

The Jungle Book (2016)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 45 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 3; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Kipling's classic stories have been adapted numerous times—while a boy I saw the 1942 version starring the young Indian actor Sabu—but never as beautifully as this Disney version. Thanks to good acting, fine script, gorgeous 3-D photography, and the marvelous computerized animal characters, director Jon Favreau shows how magical a movie can be.

With the inclusion of some songs from Disney's 1967 animated version, the film could be considered a remake. Mowgli (Neel Sethi) has been raised by a family of wolves ever since the black panther Bagheera (voiced by Ben Kingsley) found him as an abandoned baby in the jungle and brought him to the wolves because, as he says in a voiceover, "If he was going to survive, he was going to need a people – a people to protect him." Although Mowgli grows so slowly compared to their cubs, his foster parents Akela (Giancarlo Esposito) and Raksha (Lupita Nyong'o) love and accept him as one of their own. Yet being human, he sometimes goes off by himself, so that Akela

must reiterate recite the Law of the Jungle (“The strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.”)

During the dry season when the river level exposes a large rock, all of the animals agree to a truce so that all can drink freely of the precious water. Even the mighty Shere Khan (Idris Elba) does not shed blood at this time. However, smelling the scent of the hidden Mowgli, he is ready to make an exception. When told Mowgli is but a cub, the tiger snarls, “Does my face not remind you of what a grown man can do?” It had been disfigured by “the red flower” used by Mowgli’s father, so he demands that the pack turn the boy over to him. Akela refuses, the tiger slinking away but promising to return for the boy.

For the safety of the pack Bagheera and Mowgli decide it is time that he set forth to rejoin his human village. The big panther goes along to both guide and protect him on the long and dangerous journey. Along the way the boy encounters Kaa the python (Scarlett Johansson) with the hypnotic voice seducing him to lower his guard as she wraps her coils around him. Then there is the delightful Baloo the bear (Bill Murray) promising protection and companionship in exchange for Mowgli using his human skills to obtain honey from the dozens of beehives hanging from a high cliff. It is while Mowgli is atop the bear’s chest floating down the river that Baloo sings the song from the 1967 version “The Bare Necessities.” Just as dangerous as Kaa is the giant orangutan-like King Louis (Christopher Walken), whose minions the forest monkeys have kidnapped Mowgli and brought him to his throne room. This is located in the ruins of an ancient city high up on a mountain. Louis expects the boy to go to a village and bring him “the red flower,” perceiving that this is what gives humans power over the dark and over the jungle animals. He expresses this in the song “I Wanna Be Like You,” which includes the lines, “Come on, clue me what to do/ Give me the power of man’s red

fire/So I can be like you.” (This mob boss character was invented for the animated film, but I think Kipling would have enjoyed the addition.)

The young human actor interacts so seamlessly with the computer-generated animals that it is hard to believe that his action was filmed in a studio and not an actual jungle or among the mountains or the crumbling buildings of an ancient Indian city. I felt totally immersed in the beautiful sets. The only other film that comes close to this magic is the 3-D version of [Avatar](#). The animal characters are all voiced well, with, as you might expect, Bill Murray and Christopher Walken especially adding to the fun. . (Not everything is fun, I should forewarn, because Shere Kahn kills one important figure.)

Like all fables, this one slips in a lesson for young and old—that the solitary life is not the good life. Just look at Shere Kahn. Animals and humans need the pack, a teaching also affirmed long ago by the author of Ecclesiastes. Concern for others also is paramount, as we see when the boy, through his inventiveness manages to do what the mighty elephants could not do, rescue the baby pachyderm stuck in a swamp hole. *The Jungle Book* has the power to restore a spirit of play and wonder to even the oldest of its viewers. It as an absolute gem of a film best seen with companions. Whether they are eight or eighty really does not matter!

I'm adding this to the above a few days after the review was posted: Be sure not to rush out of the theater when the end credits appear. You won't want to miss some of the most beautiful, animated scenes (like they were pages from an elaborate pop-up book) you will ever see. from beginning to end, the makers lavished a lot of love on their film.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May 2016 issue of VP.