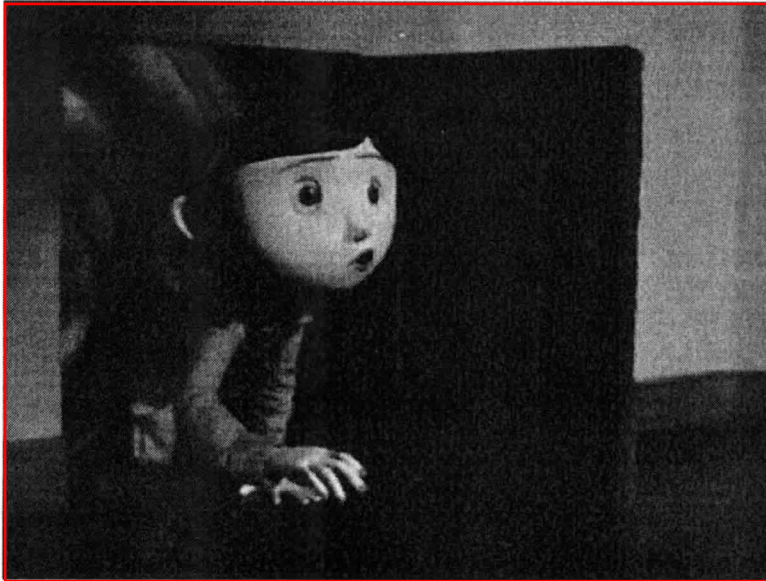


Coraline: Visually Stunning, Morally Complex, Spooky Tale

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When I told my eight-year-old son that I had been asked to write a review of the new animated feature, *Coraline*, he responded, "Tell them not to go, Dad. It's too scary." His mother recently took him to see Henry Selick's visually arresting adaption of Neil Gaiman's novel, and there was no way he was going back.



While I respectfully disagree with my son's recommendation (at least for non-children readers), I completely concur with his observation. *Coraline* is a freaky, creepy, and eerie nightmare. It's also very good.

For those unfamiliar, *Coraline* tells the story of an 11-year-old heroine recently moved from her faraway home to a spooky old house with a dark history. Although Gaiman's novel takes place in England, Selick Americanizes the film by shifting the setting to Oregon.

Ignored by inattentive and stressed-out parents, Coraline discovers a miniature door hidden beneath the wallpaper in her dilapidated home. During the day, a brick wall blocks her entrance. But at night, the mortar gives way to a billowing umbilical chord of a tunnel. Through this blue and pink passage, Coraline transports herself into an idealized, parallel version of her less than ideal life. In this spiffy, bizarro world, her improved, albeit button-eyed, parents faun over her. The gravy dish literally chugs across the dinner table on a tiny train (get it?). The expansive multi-level garden surrounding the house flourishes like Eden before the Fall.

As we soon learn, however, this fantastic world is no Eden. Students of fantasy fiction know that menace usually waits on the other side of magical portals. In terms of sheer disturbing danger, the sinister force that lurks behind Coraline's diminutive door makes the Duchess on the other side of Alice's rabbit hole, or the even the White Witch behind *Narnia's* wardrobe, seem soothing by comparison.

Among *Coraline's* many strengths, none impress more than its dazzling visuals. Under Selick's leadership, cinematographer Pete Kozachik, animation head Anthony Scott and visual effects supervisor Brian Van't Hul, each deserve their own little bald statue. I regret that I was not able to see their inventive work in its 3-D glory. Still, the computerized enhancement of classic stop motion animation produces such depth on the screen that I would swear I was wearing those silly glasses after all.

The settings slide between jaw-dropping instances of serene beauty and sinister segments of comic ugliness. The scene in which Coraline's "other father" takes her for an aerial tour of his burgeoning flower garden pulses with vibrancy, color and whimsy. Such opulent views eventually warp into surreal distortions. With shades of Salvador Dali, the bodies of Coraline's

antagonists transform into nightmarish caricatures of form—all bony shoulders and protruding posteriors.

It would be a shame if *Coraline*'s unsettling scariness keeps Christian audiences away from the theatre or the DVD. The film has much to offer. *Gospelandculture.org* currently posts a wonderful essay by Kristin Kobes Du Mez about evangelical culture's tendency to cast women as damsels in need of rescue. If you share Kobes Du Mez's concern for this pervasive portrayal of women, *Coraline*'s characterization provides a needed antidote.

Faithfully voiced by Dakota Fanning, she is strong, assertive, smart, brave and inherently good. If *Coraline* offers a positive role model for tweens, her preoccupied parents offer a needed corrective for adults. In other words, this parenting gig goes by awfully fast. Pay attention!

Coraline also provides a needed ingredient to its genre: moral complexity. Much of contemporary animation sanitizes fantasy of its nuance. We get villains so blatantly bad and heroes so perfectly good that not even a three-year-old could fail to notice the difference. This kind of animated melodrama has its place, but it is not very honest.

Sometimes, bad things hide in bright and beautiful packages. *Coraline* boldly stares at wickedness masquerading as righteousness. In doing so, it cleverly unmasks the lie. Christians should appreciate a film that takes evil seriously.

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