



The Neverending Story III

Escape from Fantasia

US : 1994 : dir. Peter MacDonald : : min
prod: Dieter Geissler : scr: Jeff Lieberman : dir.ph.: Robert Vidgeon
Jason James Richter; Melody Kay
Freddie Jones; Jack Black; Ryan Bolman; Carole Finn

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*Fantasia's Empress begs Bastian to rescue her from all these cutesy costume creatures – so she can get down to some **serious** shopping*
Source: indeterminate

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide" or "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]

Radio Times review:

"In this tired second sequel, young Bastian (Jason James Richter) must save his fantasy world when a gang steals the magical Never Ending Story book. ** "

"Fantasy. When a gang of bullies steals a magical book which is a portal to an imaginary world, a young boy must come to the rescue and stop the ensuing chaos. ** "

I've got this great idea for a film – why not do a sequel to “**THE WIZARD OF OZ**”, only this time let's set all of the action back in Kansas. And let's fly in a couple of munchkins and have them make wisecracks about Bruce Willis or Madonna, and instead of clicking her heels at the end, Dorothy can give the straw man a “high five”. Doesn't that sound just **so** cool?

Screenwriter Jeff Lieberman must have been working with a gun pressed to his head, because he hasn't the least feeling for fantasy or fairy tale escapism, and seems to have read only a cereal packet digest of the original novel. “Spare me this New Age garbage” he has Bastian's sister say to him in an early scene, while right at the end of the film Falkor the luck dragon declares to camera “*This is my favourite part of the adventure!*”, and moments later the credits roll. Dangerous irony, when the film is such irredeemable junk many in the audience will be sharing the same sentiment. Even when the camera catches glimpses of the famous book itself, it zooms in at once on an illustration – which rather defeats the whole message, I would think, about the fun of *reading*.

Few would have high expectations of any second sequel, but this just gets everything wrong. Bastian is now several years older than he was in the first two stories (a different actor in each, which doesn't help continuity) and the problem there is that he's simply too old now to be messing about with gnomes and fairy Empresses, flying dragons and walking trees. He's acquired a new stepmother and a really obnoxious stepsister Nicole, who also proves to be a thief, but that's OK because the poor thing is simply traumatised by her parents' divorce. Bastian, with “hair that looks like the rear end of a porcupine”, is starting a new school, Nicole's school, and immediately falls prey to a troop of Neanderthals led by one Slip, whose eyebrows meet above his twenty-odd-year old nose. Fleeing them, Bastian takes refuge in the storybook and is whisked away to Fantasia, but – whoops! – he left the book behind in the school library and this falls into the hands of said Slip. Bastian, with a posse of lovable favourites from the earlier films, returns from Fantasia (by means of a talisman called an Omni) to rescue the book, only to lose the Omni as well. Nicole steals it from his room, loots the local fashion store, and lets it fall into the hands of, yep, old monobrow.

All of the characters have been tweaked (messed about with) for the third film so that, like the central figure, Falkor looks and sounds quite different each time, and so does the tree man, and so does the rock giant, and so does the Empress, but the changes are rarely for the better. Falkor now sounds like Goofy. The first two stories gave timid Bastian a bold alter-ego in the fantasy world, Atreyu, which major character is jettisoned altogether. The rock giant acquired an offspring, “Junior”, in the first sequel, and that character is beefed up to a major role here, even though it is more nauseating than cute, goo-gooing and ga-gaing its lovable dialogue. Time and again, Lieberman puts lines into the mouths of the other Fantasia creatures which are wholly out of context, and only contrived to make the adults in the audience snigger: “He's not exactly Arnold Schwarzenegger in the muscle department” one of them says of Bastian to the Empress; “If I was a luck dragon I'd be halfway to Vegas by now” quips the tree man, while two gnomes bundling themselves into a parcel grumble about earning frequent air mileage points. What has any of this to do with Michael Ende's original conception – you know, the one that made this franchise saleable in the first place?

Lest I give the wrong impression here, I wasn't a fan of the first film either, not by a long chalk, but for all its insipid traits it was a sincere attempt to translate a popular children's fantasy onto the screen. The production design (chiefly in glass shots) of Fantasia itself are actually more beautiful here than in the previous editions, but are wasted on a tossed-off script which is wrong in the broad strokes and wrong in the detail. Most unforgivably of all, it picks up the running thread about school bullying and fobs kids off with a resolution of the dilemma even the dullest-witted of them couldn't swallow. Bastian gives the chief thug – nearly twice his size and a good seven years older – a fair kicking (using karate lessons he never took), and by the end Slip has been converted into a model student and Bastian's number one fan. This is what we tell to the kids who are actually being tormented and beaten up in the school corridors?

"NEVERENDING STORY III" is the **"BATMAN FOREVER"** of this series, a self-evident turkey which shoots its own franchise in the foot. Freddie Jones hints egregiously that "the story's not over yet, young man!" but I rather suspect it is. It certainly doesn't deserve another outing.

Although her character is wholly repellent, Melody Kay plays it well enough, and sparkles when she has her fashion victim triumphant scene at the shopping mall. Jason James Richter will be familiar to all from the **"FREE WILLY"** films (which also overstayed their welcome), and you have to feel for him, soldiering bravely through the tacky scenes with the rock-baby "Junior", or essaying to believe whole-heartedly in the fantasy world that dogs him like a benevolent stalker. Hollywood casting agents certainly have an eye for gorgeous boys, even if they tend to drop them unceremoniously when their pre-adolescent looks begin to fade. Richter has not yet made the transition to the teen hunk stakes, and the films so far to his credit offer no indication whether he can cut it on acting ability alone. Pretty or no, it is not worth dragging your eyes through this mess to watch him. ***Definitely to be avoided.***

See the first two instalments, and subject index under **BULLYING, FANTASY / FOLK TALES / FAIRY TALES, MOVING HOME, SCHOOL** and **STEPMOTHERS / STEPFATHERS**.