

Cars 3 (2017)

Rated G. Running time: 1 hour 49 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:18

In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Acts 20:35

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:4

Director Brian Fee, who served as a story artist on the first two films of the Pixar series, redeems the franchise after the critics' drubbing of *Cars 2*. Of course, he is greatly aided by co-writer Mike Rich (and several other writers), a talented voice cast, and spectacular animation that, with its 3D photography, places us seemingly in the middle of the action. Mention too must be made of the background art which is among the most beautiful that I have seen, especially the night scenes.

The world of *Cars* is a fantasy one in which not only are cars driverless, but one from which all humans have disappeared—and

come to think of it, other creatures as well. Even the spectators in the huge stands are cars, cheering as excitedly as any human fans at a NASCAR event. The wonder is that the art of the animators and skills of the voice talent can convey distinct characters beneath the hoods of the vehicles—no, these are no longer “vehicles,” tools for transporting humans, they are personalities in themselves. In such scenes, as when a trainer named Cruz shares her unfulfilled dream of becoming a racer herself, you probably will feel a tear or two welling up in your eyes.

The plot involves the champion speed racer Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson) trying to get his mojo back after suffering a defeat, and then in a later race, a crash that puts him out of commission for a while. The rookie Jackson Storm (Armie Hammer), a jet-black new breed of racing car, has come out of nowhere to beat the Champ and gain critical and popular acclaim. Storm pretends to respect Lightning, but he really is bent on sowing the seeds of self-doubt in his competitor's mind with his false praise. One by one Lightning's friendly fellow racers drop out of the sport as technological change renders them obsolete. The consensus among sports commentators is that Lightning too is at the end of his career.

Lightning, returning to his hometown of Radiator Springs, is aided by his numerous friends in his attempt to recover, including possible love interest Sally (Bonnie Hunt), his tow truck pal (Mater (Larry the Cable Guy)), and later on by a famous coach Smokey (Chris Cooper), and a new character Cruz Ramirez (Cristela Alonzo), a small bright yellow-bodied roadster. Cruz is the head trainer working for Lightning's new sponsor the mysterious investor Sterling (Nathan Fillion) who has set up an elaborate high-tech training facility. Cruz expresses her admiration for Lightning's record, but also says, “I call you my senior project!” Both she and the racing experts regard Lightning as a has-been. Little wonder that Lightning does not take well to the high-tech simulation tests

and such. Learning that Sterling is interested in him only for the money to be made selling products under Lightning's famous name, Lightning leaves the facility inside the trailer of his transport truck Mack (John Ratzenberger).

Cruz accompanies Lightning, the pair winding up at a demolition derby. Under disguise, Lightning enters, changes his mind, but both are trapped when the gates close. The wild race, as much as a duel to smash the other car as it is to cross over the finish line first, finds both Cruz and Lightning unbattered, but, surprise, it is Cruz who wins the race. She is elated, failing to see Lightning's downcast reaction. They have words, with Cruz pouring out her heart, explaining how she had long ago given up her dream to be on the track competing, and instead settling for the next best thing, training others to race.

The two separate, but come back together the next day. Although she resigns as his trainer, Cruz agrees to accompany him in his quest for the trainer of his old mentor Doc, Smokey (Chris Cooper), in hopes of securing some helpful advice.

Smokey tells him that he will not be able to beat Jackson's speed, but that he can outsmart him, whereupon he puts Lightning through a rigorous series of training exercises involving his pupil's being surrounded by a large "herd" of tractors through which he must navigate. Smokey also reveals that the retired Doc's biggest joy was not the memories of his own string of victories, but of a young rookie named Lightning. (In the flash backs we hear the voice of Paul Newman, again voicing the character, thanks to some digital wizardry.) This leads our favorite racer to do some rethinking of his priorities when the day of the Big Race arrives, Lightning's last chance to save his career.

Lightning's decision will be one that would gladden the heart of the apostle Paul, quoted above, and propels this sequel to a level of maturity far beyond that of *Cars 2*. In a culture which mostly teaches "Winning is everything" and "getting" is

what makes for the abundant life, it is good to find a film that states that real joy comes from giving to others. Lightning's decision during the Big Race is thus very counter cultural. The focus upon Cruz adds a touch of feminism to a series that hitherto has been exclusively male-centered, except for the small role of Sally. Race lovers will revel in the racetrack scenes. I don't recall any live-action racecar films that provide such thrilling views of a race from the viewpoint of the driver. All this wrapped in a package that includes much beauty and thrilling action.

This review with a set of questions will be in the 2017 issue of VP.