

Movie Review: 'The Spiderwick Chronicles'

by Arthur Salm

Goblins and ogres and sylphs, oh no!

When the recently split-up Grace family - dad has flown - arrives at the creepy, isolated old mansion that belonged to Aunt Lucinda before she was taken to the asylum. ... (See first sentence.)

'THE SPIDERWICK CHRONICLES' - Hogsqueal (voiced by Seth Rogen) helps Jared Grace (Freddie Highmore) spy on the wicked creatures trying to get their hands on Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You in the adventure film 'The Spiderwick Chronicles.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) And why are goblins, et al., about? Eighty years ago, Lucinda's (Joan Plowright) slightly unhinged father, Arthur Spiderwick (David Straithairn), discovered a secret world of invisible creatures, and inscribed his "knowledge of the fantastical world" in a book, or rather, Book. Should the No. 1 ogre Mulgarath ever get hold of it, why. ... So Spiderwick surrounded the mansion with a sort of Goblins-B-Gone protective circle, and hid the Book away.

Enter Graces: mom (Mary-Louise Parker); teen and, fortuitously, fencing student Mallory (Sarah Bolger); and her younger brothers, despised Jared the Angry, Adventurous One and beloved Simon the Smart One (both played by Freddie Highmore). Doesn't take long for Jared to ride a forgotten dumbwaiter to a secret

room, uncloak a heretofore invisible, short-fused and diminutive creature named Thimbletack (Martin Short) and break the seal of and dive into the Book because a note tells him not to.

At which point "The Spiderwick Chronicles," adapted from the popular series of children's books by Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi, goes into Creature Effects overdrive. Waves of nasty goblins ring the house, snatch Simon, attack Mallory until she gives them what-for with her trusty sword, and generally lay siege to the Graces under the direction of ogre Mulgarath (Nick Nolte, when in human form). Spats on hold due to monsters, the Grace kids muster their resources, forge alliances with some friendly beasties and prepare for battle.

The pace is so swift and the creatures so icky that there's no time to examine the workmanship on the shaky contraption of a plot, which, even allowing for Faerie cosmology, seems a mite far-fetched.

What's puzzling about "The Spiderwick Chronicles" is the narrow range of target audience. It's too violent and scary for kids under 10 or 11; the only tickets likely to be sold to anyone over 14 will be to adults accompanying their children, or to those poor souls who've been ordered to take a younger sib to the movies.

Once there, though, they won't be bored. They could even find themselves charmed, and not only tolerate the little pest in the next seat for the whole 97 minutes, but afterward make it through the mall and all the way to the car without squabbling. Best to get along, what with the goblins and all.

"The Spiderwick Chronicles." Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.