Through ‘Wonder,’ The Power To Imagine

There is more to the tale than meets the eye in the film version of R.J. Palacio’s novel.

LIKE MOST PEOPLE who love the best-selling book “Wonder,” I’ve been thrilled by the success of the movie version. It captures beautifully the book’s central premise, that we should choose to be kind and inclusive to people like Auggie Pullman, the protagonist, who was born with facial deformities that are at first shocking to look at. The young actor Jacob Tremblay, wearing mask-like makeup that rearranges his features, gracefully inhabits the role of Auggie not only by showing his pain and vulnerability, but also by convincing us of one of the secret weapons of R.J. Palacio’s book: Auggie is fun, clever and generous, and the kids who call him “the freak” actually have the most to gain by his friendship. So I feel gratified that the movie seems to be catching on — but also, I’ll admit, a bit wary.

The books-versus-movies battle is not usually a fair fight. The visual is the best developed of our senses, and as such it tends to dominate. Perhaps that’s partly why literary-minded people like me sometimes scoff at the movie versions of books. But we shouldn’t, as a rule.

Children’s books, especially, make terrific movies. People who write for children can’t afford the wordiness that authors of books...
Traveling Space, With Movie Stars

A look at new and notable trailers that recently hit screens. BRUCE FRETTS

'A Wrinkle in Time'

Even though Ava DuVernay’s name isn’t seen until the end of the new trailer for her reimagining of “A Wrinkle in Time,” it clearly exemplifies female empowerment. Based on Madeleine L’Engle’s 1962 novel, it’s the story of Meg Murry (Storm Reid, of “12 Years a Slave”), a girl who learns to bend the rules of time and space to save her astrophysicist father (Chris Pine) from captivity in another dimension.

Along her journey, she’s helped by three otherworldly beings: Mrs. Which (Oprah Winfrey), Mrs. Who (Mindy Kaling) and Mrs. Whatsit (Reese Witherspoon). Meg’s mother, a doctor played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw, also guides her.

Meg is accompanied by her brother, Charles Wallace (Deric McCabe), and her best friend, Calvin (Levi Miller); a few other men also pop up in the trailer, including Zack Galifianakis, Michael Peña and André Holland. But, as Mrs. Which tells Meg of the evil energy trapping her father, “the only one who can stop it is you.”

Storm Reid in the movie, which also stars Oprah Winfrey.

The Greatest Showman

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment you’ve been waiting for,” Hugh Jackman sings in the trailer for the P.T. Barnum biopic, “The Greatest Showman.” Whether that’s true will be determined when this cinematic circus comes to town on Dec. 20, but 20th Century Fox has put together a number of winning elements to hedge its bet on a risky proposition: original musical period

Hugh Jackman in a scene from the P.T. Barnum biopic.

School Musical” grad Zac Efron and the pop star Zendaya.

With a screenplay by the “Dreamgirls” and “Chicago” veteran Bill Condon and “Sex and the City” alum Jenny Bicks, “The Greatest Showman” projects a message of inclusion that may resonate with contemporary audiences. “They don’t understand yet,” Barnum tells a bearded woman played by Michael Keaton, “but they will.”

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for adults can get away with, and there is a realism that comes with writing for readers who are generally not too far off from their last good cry. The hallmarks of a great kids’ book are well-paced storytelling and emotional truth, qualities that are crucial to an effective movie. I don’t want to imagine a world without films like “The Wizard of Oz” or “Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” or even the Harry Potter movies. These are unforgettable cinematic experiences, and they have no doubt increased the cultural reach and maybe even the longevity of the children’s books they are based on.

But “Wonder,” the book, operates on a level that seems imperative to the powers of cinema. Perhaps its greatest power resides exclusively in the province of literature. I recently mean the way Palacio’s novel conjures an entire world through words alone, making you care deeply about its characters, and offering you a privileged entry into their inner lives. What I think helped this book catch fire is that it’s a compelling visual mystery lies at its core, and you have to solve it for yourself, completely within the confines of your own imagination.

That is, of course, the precise details of Auggie’s ravaged face, which at his birth was so dangerously misshapen that basic functions like seeing, hearing, breathing and eating were in question. As the book begins, his face, after years of surgeries, is a surface of scars and improvised features made of bones and skin repurposed from elsewhere. Just what does it look like? We can’t know for sure. Each reader must conjure his or her own answer, which makes reading it a very active experience. That quality — rare in a work of realism like “Wonder” — is part of what has kept so many children absorbed by the book’s pages.

“I won’t describe what I look like,” 10-year-old Auggie says on the first page. “Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse.” Instead, we get to know him by hearing his thoughts about his family, and his fears of going to school for the first time after being home-schooled by his mom, who is also his teacher.

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'The Greatest Showman'

"Ladies and gents, this is the moment you've waited for," Hugh Jackman sings in the trailer for the P.T. Barnum biopic, "The Greatest Showman." Whether that's true will be determined when this cinematic circus comes to town on Dec. 25, but 20th Century Fox has put together a number of winning elements to hedge its bet on a risky proposition: an original musical period piece.

Mr. Jackman's last movie musical, "Les Misérables," opened on Christmas Day 2012 and went on to gross more than $440 million worldwide. Unlike "Les Miz," however, "The Greatest Showman" is not based on a successful stage show, and it's unrelated to the 1962 Broadway hit "Barnum." Instead, the new film features new songs with lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, who earned an Oscar for "La La Land" and a Tony for the current smash "Dear Evan Hansen."

Michelle Williams, who stars as Barnum's wife, Charity, isn't known for her musical skills but the actress has been nominated for four Oscars, mostly recently for "Manchester by the Sea." The supporting cast also includes a pair of popular younger performers with singing chops, the "High School Musical" grad Zac Efron and the pop star Zendaya.

With a screenplay by the "Dreamgirls" and "Chicago" veteran Bill Condon and "Sex and the City" alum Jenny Bicks, "The Greatest Showman" projects a message of inclusion that may resonate with contemporary audiences. "They don't understand yet," Barnum tells a bearded woman played by Keala Settle (a Tony nominee for "Hands on a Hardbody," from 2013). One can only hope he film doesn't prove the most famous aphorism attributed to Barnum: "There's a sucker born every minute."

Hugh Jackman in a scene from the P.T. Barnum biopic.

'Rampage'

"Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle," this isn't. Dwayne Johnson will follow his coming comedy sequel with a less family-friendly wildlife adventure, "Rampage." In it, he plays a primatologist who forges a strong bond with a silverback gorilla named George (not to be confused with Curious George).

After a botched genetic experiment causes George to mutate into a King Kong-like giant, the scientist tries to save his simian pal while battling other oversized creatures, including a 30-foot-long wolf and a gigantic crocodile.

Based on a 1980s video game, "Rampage" reunites Mr. Johnson with Brad Peyton, the director of his 2015 smash disaster movie, "San Andreas," which raked in $474 million worldwide. The cast also boasts a couple of cable TV horror-show veterans, Jeffrey Dean Morgan ("The Walking Dead") and Joe Manganiello ("True Blood"), as well as Naomi Harris, an Oscar nominee for "Moonlight."

The new trailer suggests the movie combines elements of "Planet of the Apes" with "Snakes on a Plane" (albeit with an ape). "Rampage" will reach theaters April 20.

Dwayne Johnson plays a scientist in the movie.

The Metroropliantom Opera

Today, Wed & Sat mat
RARE PERFORMANCES
VERDI
REQUIEM
James Levine conducts the Met Orchestra and Chorus and four leading soloists in Verdi's last and most powerful work. This 2017 staging by Tito Capobianco features a young, charismatic Nabucco and intimate scenes of passion and tragedy. Baritone Edward Parks and soprano Angelika Kirchschlager are joined by mezzo-soprano Michelle deYoung and tenor Matthew Polenzani.

Tues & Sat eve
FINAL PERFORMANCES
MASSenet
THAIS
Ailyn Pérez stars as the alluring temptress. Gerald Finley is the monk who's powerless to resist her spell. Renée Fleming stars in the role of a pharisee who tempts her with a grand plan to kill the king of Siam. The drama unfolds against a backdrop of exotic music, from haunting serenades to vivid scenes of Beijing.

Thu
HOLIDAY PRESENTATION
MOZART
THE MAGIC FLUTE
There's magic at the Met! Julie Taymor's spectacular holiday production for families follows a young boy as he journeys to the land of the dead to save his sister. Ave Maria, the Met's annual Christmas benefit to support education and outreach programs, follows. And there's no more spectacular production than this: The Magic Flute. At 1 pm.

Fri
NEW PRODUCTION
BELLI
NORMA
Bel canto virtuosos Angela Meade and Jamie Barton step into the Met's acclaimed new production. Roman Emperor Calisto had a group of young men around him to help him run the government. When one of them, Octavian, was about to marry a wealthy woman, he turned to Calisto for assistance. When Calisto refused, Octavian turned on him, and Calisto was murdered. Octavian then set himself up as emperor, and Calisto's widow, Norma, sought revenge. She learned that Calisto was a secret member of the hair, and that he had fathered a child with her. She also learned that Calisto had been betrayed by his own son. In the end, Norma took her revenge, and Octavian was killed.