

Wild Things, You Make My Heart Sing

Written by Margaret Evans

If I were still writing about politics – a hobby I gave up around the same time I stopped extracting my own teeth for sport – I might posit an audacious theory: that the hip and famously eccentric young team of Spike Jonze and Dave Eggers have made a profoundly conservative film in “Where The Wild Things Are.”



But since I'm *not* writing about politics anymore – and since I'm grateful to Jonze and Eggers for this lovely movie, and don't wish to stick them with a divisive label I'm pretty sure they weren't hoping to earn – I'll just call “Wild Things” a wise, sorrowful, truthful tale of human nature. No, wait... I'll call it a fable. Even better.

My first impulse, in fact, is to call it a “postmodern” fable. Our young hero, Max, is no longer merely a kid in a wolf suit who's been sent to his room for sassing his mother, à la Maurice Sendak's 1963 children's classic. The new cinematic Max, while still in wolf's clothing, has had his story significantly fleshed out (not surprising, since the book came in at a little over 300 words) and intentionally updated. He is now a child of divorce who lives with his mother... a mother who's worried about job security and dating some guy who's not his father. Max also has a beloved teenaged sister who prefers riding in cars with boys to spending time with him, and a science teacher who waxes rhapsodic over the coming death of the sun. (“But don't worry,” Teacher tells his class of third graders, who look a bit unsettled by this news. “By the time that happens, humanity will have already been destroyed by nuclear war or global warming or something....”) I paraphrase, but you get the point. Max is a contemporary boy with contemporary fears and anxieties.

But the world has never been a safe or easy place, and children have always sensed this on some level, despite our best efforts to protect them. In that respect, Max is a boy for all times. And the fable that is “Wild Things,” while postmodern in style, tone, and some of its subject matter, is a story for all times... and quite traditional in its way.

Like most traditional fables, it even features animal characters who speak and act like humans. I'm talking, of course, about the Wild Things – huge, fantastical creatures, astonishing to

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behold, drawn faithfully from the illustrations in Sendak's book. When Max (played by cherub-faced Max Records) becomes angry at his mother (the wonderfully *real* Catherine Keener) for her attentions to a new boyfriend – and her

inattention

to him – he throws a tantrum to end all tantrums, which culminates in his running away, then sailing off to the mysterious island where the Wild Things are.

If I were a psychiatrist, I could probably tell you which aspect of Max's personality is represented by each Wild Thing – I'm pretty sure that's what the filmmakers are going for, here – but these creatures are too deliciously complex to be seen as mere ciphers. Their ring leader is Carol (voiced by James Gandolfini), whose anxiety and vulnerability are matched only by his great, all-consuming capacity for love. When Max first encounters Carol, he's violently smashing all the creatures' houses (including his own) into bits, because, he says, "I just want us all to be together." The other Wild Things (voiced by Catherine O'Hara, Forest Whitaker, Paul Dano, Chris Cooper, and Lauren Ambrose, whose "KW" is particularly lovable) are equally complicated and hard to pin down. They are initially afraid of Max, despite his small stature and childish appearance, but he wins them over, boasting of magical powers and incredible feats of bravery, and soon they make him their king. Accepting his crown, King Max promises to use his special powers to "keep out all the sadness."

In an effort to fulfill this promise, Max concocts a plan. He decides to build "the perfect fort"... a wondrous structure that will keep all the Wild Things together and protect them from outside forces. The fort, in fact, will be designed to "suck out the brains" of anyone they don't like who might happen to come along. The Wild Things love this idea and look forward to sleeping together in this perfect fort, fur to fur, one on top of the other, in a "real pile." They begin working together to build it, cheerfully and cooperatively, and all is well... at first.

Pretty soon, an enemy shows up and things begin to fall apart. No, I'm not talking about KW's inscrutable new friends, Terry and Bob. I'm talking about Human Nature. Jealousy and envy rear their ugly heads... along with possessiveness, pettiness, anger, impatience, and selfishness. As these destructive forces begin chipping away at relationships – and even at the fort, itself – King Max races around the island trying to put out emotional fires in hopes of restoring universal happiness to his realm. Ultimately, his task is impossible, and King Max is found out. "You're not really a king, are you?" says Carol, betrayed. "You said you would keep the sadness out, but you can't. You don't have the power."

Devastated, Max recognizes the truth in Carol's statement. Nobody can keep out the sadness... the sadness comes from within, not without. He also faces the fact that he doesn't belong here

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where the Wild Things are. They are a family, but they are not *his* family. It's time to go home. Max boards his little boat and sails away from the island, sounding a deep, aching howl of animal anguish, and the Wild Things howl back. It's one of the most beautiful scenes I've ever witnessed on film.

Like all good fables, I think "Wild Things" has a moral. Many morals, in fact. If I had to sum up the film's central message, it might go something like this:

"Family life is hard, but it's still the best thing we've got going in this crazy, lonely world."

But that's only one of many old-fashioned truisms woven into the deceptively edgy-looking fabric of this indie-style art film. (Yes, I'm calling this fable an "art film," too. What you *won't*

hear me call it is a "children's film.") Are those truisms there intentionally? I have no idea. Did the filmmakers actually

mean

to give us this dark take on human nature, suggesting that our impulse to destroy runs as deep as our impulse to create? Did they

mean

to acknowledge that social engineering is a risky business? That not all walls, barriers and boundaries need to be torn down; that some are there to protect us, and only need a bit of tweaking? (And that smashing them to smithereens seldom ends well?) Did the filmmakers *really*

intend to suggest that political leaders (and kings) never succeed in "keeping out all the sadness"... and that we shouldn't expect them to?

Did they really mean to tell us that Utopia, while it sounds wonderful, is impossible? That sleeping in a "real pile" may be cozy for a bit, but is ultimately restrictive, spirit-crushing... and damned uncomfortable?

Did Jonze and Eggers mean to say these things in "Wild Things"? I doubt it. Jonze has claimed his only intention was to portray "what it feels like to be in the head of a nine-year-old." But truth has a way of sneaking into the best art, with or without the artist's permission. In the end, as a smiling Max sails back across the tempestuous, exhilarating sea of his own imagination – back to his home, back to his mother – we are reminded, once again, of *the* truth, the one that's been told over and over, and that we must continue to tell, in as many ways as we can... as old as Adam and fresh as this morning's dew:

Only love can break your heart. And only love can mend it.

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