

Monkey Kingdom (2015)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 21 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 3; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:52-53

In the fictional film about two documentary filmmakers [While We Are Young](#) the argument is raised about two ways of making a documentary film—that of shooting and discovering truth in what is captured on film, and that of shooting with the end already in mind. In Disney's eighth True Life Adventure it seems that co-director Mark Linfield and Alastair Fothergill lean toward the latter. Although not as shamelessly anthropomorphic as Disney's [African Cats](#)—narrator Tina Fey does not voice any dialogue attributed to the monkeys—the very naming of the various animals and drawing from what must have been thousands of feet of film a cohesive narrative is to claim more than is really there.

Whatever the reality, *Monkey Kingdom* is a delightful family film about an outsider making good. As in all of their Nature films, the photography is excellent; some of the scenes of the jungle birds and the sun setting against the background of the spire of a ruined temple in Polonaruwa Sri Lanka are fabulous. There are so many close-ups of the monkeys doing both serious and funny things that even very young children will be enchanted.

Maya is a toque-macaque monkey living at the bottom of the social order of what is called the Temple Troop that inhabits

a tall outcropping the filmmakers call Castle Rock. Headed by Raja (get it, the name from Hindi for “reign” or Power”), the Troop members never allow Maya atop, not even when it rains, nor is she allowed to climb the large tree that bears such delicious fruit. She must settle for what falls to the ground, or forage afar for her food. At one point this includes swimming under water to reach edibles near the bottom. I don’t ever recall seeing a film of monkey’s swimming, a real revelation for this viewer. In most such films it is crocodiles that one must look out for, but here it is seven-foot long monitor lizards, one of which catches an unwary monkey. We also see that leopards pose a danger, which is why even a low-cast monkey like Maya stays with the troop despite its treatment of her.

For a brief time Maya enjoys the company of the wandering Kumar, but Raja soon drives him away. However he has impregnated her, with Maya left with little Kip. Her quest for food becomes ever more desperate. But of course, this is a Disney film, and we know that like all of their girl-empowerment tales, dear Maya will eventually overcome all obstacles. True animal lovers probably will wince at the imposing of human attributes and a Horatio Alger storyline to the monkeys—there is even a struggle with another troop that is told in such anthropomorphic terms that we expect the two alpha monkeys to unroll battle maps and pull out their binoculars. And I do not intend to demean Mary and her Magnificat by quoting a portion of it above, but this does indeed follow the arc of the script.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May 2015 issue of Visual Parables.