



BIRTH OF A NERF HERDER

Solo movie looks at the origins of Star Wars' iconic anti-hero, with mixed results

The galaxy far, far away hasn't been a nice place for a long time. We've known this since we saw Alderaan blow up in the very first Star Wars film; we've been reminded of it seeing slaves in Jabba's palace, or meeting the moral degenerates partying at Canto Bight while the First Order destroys the Resistance.

And the Star Wars movies, despite their considerable strengths, have never been particularly good at engaging with this side of their world. That would require getting messy, getting painful and considering exactly who's been crushed under the boot heel of the Empire — the First Order, or the black market that springs up in the shadow of such domination.

In *Solo*, oppression and slavery are more visible than ever, yet the movie wants to keep them at arm's length, just set dressing for a fairly light-toned, PG-13 antihero's journey. The result is tonally jarring: Han Solo (Alden Ehrenreich) is a cocky, impudent character, even when he's trying to escape from a shitty childhood, and as the movie veers from oppressed planet to oppressed planet, it begins to feel as if the story is borrowing the pain of others to give Han's narrative more weight.

This poorly considered choice didn't have to be made: There's enough darkness in Han's childhood (and future) that we understand the evil influence of the Empire. Leaning so heavily on the trauma of others to provide a backdrop to Han's semi-moral awakening renders *Solo* a little ragged and awkward.

It's part paint-by-numbers origin story and part potential framework for a stronger, heavier spinoff movie — one about someone other than Han Solo. Maybe that movie's about his childhood friend Qi'ra (Emilia Clarke) and her troubled history, or the droid L3 (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) and her quest for droid rights, or Thandie Newton's underused Val, or the young rebel we meet at the end, who reshapes Han's understanding of what's worth fighting for.

These characters are among the best parts of *Solo*, which

does have good moments amid the awkward choices and ticky-boxing approach to Han's backstory. (Does it seem weird that so many historic moments in the life of Mr. Solo take place in the span of a week or so? If we didn't know about his future with the Rebellion, I'd think this is the space equivalent of peaking in high school.)

Han's just-formed friendship with Chewie (Joonas Suotamo) feels fresh and promising, as it should; his instantly fraught relationship with Lando Calrissian (a perfect Donald Glover, who deserves his own movie) is all rough edges and one-upmanship. Lando's still perfecting his suaveness; Han doesn't know what he's trying to be, and they're clearly best frenemies forever.

Ehrenreich makes an acceptable Han, though he can't quite master the careful balance of cynicism and half-buried optimism that Harrison Ford maintained so well. This is partly because young Han doesn't understand himself yet — so Ehrenreich has the unenviable job of being the audience-insert character in a story that we largely already know.

What we *don't* know about everyone else in the film would make for a new Star Wars story. It's a big galaxy out there. How about we go explore, instead of looking backwards? (*Playing now in a galaxy near you*)



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