

The Legend of Tarzan (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4 (*I'm giving it a 4 star rating because of its revisionist setting*)

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord

Psalm 10:2-3

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

Matthew 23:25

When I was nine or ten my best friend and I began reading his father's Tarzan collection, starting, of course, with *Tarzan of the Apes*. This was the first novel of any kind that I read all the way through. I was forever hooked on adventure tales! While reading all of the other "Lord of the Jungle" tales, we joined with neighborhood kids in buying every Tarzan comic book as soon as Dell published it; memorized the words of Tarzan's ape language printed at the back of the comic; enjoyed venturing into the nearby woods, stripped down to our swimming trunks to climb trees and swing on wild grape vines while practicing our Tarzan yells; and, of course, we went to all of the Tarzan films. The various stars and athletes that I recall portraying the "ape man" ranged from Buster Crabbe to Johnny Weismuller to Gordon Scott to Lex Barker.

After Barker's films my interest in Burroughs waned, due to what I increasingly realized was Burroughs bad writing style and underlying racism. However, because of past love for this character I have been looking forward to seeing the newest incarnation of Edgar Rice Burroughs's widely loved hero. Years ago I did review the 1984 *Greystoke*, and was especially impressed that the scriptwriter gave up the pigeon English of the earlier Tarzan films (my only criticism of the films when I was a kid). I am glad to see that co-screenwriters Adam Cozad and Craig Brewer have also written Lord Greystoke's dialogue in the proper English that Burroughs had intended.

Indeed, the film begins at massive The Greystoke estate in England where Greystoke is living in contentment with his beloved Jane (Margot Robbie). Several men, including the American George Washington Williams (Samuel Jackson), are trying to persuade John Clayton III, Lord Greystoke, aka Tarzan (Alexander Skarsgård), to lead an investigative party back to his jungle homeland. Their mission is to discover the truth about the charges that the Congo's present ruler King Leopold II of Belgium is mistreating the people. Greystoke at first refuses, but then is persuaded, so off he and Williams go. He tries to leave Jane at home for safety reasons, but of course, she insists on going with them.

Although the party has been invited by King Leopold's agent in the Congo Capt. Rom (Christoph Waltz), they do not land at the expected port where Rom is waiting to personally welcome them. Instead, they enter the country at a different point. They decide to look around on their own because they do not trust him. Well they might, as the invitation is part of a plot by Rom to entice Tarzan back to Africa so he can kidnap him. Rom has made a deal in the lost city of Opar with Chief Mbonga (Djimon Hounsou) to deliver Tarzan to him in exchange for a chest of diamonds.

King Leopold is deeply in debt and needs money to pay for a mercenary army that will descend on the Congo and manage his

rubber plantations and slave trade. The Chief is seeking vengeance because Tarzan killed his son after that warrior killed Tarzan's ape mother Kala. (Scattered throughout the film are origin scenes showing the birth of Tarzan to his English mother, their deaths, and his being taken and raised by Kala despite the objections of Kerchak, the alpha ape, and of course the scene in which Kala is killed.)

There is a lot of action—tree swinging, Tarzan fighting a gorilla almost twice his size, seizure of a train full of soldiers, a confrontation with Chief Mbonga, and of course the necessary rescue of Jane when she is captured by Rom and taken aboard the paddleboat moving upriver. Skarsgård, with his mighty pecs, Jackson with his witty tongue, and Robbie with her great beauty and spunk (she and Jackson are the highlights of the film)—all provide plenty of entertainment, but what is most interesting to me is the revisionist take on the setting of the story.

Though at first oblivious to the racism and favorable attitude toward colonialism in Burroughs' novels and the film versions, I did become aware of this as I grew older. The new film's screenwriters deal with such unacceptable elements for a modern audience by setting the story in a real situation, the notorious "ownership" of the Congo by the Belgian King. Leopold II sought to personally enrich himself by using its people as his slaves, first in the ivory trade, then in the production of rubber. It is estimated that from 5 to 10 million people died horribly of maltreatment at the hands of his thuggish private army, and thousands of others were mutilated for infractions of rules. The King covered up the atrocities by various means, such as discrediting anyone who dared speak out and by bribing publishers, but rumors and partial reports, some by missionaries, leaked out.

Samuel Jackson's George Washington Williams was a real person, a Civil War soldier, friend of Frederick Douglas and William Lloyd Garrison, Baptist minister (the first black man to

graduate from Newton Theological Institution), member of the Ohio State Legislature, a pioneer African American historian, and a newspaper columnist. Commissioned by Pres. Benjamin Harrison, Williams did travel to Africa after first visiting King Leopold—the latter tried to dissuade him from going. He was so appalled by the atrocities that he saw in the Congo that he wrote an open letter to the King in which he called for an international commission*. He did not live to see the results because he died shortly afterward in England in 1890 at the age of 41. (This film, by the way, takes place in 1889 and 1890.) Movements in the U.S. and Britain arose to condemn the King's treatment of the people, much like those that sprang up in the 20th Century to oppose apartheid in South Africa. Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle both added their accusing voices of protest.

With the above history in mind, it is not surprising that today some African Americans object to the pairing up of a real life African American hero with a white hero, given the Lord of the Jungle's past racial baggage. Worse, perhaps, Williams is reduced to a sidekick role, although at least he is shown as persistent and as never showing the whites of his eyes in fear, as did black characters in older Hollywood movies. Still, the movie Williams is more like Rochester to Jack Benny, or Tonto to the Lone Ranger.

Capt. Rom is quite a suave looking villain, dressed in his white suite. He wears the suspect mustache, though it is too short for him to twirl while threatening the captive Jane. He apparently retains some trace of piety. We often catch sight of the rosary beads and tiny crucifix he carries in one hand. This outward symbol of Catholic piety mirrors that of his King, who actually argued that his harsh treatment of the Congolese was justified, and besides, he was bringing Christianity to them—his getting rich by oppressing them a bizarre twist of the saying that you can do well by doing good.

The simplistic solution to the thwarting of the King and his henchman Rom's evil plans looks spectacular in the climatic scene. (Thousands of wild animals, rounded up by Tarzan, stampede through the port city where Rom plans to turn over a chest of diamonds to pay for the thousands of soldiers ready to disembark from their ships anchored in the harbor.) However in real life, it was not until 1909 that international outcries at last forced the Belgian Parliament to take over the Congo from the King and begin to initiate reforms.

This is probably more history than you expect or maybe want from a film review, but I hope it helps in understanding it. Director David Yates (remember him from the last half of the Harry Potter series?) gives us plenty of exciting scenes of Tarzan fighting or intermingling with the animals and friendly natives. And there is much natural beauty in the film, one of my favorites being the brief and quiet scene of Tarzan and Williams encountering in the jungle a herd of friendly elephants, whose eyes seem to express that they remember Tarzan from years ago. I find myself conflicted about recommending this film, and yet I have no doubt that a leader willing to do some research could lead an interesting exploration of race and colonialism as it has been portrayed in films and novels through the years.

*Here is a link to the full text of William's long letter:
<http://www.blackpast.org/george-washington-williams-open-letter-king-leopold-congo-1890>

This review with a set of discussion questions is in the July 2016 issue of VP.