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Movie Review: Onward

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Movie Review: Onward

Abstract

"*Onward* is B-level Pixar, slightly above-average, warm-hearted entertainment."

Posting about the movie *Onward* 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.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-onward/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

April 2, 2020

Movie Review: *Onward*

Josh Matthews

★★★

Title: *Onward*

Directed by: Dan Scanlon

Written: Dan Scanlon and Keith Bunin

Starring: Tom Holland, Chris Pratt, Julia Louis-Dreyfus

Music by: Jeff Danna, Michael Danna

The new Pixar movie *Onward* arrived at an inopportune time. When I went to the theater in early March 2020, the world had begun shutting down, thanks to the coronavirus.

Consequently, you probably missed out on *Onward*. It's too bad. This is a decent and pretty funny movie, aimed at older kids, but one also for nearly everybody. Here's hoping that Disney releases it on their streaming platform soon, while we all sit at home, waiting for the coronavirus to be cured. During these days, we need amusing movies like *Onward*.

The movie is part of the recent trend to update and repackage 1980s American movies. Recently, Hollywood movie studios have been mining that decades' movies for the nostalgia factor that makes those of us of the proper age fondly remember our childhoods.

Onward contains a number of 1980s movies. It's part *Goonies*, a small part *E.T.*, and a big helping of *Weekend at Bernie's*. You remember that one? It's where two young guys have their boss die on them, and for plot reasons have to pretend he's still alive. So, they cart around a body in public, propping the dead Bernie up as if he's alive.

Somehow *Onward* reworks that premise, while adding a huge dose of fantasy. The movie takes place in a fantasy world that loses its magic when it adopts science and technology, socially developing in the same way that our world has. Thus the elves, centaurs, and manticores that populate *Onward* live in a modern suburbia, in which wild unicorns, who once roamed in the wild, now forage in the curbside trashcans outside the McMansions of middle-class elf families.

The movie centers on the Lightfoots, a suburban elf family, and although they look like blue bats to me—during the movie, I had to look up what they were because I couldn't tell—they act like modern humans in TV dramas do.

These Lightfoots have two teenage boys, Ian and Barley (voiced by Tom Holland and Chris Pratt). Ian is the central protagonist. Like those in 1980s high-school movies, he wants to be cool in school although he doesn't quite fit in. His brother Barley is definitely not cool. Barley knows everything about magic of the olden days of his world. He resembles a Dungeons-and-Dragons player, and his Econoline van has a large unicorn decal on its side. In short, he's a super-nerd, and Ian doesn't like to be seen with him.

Both teenage boys lost their father a long time ago, when they were children. When Ian turns 16, his mother gives him a gift from his dead father: a magical staff. If Ian uses it, his dad will return to life for 24 hours.

The only problem is that, when Ian does use the staff, only half of his dad comes back. The bottom half.

Ian and Barley then set off on a quest across their world, searching for magic that will bring back their dad in full, if only for 24 hours. They tote along the bottom half of their dad, who's a pair of pants and shoes walking around blindly. That's where the *Weekend at Bernie's* gags come in. The boys dress up the top-half of their dad as a dummy, pretending he's a complete person.

Tonally, *Onward* mixes absurdist humor with serious family-therapy drama stuff. What's that like? Think about the results of mixing Looney Tunes with Pixar's *Inside Out*. I found that those two tonal elements do not work together well in this movie, maybe except at the ending.

Nevertheless, the movie is aimed at an early teenage audience—the two tones combining to say: “Grow up but be goofy.” Surprisingly, I believe that *Onward* skews older than most Pixar movies, not because of the content but because of its themes. The movie centers on teenage concerns, such as not being socially acceptable and missing your dead parents. Probably children between four and eight are not going to understand large segments of this movie, and they are less likely to identify with the 16- and 19-year-old protagonists.

What works best in *Onward* is the absurdist humor, which as the movie goes on, is increasingly funnier. Maybe I’m just a sucker for a pair of pants aimlessly bumping into objects on the screen, but the half-dad bits were very funny, making me laugh out loud in the theater (a rarity these days). As well, there are motorcycling pixies who act tough in spite of their size, and they engage the Lightfoot boys in a hilarious send-up of the chases in the *Mad Max* movies.

Onward is B-level Pixar, slightly above-average, warm-hearted entertainment. To combat the coronavirus, we need more of this, and far less of the horror-movie and darker teenage-level fare we’ve been subjected to in theaters and on Netflix for years. Enjoy it when you can.