

Movie Review: ‘Peter Rabbit’

NEW YORK — That rustling sound you hear is famed children’s author Beatrix Potter spinning in her grave, distressed at what has been done to her beloved characters in “Peter Rabbit” (Columbia).

Potter (1866-1943) wrote gentle morality fables about anthropomorphic animals, which she illustrated herself. Her 23 pocket-sized books, starting with “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” (1902), have become one of the top-selling series of all time.

Now her most famous character, the mischievous Peter Rabbit, has been transformed into a fast-talking juvenile delinquent, a hipster dude rather too fond of rude jokes and possessing a nasty murderous streak.

Director Will Gluck (“Annie”), who co-wrote the screenplay with Ron Lieber, mixes live-action with animation for this adventure comedy. While the interplay of human actors with CGI critters is remarkable, the film’s manic pace and reliance on cheap gags set a discordant tone at odds with Potter’s elegant style.

The film picks up where Potter’s first volume leaves off. Peter (voice of James Corden) is now the leader of his family, which includes his younger sisters, triplets Flopsy (voice of Margot Robbie), Mopsy (voice of Elizabeth Debicki), and Cottontail (voice of Daisy Ridley).

We know from Potter’s story how their father died. Deep in the verdant English countryside, he wandered into a fenced-in garden and was caught by the owner, Mr. McGregor, who turned him into a pie supper.

Let that be a lesson to you, Mother warns her brood. But Peter disobeys, and barely escapes with his life.

In the movie, their mother also has died, and Peter is obsessed with Mr. McGregor (Sam Neill), seeking revenge and his vegetables. He enlists his sisters and his cousin, Benjamin Bunny (voice of Colin Moody), on daily raids into the garden.

During one ambush, Mr. McGregor has a fatal heart attack, collapsing in front of

Peter. The young bunny is elated, as are his family and friends. All are invited to overrun the garden and Mr. McGregor's cottage, both of which are thoroughly trashed.

Fans of the Potter books will spot Pigling Bland (voice of Ewen Leslie), Jemima Puddle-Duck (voice of Rose Byrne), and Miss Tiggy-Winkle (voice of Sia), among other familiar characters.

The animals' idyll is short-lived, as soon a new McGregor arrives, great-nephew Thomas (Domhnall Gleeson). He's a city boy from London who hates the country (and all four-legged creatures) and plans to put the homestead up for sale.

Until, that is, he meets his comely neighbor, Bea (Rose Byrne). She's a kind and sweet friend to Peter and his family, whom she paints in her spare time (for Bea read Beatrix, of course). She tries to soften Thomas' strong feelings and eventually captures his heart.

Peter will have none of this, and plots Thomas' murder as the bunnies declare war.

Thankfully, the film's resolution does impart some of the lessons of Potter's books, including the importance of family, honesty and forgiveness. But the filmmakers cannot resist the ill-mannered behavior, low-brow jokes, and noisy eruptions that seem to be staples in children's films today.

Suffice it to say, Potter would recoil at Peter's attempt to thrust a carrot up Mr. McGregor's bare buttocks, not to mention a comic remark about Benjamin Bunny's nipples.

The film contains a vengeance theme, a glimpse of partial rear nudity, some rude humor and action sequences. The Catholic News Service classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

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