



Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson) buddies up to Mater (Larry the Cable Guy) in *Cars*.

Road Trip

Pixar takes to the highway.

CARS: Directed by John Lasseter and Joe Ranft. Music by Randy Newman. With the voices of Owen Wilson, Bonnie Hunt, Tony Shalhoub, Jeremy Piven, George Carlin, Michael Keaton, Cheech Marin, Larry the Cable Guy, John Ratzenberger and Paul Newman. Pixar Animation Studios, 2006. G. 116 minutes.

Pixar, the studio behind the new film *Cars*, reminds me of a teacher's pet. You know the kid I'm talking about: perfect grades, perfect attendance, always won a ribbon at the science fair. As long as he stayed out of the weight room, he wasn't going to fail at anything. Pixar is like this because they can't release a movie without releasing a featurette about *how* they made the movie. Perfection can be downright annoying to watch.

At its best, Pixar brings a bold, sophisticated look to an unforgettable story. That was the case with *Toy Story* (1995) and *Finding Nemo* (2003), both of which are classics of the genre. When they're merely very good, as in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), the high polish of the Pixar style overwhelms the story rather than enhances it. The imagery can feel like an end in itself. *Cars* is merely very good, which by Pixar standards is a mild disappointment.

The movie starts off at full throttle. Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson) is a gifted but self-absorbed rookie race car. In the final race of the year, McQueen's ego costs him the victory, setting up a playoff race a week later in California. McQueen is a lovable lunkhead. If you told him that "race car" is a palindrome, he'd probably tell you to get your oil checked.

On the drive west, McQueen becomes separated from his intrepid transport truck, Mack (John Ratzenberger). Confused, McQueen arrives at the town of Radiator Springs, or the Town that Time Forgot. Visitors to Radiator Springs are either out of gas or lost, much to the dismay of its eccen-

tric citizenry. It wasn't always that way: Before the interstate bypassed it, Radiator Springs was a thriving community along the "mother road," Route 66.

Cars was originally called *Route 66*, and it's easy to see why. The film is overheated with nostalgia. There's another story here, a richer and more human story about the death of a beloved American road, and the slow decline of the towns it once supported. But *Cars* is merely a cartoon, and it has a hard time transcending the limitations of the form. In traditional cartoons — think Wile E. Coyote and Sylvester the Cat — no good sin goes unpunished. Such is the case with *Cars*. McQueen needs to learn the value of friendship and humility. The town needs someone to believe in. Enter McQueen the racing phenomenon. It's *The Music Man* with white-walls.

The voice talents here are terrific, particularly Paul Newman and Bonnie Hunt. Both play the role of mentor to McQueen, and Newman's gravelly tones add weight to the movie. If you're a fan of "Car Talk," you'll recognize Click and Clack (Tom and Ray Magliozzi) as McQueen's sponsors. But the most consistently funny character is Mater (Larry the Cable Guy). It's a terrific bit of casting; Larry should enjoy this before he becomes the next Andrew Dice Clay.

The biggest problem with *Cars* is the concept. It literally doesn't have legs. Whereas in *Nemo*, humans were a necessary evil, *Cars* strips any human presence from the story. Houseflies are tiny cars with wings. Jet contrails are tire tracks in the sky. It starts to feel a little gimmicky. *Cars* isn't the best movie you'll see this summer. It may not even be the best Pixar movie you see this summer, since the reel for *Cars* also contains the four-minute, Oscar-nominated animated short *One Man Band*. See *Cars* for a mildly enjoyable ride that doesn't break down but doesn't drive you anywhere really special. **CW**

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