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Movie Review: Toy Story 4

Abstract

"There's no question that whatever emerged from the animators would be good, but could it be great? Did it need to be made, or should the time and talent have been devoted to a new project, a new story?"

Posting about the movie *Toy Story 4* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

July 2, 2019

Movie Review: *Toy Story 4*

Tom Clark

★★★★

Title: *Toy Story 4*

Directed by: Josh Cooley

Written by: John Lasseter

Starring: Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Annie Potts

Music by: Randy Newman

As the credits rolled in the theater after *Toy Story 3* and I wiped all the tears off my face, I had two thoughts. First, I don't think there are any perfect films, but that one came as close as it gets, completing the storyline powerfully and beautifully. Second, they will never make another *Toy Story* again. It simply doesn't make any sense to write an encore to the magnum opus. Nine years later, enter *Toy Story 4*.

Walking into the theater, I had my doubts. After *Toy Story 3*, Woody, Buzz, and the gang had been passed down from Andy to a new child, Bonnie. All the fun we've seen the toys enjoy was about to start again, in our imaginations—not on the big screen. Then again, Pixar rarely fails to deliver. There's no question that whatever emerged from the animators would be good, but could it be great? Did it need to be made, or should the time and talent have been devoted to a new project, a new story? Just as a talented musician can take the same notes and chords and play a new arrangement of them to create something new, it can also fall flat and fail to be fresh. For anyone who grew up with Woody, Buzz, Bo Peep, Rex, Slinky and the rest, the joy of seeing them come to life again would be sufficient for a positive experience with another installment. But, Pixar hasn't typically been willing to release films merely "good enough to watch" and that remains true here. *Toy Story 4* is not just rewarmed soup; it has something new to say. It

contains, among other things, a beautiful story of redemption, and the cost required to make that possible.

Toy Story 4 immediately feels at home with the story picking right back up in Bonnie's room with similar toy management and rescue operations to re-root the audience in familiar territory and remind them how much they enjoy and have missed these characters. Thematically in line with previous films, as Bonnie goes off to Kindergarten orientation, the toys again being to worry about being forgotten. While this minor chord has been played before, a shift in key comes with Bonnie creating a toy named "Forky" from a spork and some other bits of trash. Much of the rest of the film is a series of rescue missions to keep Forky from returning home to the trash during a family end-of-summer road trip. A montage of small rescues culminates in a big rescue that comprises the rest of the film. Woody on a mission to rescue toys is well-worn ground, but I was surprised by how much Forky caught my attention. A combination of Tony Hale's excellent voice acting and a fresh silliness evoking a childlike response in the audience worked some magic yet again. Since the rescue plot is where *Toy Story* shines anyway, it created a solid line on which the other new elements of the film could be hung. The old formula of starting safe in the child's room and then getting tossed into a new place on an adventure isn't new, but it's solid. A small-town festival with a traveling carnival creates plenty of opportunities for the animators to play with the toys in fresh ways. On that alone, the movie deserves a recommendation. It's really fun to see the gang back together.

However, as mentioned above, it isn't perfect. The portrayal of parents is weak here, or certainly weaker than *Inside Out*, for example. They are one-dimensional, and too often I think the toys were pitted against the parents—which wasn't present in earlier installments. Andy's parents cared, in a way, about Woody, Buzz, and of course Andy genuinely; here Bonnie is often placated, but not always loved or *known*. Maybe the aloofness of parents is part of the canon in *Toy Story*, but it didn't always ring true here. I found the movie to be at parts quite moving, but other more sophisticated watchers might find it merely sentimental. While some of the new characters are incredible, Keanu Reeves voicing of "Duke Caboom" being a stand-out example, others are only passable. Many of the classic toys get short shrift, only appearing in a large group, with their individual talents left on the table. Some of the slap-stick humor hits, but not all. One of the things that *Toy Story* has held sacrosanct is the wall between toys and humans. The toys only are alive when no one is watching. The complete devotion to one law above all is a constraint that leads to creativity; limitation breathes life into art (Calvin's tiger Hobbes for example). Obviously, there is the climax in *Toy Story* where Woody reveals himself to Sid, but that is the exception that makes the rule. Too often in *Toy Story 4* the toys bend this rule. I think the writers could have pushed themselves to deeper creativity if they had viewed this limitation as a core principle of the universe.

So, is there anything new here, any themes not played before? I think there are at least two new verses that *Toy Story 4* contributes to the song of the toys. First, Bo Peep is a harmony to Woody's melody that weaves in and out of the main plot. I really liked how they allowed her to become an independent, strong character with her own ideas. She is no damsel in distress here, and while her vision of the good life is different than Woody's, it isn't disregarded. Woody's view has been the primary lens through which we encounter this world. Seeing from another viewpoint in parallel was refreshing. While the continuity in the essential character of each toy is something that binds these films together, allowing them to change was something I appreciated as well. Altogether it made for a welcome encore worth sticking around for.

Secondly, in *Toy Story* we have a villain in Sid, who gets taught a lesson near the end. He is beaten, but he is not redeemed. Without too much of a spoiler, *Toy Story 4* again has a villain who through multiple significant acts of sacrifice, especially by Woody, is understood, known, welcomed, changed, and climatically sent out. This kind of redemption where the heroes we know and love allow others to join the spotlight is beautiful. Woody, through his actions and character, saves other toys and helps them to catch his captivating vision of purpose and goodness. He's not flawless, but he is loyal and good, and the world around him is consistently made better by him—not beaten, but instead redeemed.

Even with the critiques mentioned above, I would still recommend the movie; I know my kids thoroughly enjoyed it. The animation is splendid; set it beside any *Toy Story* film and you'll be impressed. The additional redemptive arc brought something more—that the enemy can become a friend. As a person of faith, isn't that my story too?