

Movie Review: 'National Treasure: Book of Secrets'

by David_Elliott

Nicolas Cage looks good in a seersucker suit. That is about the only clear and certain fact to ward off suspicion in "National Treasure: Book of Secrets."

'NATIONAL TREASURE: BOOK OF SECRETS' - A cave in South Dakota lures Nicolas Cage and Diane Kruger to the gold in the adventure film 'National Treasure: Book of Secrets.' CNS Photo courtesy of Disney. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Who owns the book? The president of the United States, who tells nobody about it but lets it be kept on the rear of an open shelf at the Library of Congress, where just about any nosey bookworm could find it. Calvin Coolidge knew about it, even put a photo of a pre-Columbian hieroglyphic panel inside it but, being Silent Cal, stayed mum.

The current prez, not George W. Bush but actor Bruce Greenwood, knows of the book and tells treasure

hunter and history buff Ben Gates (Cage). But only after Gates invokes the president's Huck Finn impulse to help Gates open up the forgotten cellars of George Washington's mansion at Mount Vernon, leaving the Secret Service behind as they enter spaces no curator or site maintainer had ever thought to visit.

In case you are busily wondering, that old Aztec or Toltec panel once in JFK's Oval Office desk has a matching element at Buckingham Palace, where Gates found it without help from Queen Elizabeth (no Huck is she). After getting into the palace, the White House and Mount Vernon, surviving hot pursuit by mean Mitch (Ed Harris), and watching his estranged parents (Jon Voight, Helen Mirren) bicker cutely, Gates ends up seeking the mythic, golden city of Cibola near Mount Rushmore.

That means a zip past spots sacred to "North by Northwest" fans, into hidden grottos full of Cibolan gold, which suggest a peyote merger of "King Solomon's Mines" and the Glenn Ford caper among Mexican ruins, "Plunder of the Sun." Plus (bonus) a fright gag lifted from "Roman Holiday."

The funniest goof in this surreal sequel is Cage lamenting the current state of American education. That, in a film which suggests that Queen Victoria rooted for Robert E. Lee, that Gen. Custer died at Little Big Horn while on a quest for gold and that the Apollo astronauts didn't land on the moon.

This is where inane meets insane, but with such breathless zeal for make-believe that you might chuckle yourself silly. Cage, as usual, acts as if his reputation were at stake. He seemed more sober playing a suicidal drunk in "Leaving Las Vegas."

Even winners of the Bancroft Prize in history would have to admit there's a crazy, pinballing urge to entertain. And that most of the actors give off the special shine of people on a paid holiday.

Less a film than a theme park for conspiracy addicts who seriously debate "Ripley's Believe It or Not," this is not about history. It is about gold. Box-office gold.

A Walt Disney release. Director: Jon Turteltaub. Writers: Cormac and Marianne Wibberley. Cast: Nicolas Cage, Helen Mirren, Diane Kruger, Jon Voight, Ed Harris, Bruce Greenwood. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.

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