

Sequel misses mark; 'Lambs' chills and thrills

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK (CNS) — A young boy meets up with fantastical creatures with magical powers when he dives into his fairy-tale book in "The NeverEnding Story II: The Next Chapter" (Warner Bros.).

Bastian (Jonathan Brandis) is lured back into the pages of the mysterious book, *The NeverEnding Story*, by the pleas of the Childlike Empress (Alexandra Johnes), who tells him her planet Fantasia is in danger.

The planet is under the control of evil machinations controlled by a sorceress (Clarissa Burt) and her nasty Giants, who now turn their attentions on Bastian. The boy wears a magic pendant that can grant wishes, but each wish makes him less able to remember his life on Earth and why he has come to Fantasia.

Along with his friends, Atreyu (Kenny Morrison) and Falkor, the flying shaggy dragon from Bastian's earlier adventure on the planet, he heads for the sorceress' castle. On the way the trio encounters the lovable Rock Biter — a talking mountain with a newborn baby peak — and other amazing creatures.

Bastian's indiscriminate wishes weaken, however, all but putting him under the sorceress' spell until he has only one wish left — to either return him to his home on



Bastian makes the acquaintance of Nimby The Bird (Martin Umbeck) in 'The NeverEnding Story II: The Next Chapter.'

Earth or to save the gentle people on Fantasia.

Director George Miller's sequel to the 1984 film misses the mark with a storyline both too bland for teenagers and adults. The movie also has monsters that might prove too scary for tiny tots.

On the plus side, the fantasy-adventure is visually captivating. Fantastical creatures such as Falkor, with his beautiful glassy eyes set in a huge face, and the craggy but affable talking mountain — with his chip off the old granite block squawking beside him — are a delight.

Equally lovely are the sets for the mythic Fantasia, where everyone in the crystalline Silver City seems to be waltzing on ice in turn-of-the-century chiffon confections.

The trouble is that the plot is weak and unconvincing — something about nothingness taking over the planet — and the pace is too methodical for an adventure tale.

Children may enjoy watching the film, but parents should be aware that some scenes may briefly frighten pre-schoolers.

Because of some menacing characters and fantasy violence, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-I — general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

The movie is preceded by a new Bugs Bunny short, "Box Office Bunny," rated G — general audiences, all ages admitted — by the MPAA and directed by Darrell Van Citters with voices by Jeff Bergman. In the movie, Bugs tangles with Daffy Duck and usher Elmer Fudd when they try to eject him from the new movie palace built over his rabbit hole.



Bastian (Jonathan Brandis) takes a wild ride on the back of Falkor, the flying luckdragon, in Warner Bros.' adventure-fantasy, 'The NeverEnding Story II: The Next Chapter.' The film deals with a young boy who meets up with fantastical creatures when he dives into his fairy-tale book.

'Silence of the Lambs'

A novice FBI investigator must reveal her private demons to get leads to the identity of a serial killer in "The Silence of the Lambs" (Orion).

Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) is on the loose and eluding capture for murdering — and partially skinning — his female victims. Crafty FBI honcho Crawford (Scott Glenn) asks trainee Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) to interview Dr. Hannibal Lector (Anthony Hopkins), hoping to get clues from Lector about the crazed killer's mind-set.

Lector, a brilliant psychiatrist also known as "Hannibal the Cannibal," has been incarcerated for eight years in the basement of a maximum security prison for the criminally insane.

Lector provides solid leads but the serial killer's kidnapping of a U.S. senator's daughter (Brooke Smith) means he must be caught within days or the young woman will meet a horrible death. Lector, who knows the identity of Buffalo Bill, demands and gets a face-to-face meeting with the senator (Diane Baker).

Before he can be returned to prison from his temporary holding cell, Lector engineers a horrifying escape just as Clarice — all alone and truly terrified — puts the pieces together the instant she comes face-to-face with Buffalo Bill.

The best-selling novel by Thomas Harris gets a bone-chilling translation to the screen in director Jonathan Demme's hands. From repugnant subject matter, Demme has crafted an unnervingly realistic portrait of serial killers.

Hopkins gives an unparalleled performance as the intoxicatingly dangerous psychiatrist-turned-psychopath. With his ice-blue eyes, slicked-back hair and eerie voice, he dominates the movie with his presence, and his meetings with Clarice

form the film's harrowing emotional core.

Frightened and at times humiliated by Lector's prying, Foster as Clarice hits the right note at every juncture. She imbues Clarice with tremendous dignity and inner strength, all the while looking as vulnerable as a newborn preemie. Her character is revealed with great economy — not so much as an eye blink is wasted in her spare and superb portrayal.

Levine as the third element in the deadly triangle is totally repellent — a would-be transsexual whose horrific goal is unspeakably evil. Prancing around in diaphanous material as his latest victim is slowly starved in an underground pit, he is a bloodcurdling character based on an amalgam of serial killers in FBI files.

Razor-sharp pacing, taut editing, dark, scary visuals contrasted by suddenly stark lighting all play their part in making this a gripping adult thriller. But even adults who are at all squeamish may find this film too powerful because the gruesome suspense never lets up.

This film could easily have been highly exploitative, sensationalizing the victimization of young women. Instead the story focuses more on a courageous female agent who will not be deterred. The heinous crimes are treated in serious, straightforward fashion — with gory body photos and autopsy shots all part and parcel of the necessarily detailed FBI investigation.

The result is a film of savage brutality. This chiller is spellbinding even as it repels decent people unaccustomed to the ugliness of evil up close and unleashed.

Because of some intense violence and graphic shots of mutilated bodies, a flash of nudity and occasional rough language, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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