



Boys and Monsters

Growing up is a fairy tale in *Super 8*

SUPER 8: Written and directed by J.J. Abrams. Cinematography, Larry Fong. Editors, Maryann Brandon and Mary Jo Markey. Music, Michael Giacchino. Starring Joel Courtney, Elle Fanning, Kyle Chandler, Ryan Lee, Zach Mills, Riley Griffiths, Gabriel Basso and Ron Eldard. Paramount Pictures, 2011. PG-13. 112 minutes.

As in so many fairy tales, the young hero of J.J. Abrams' *Super 8* is a boy without a mother. The film's wordless opening scene tells you everything you need to know about why Joe Lamb (Joel Courtney) is first seen slouching alone on a swing. Indoors, grave-faced adults murmur their concern.

You don't have to know that Steven Spielberg serves as a producer on *Super 8* — and that Abrams has referred to him as his "consigliere" — to see the thematic lines between a film like Spielberg's *E.T.* and *Super 8*. Abrams' sly monster movie skates along neatly, alternating between relationship-focused moments and the development of the film's central mystery. That mystery goes whiz-bang, all dark nights and wide eyes; the quieter moments make the film a success. *Super 8* wears its heart on its sleeve as fully as any Spielbergian adventure: It's a film that loves film, and has a loving, wry, self-deprecating take on the obsessives who make it.

Joe's best friend, budding director Charles (Riley Griffiths), has a one-track mind: his zombie opus must be done, and "mint," in time for a youth film competition. Each of Charles' pals has a part to play: Joe handles makeup; Martin (Gabriel Basso) is the leading man; explosives fiend Cary (Ryan Lee) does double duty as cameraman and main zombie; and so on. Charles' obsession with "production values" leads the gang to a train station, late at night, for a key scene that becomes all the more important when an approaching train derails right in front of them.

The train crash is *Super 8*'s greatest set piece: massive, explosive, breathtaking and peculiar, it overshadows all the action that

comes after, from the *Jurassic Park*-like roaring that seems to come from nowhere to the underground lair that recalls the home of a certain nasty *Lord of the Rings* enemy. Abrams' plot is plenty familiar, but the insult-laden banter among his budding filmmakers keeps *Super 8* feeling fresh (though a certain failure of imagination regarding female characters is as stale as week-old popcorn). Rambunctious, snott-nosed and foul-mouthed, the boys are generally more concerned with not getting in trouble — and with clever ways to incorporate the post-train-crash military presence into Charles' film — than with the bigger picture.

To explore what's really happening, we have Deputy Sheriff Lamb (Kyle Chandler), the classic do-gooder who spends more time worrying about the welfare of the townspeople than attending to the well being of his own son. Lamb, resourceful and stubborn, acts as the adult audience's stand-in, but this movie is for the kids — for the boys in the theater dreaming of the kind of adventure that this big-hearted film (and, maybe, the making of it) provides.

Spielberg may have set the bar for a certain species of modern male fairy tale; his template gives Abrams the slyness, the carefully timed reveal, the aw-shucks sweetness tempered with brash humor and the soft ending (rendered sledgehammer-heavy by Michael Giacchino's typically sentimental score). But Spielberg didn't create the hero's journey any more than George Lucas did when he sent a farm boy to save the universe. Abrams' film works not because of its impeccable production values (Charles would approve), its smart-mouthed child actors or its copious use of lens flare, but because it does the same thing myths do, and fairy tales, and films that become classics: Its adventure story offers another glorious metaphor for the incredible, terrible, ordinary, wonderful process of growing up. **EW**

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