
MARIA RUSSO
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

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

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DALE ROBINETTE/LIONSGATE

Jacob Tremblay stars as Auggie Pullman

'Wonder' Has More Than Meets the Eye

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for adults can get away with, and there is a realness 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 impervious to the powers of cinema. Perhaps its greatest power resides exclusively in the province of literature. I don't just 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 a compelling visual mystery lies at its core, and you have to solve it for yourself, completely within the confines of your own imagination.

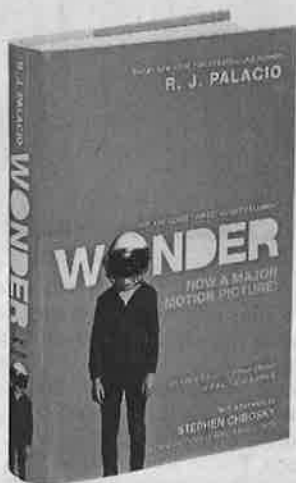
That is, of course, the precise details of Auggie's ravaged face, which at his birth was so dangerously misshapen that basic functions like seeing, hearing, breathing and eating were in question. As the book begins, his face, after years of surgeries, is a surface of scars and improvised features made 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, and the stories of his heartbreak-

imagined, but that's another story.) In the theater, I looked at the reveal with a peculiar mixture of satisfaction and letdown.

Here is where I encourage anyone whose child has not yet read the book, or seen the movie (and let's remember that with children's literature, an entirely new audience ages into a book every year): Try to get hold of a copy that is not the brand-new "movie tie-in edition." As the cover trumpets, this new edition "includes full-color movie photos and exclusive content!" No, no, a thousand times no. Those full-color photos of Jacob Tremblay in his makeup will make impossible the experience of creating, each child for him or herself, a private image of Auggie.

In the book, when Auggie does comment on his appearance, his words focus on what it is like to live in his body. Take this short scene about dealing with his ears, which are the feature "I hate the most," because they're "like tiny closed fists on the sides of my face," and they're "too low on my head." But his hearing has been getting worse, and he constantly has an "ocean" sound in his head,



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"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, and the stories of his heartbreaking attempts at making and keeping friends over the years. It's not until page 88, when the narrative voice shifts to his teenage sister, Via, that we get some specifics about his face. His eyes "slant downward at an extreme angle," with top eyelids "always halfway closed" and lower eyelids that look "like they're inside out." He has "tiny cauliflower-shaped ears" as well as a "severe overbite and an extremely undersized jawbone." There are a few more specific descriptions there, and seeded throughout the book. Still, even after reading the book several times, and reviewing it for *The Times*, I felt an abiding uncertainty and a kind of tender curiosity about Auggie's face. Not only was it difficult to imagine how such unusual features cohered visually, I somehow didn't want to hurt his feelings by wanting too badly to know the brutal reality.

Yet just a few minutes into the movie "Wonder," the tantalizing central mystery of the book is over. We see Auggie jumping on his bed, then walking to the first day of school with his parents and Via, all the while wearing an astronaut helmet. They arrive at his new school, he takes off the helmet, and there it is: the nonnegotiable truth, or rather the filmmakers' version of it. (Which, by the way, is not nearly as drastically different as I think most readers of the book will have



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"like I was underwater." So after a short protest he lets the doctor put in the hearing aid. What comes next is one of those perfectly pitched passages that makes you soar each time Auggie's life gets a little better. "The ocean just wasn't living inside my head any more." He could hear "sounds like shiny lights" in his brain. "I don't know if there's a word that means the same as 'bright' in terms of hearing, but I wish I knew one, because I was hearing brightly now."

Moments like that one, when Palacio steers us toward feeling, rather than seeing, what it is like to be Auggie, help explain why, when there are so many books about kids with disabilities, this novel is the one that has inspired a movement. It's called "Choose Kind" and its aim is to help children develop empathy. Along with the Children's Craniofacial Association, schools and communities have embraced the book as a cause, more than just a reading experience, with "Wonder" "Community Reads" events and schools establishing "certified choose kind classrooms."

Many of those classrooms, and others too, have been making field trips to see the movie. I hope more will follow. In its quiet way it's a tremendous movie, and along with the book it has important work to do. But there is still this strange situation to contend with: The movie does justice to Auggie's story, but it doesn't — it can't — do justice to the book.

Maria Russo is the children's books editor at The Times Book Review.