame one of the islands, a sea serpent that embodies Edmund's worst nightmare.

Legendary cinematographer Dante Spinotti plays over the surface of the ocean and the horizon line with rainbows of refracted light; even in the shipboard scenes, which are mostly conduits from one adventure to the next, there's not any doubt that

we're in a place of profound enchantment. A place of intense feeling, too; the film ends, as the novel does, with a series of poignant farewells that simultaneously acknowledge the twilight of childhood and the approach of death. Like their source material, the Narnia movies embrace the darkness as well as the light.