

# Kong: Skull Island (2017)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 58 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 6; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."*

*Genesis 11:4a*

Like the Tower of Babel story, many science fiction and monster stories are cautionary tales, and so is director Jordan Vogt-Roberts' film about a bunch of Americans helicoptering into an uncharted land and the first thing they do is to drop a bunch of bombs. Turns out to be a pretty dumb idea. Jordan Vogt-Roberts' adventure film turns out to be far better than I had expected, thanks to some great computerized special effects and the presence of the great character actor John C. Riley. Also enjoyable are the many references to *Apocalypse Now*.

The new version of Kong is placed in the early 70s to get around the obvious question of why an undiscovered island was not picked up on a satellite photo, but in the film's prologue the action begins in 1944 when an American and a Japanese fighter pilot bail out of their damaged planes and continue to try to kill each other on the ground. Their fight to the death is interrupted by something bigger than either of them, much, MUCH BIGGER.

Jump to Washington DC in the early 70s, just after the US has bailed out of Vietnam. Bill Randa (John Goodman) and geologist Houston Brooks (Corey Hawkins) convince Senator Willis

(Richard Jenkins) to bankroll an expedition to the newly discovered, storm-shrouded Skull Island. Randa even persuades the Senator to send a military escort. Just why he requests the latter we learn later. Years earlier Randa, having been the sole survivor of a doomed ship destroyed by monsters, had been washed up on the island.

The Sky Devils squadron, led by Colonel Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson), are about to go home now that the Vietnam War has ended, but accept this last assignment. We begin to see the Colonel's stubbornness when he tells anti-war photographer Mason Weaver (Brie Larson) that the US did not lose the war, rather, we "abandoned it." Among the many others of the large crew is former British Special Air Service captain James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston) who will be the expeditions' tracker when they land on the jungle-covered island.

When their ship nears the island the choppers take off and manage to fly through the perpetual storm that encircles it. Without landing they drop a series of seismic charges into the ground, setting off explosions. Suddenly a tree flies upward, crashing into one of choppers. A couple more are sent crashing to the ground. The surviving crew members are split into two parts. Standing above them is a 100-foot tall very angry gorilla.

Col. Packard and Randa are part of one of surviving groups, Packard demanding at gun-point the truth about the island. Randa admits that he had known about giant creatures on the island, but nobody had believed him, hence his cover story about a scientific exploration. Keeping in touch with each other by radio, the leaders of the crash survivors agree to meet at the point where the copters have landed at a distant point on the island.

Conrad leads the second group of survivors, who eventually encounter what looks like a fierce tribe of natives. The

stand-off between them, with their guns ready to fire and the painted natives with their raised spears, is interrupted by a bearded man wearing the tattered remains of a USAF uniform. He identifies himself as Hank Marlow (John C. Reilly). He defuses the situation, filling the newcomers in on his story and the island's inhabitants. Kong is not the enemy, but the protector of the natives, else they all would have died at the jaws of the real enemy, gigantic lizards that he calls Skull Crawlers. Explaining Kong's attack on the helicopters, he says, "Kong's a pretty good king. Keeps to himself, mostly. This is his home, we're just guests. But you don't go into someone's house and start dropping bombs, unless you're picking a fight."

There are, of course, lots of attacks by the skull crawlers, the already large body count continually rising. (One even is killed by a giant spider, the legs of which he mistakes for a tree. And there's a giant octopus that attacks Kong. Skull Island is not a good spot for a family vacation!) Matters are made worst by Packard's refusal to just head out for their rendezvous with the choppers. He wants revenge against Kong. Despite the pleas of the others and Hanks explanation that Kong was protecting his island when he attacked the squadron, Packard insists on pressing on through the island until he can find and destroy the giant gorilla. Of course, we can see where this will lead, with Packard being a good stand-in for the infamous Col. Kurtz in Coppola's film.

Like most thrillers, the characters are sketchy, with just Hank Marlow standing out as a likeable guy able to survive for almost 29 years but always dreaming of returning home to his wife and son. We see this at the end in a sequence shot on what looks like grainy home movie film. He is given many funny lines, but the best one, because of its relevance to today's events, belongs to John Goodman's Randa, who comments on the Post-Vietnam War, Nixon-dominated capital, "Mark my word, there'll never be a more screwed-up time in Washington."

Along with the references to *Apocalypse Now* you might enjoy

one to the old story of *Androcles and the Lion*. I am not sure, but I think it is Brie Larson's Mason Weaver who mentions the story early on—and I do know that she is the one who is trying to help a giant ox pinned down by a tree when Kong shows up and easily lifts the tree away. He apparently realizes that not all the humans are such enemies (except for Packard). There is a tender moment when she reaches out and touches his face. Amidst all the action and violence there is the whisper of the message that kindness begets kindness. Not bad for a blockbuster that most patrons will go to for its spectacular action. In many ways, the film is a bit goofy, but for escapist entertainment there is never a boring moment.

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