

How to Train Your Dragon

reviewed by [Matthew Myer Boulton](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

The first ever Academy Award for Best Picture was given in 1929 to *Wings*, a World War I aviation drama full of groundbreaking aerial sequences. People flocked to see the film largely because they longed to feel what it might be like to fly.

That old longing is also satisfied in *How to Train Your Dragon*—though in this case we get to fly among dragons. The visually dazzling DreamWorks animation film, based on the children’s book series by Cressida Cowell, turns out to be strikingly thoughtful as well.

The action unfolds in a Viking village on the isle of Berk, an Odin-forsaken outcropping of rock and forest plagued by dragons that regularly steal the villagers’ livestock. Our hero is Hiccup (deftly voiced by Jay Baruchel), a young, nerdy, skinny misfit, the son of the village’s brawny chieftain (Gerard Butler), who is better suited to inventing clever contraptions than to dragon-slaying.

The Vikings understandably hate the dragons, just as the dragons apparently hate the Vikings. But when Hiccup comes face to face with the creature he is supposed to kill, he senses that the dragon is as vulnerable and frightened as he is. Instead of killing the dragon, he frees it—and so begins a dangerous, beautiful friendship.

The dragon, whom Hiccup names Toothless, is a cross between an agile black cat, a cool black bat, a loyal black Labrador and a wild black stallion. A brilliant, wordless four-minute stretch shows Hiccup and Toothless haltingly, courageously and then playfully getting to know each other. Unfolding against John Powell’s buoyant score, the sequence is a moving, memorable portrait of play and friendship.

The movie also offers an intriguing portrait of reconciliation. Late in the story, when all seems lost, Hiccup reflects that he first set Toothless free because “when I looked at him, I saw myself.” That version of the Golden Rule functions as the film’s moral fulcrum—and indeed, for Christians, it may help recall how the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is a line Jesus borrows from Leviticus, where it has everything to do with renouncing vengeance and grudges (Lev. 19:18).

How to Train Your Dragon is a master piece of visual style, taking full advantage of the new animation and 3D technologies that are reshaping cinema today. It's also a terrific piece of storytelling, woven through with questions like: How do we move beyond the endless rhythm of revenge? When does "fitting in" actually mean copping out?

Finally, and most important, it is great fun. It includes several sequences that provoke real delight, a few that make our hearts swirl—and a few that make us feel like we're flying.