



The Spiderwick Chronicles

Tony Watkins

Closer than you think

Author: Tony Watkins

Keywords: Reality, magic, families, fathers, trust, belief, anger

Film title: The Spiderwick Chronicles

Director: Mark Waters

Screenplay: Karey Kirkpatrick, David Berenbaum and John Sayles (based on the novel by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black)

Starring: Freddie Highmore, Sarah Bolger, Joan Plowright, Nick Nolte, David Strathairn

Distributor: Paramount Pictures

Cinema Release Date: 14 February 2008 (USA); 21 March 2008 (UK)

Certificate: PG

[Image]

When a change in family circumstances forces Helen Grace (Mary-Louise Parker) to leave New York with her three children, and move into Great Aunt Lucinda's secluded and neglected old house, it's not easy for any of them. Mallory (Sarah Bolger), the eldest, knows about her parents' relationship difficulties, and is doing her best to both support her mother and protect her younger brothers. Twins Jared and Simon (both played by Freddie Highmore) respond very differently to their new surroundings. Simon takes it all in his stride. Studious, calm and mild-mannered, he hates conflict and describes himself as a pacifist, to the extent that he's even reluctant to help Mallory with her fencing practice. Jared, by contrast, is hot-headed and evidently finds life

much more difficult to negotiate. He has clearly been aware of the tension between his parents and we learn that he has a history of angry, violent outbursts. As a result, his family sees him as an impetuous trouble-maker, and Mallory rightly accuses him of always acting but never thinking.

Lucinda's house is decidedly strange, as well as run-down, and nobody is thrilled by the prospect of living there. Before long, things start disappearing and Mallory's hair is tied to the bed during the night. Jared immediately gets the blame, though he vehemently protests his innocence. But as a result of Jared hearing scrabbling noises in the walls, a large hole gets knocked in the kitchen wall revealing a dumb waiter that had long since been plastered over. Inside is a collection of odds and ends, including the missing items. Later, when he is alone, Jared climbs into the dumb waiter and hoists himself up to find out where it goes. He comes out in a secret room: the study of Lucinda's father, Arthur Spiderwick. Jared also unearths an old book in a trunk: *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You*. Ignoring the warning tucked into the string tied around the book, Jared opens it to discover a wealth of information about the invisible faerie world. That night he reads about brownies, and their habit of turning into boggarts when angry, goblins, sprites, and other magical creatures, as well as the evil ogre Mulgarath. Mulgarath longs for the wealth of information within the book as it would give him absolute power. Unfortunately, as Jared learns from Thimbletack, the house brownie whom he soon meets, his actions in taking this book outside the protective circle around the house puts them all in great danger: Mulgarath will know the book has been found and will stop at nothing to acquire it.

The Spiderwick Chronicles is a refreshingly different fantasy film. Rooted as it is in the world of everyday normal life, it successfully creates the feeling that the faerie world could be all around us without us realising it. Many fantasy stories take place solely within the fantasy realm, or in some pseudo-historical setting, and therefore never require us to suspend our disbelief in the same kind of way. This familiar context is closely linked to the genesis of the stories. The creators of the series of books on which the film is based, writer

Holly Black and illustrator Tony DiTerlizzi, make the curious claim that the stories are based on what they were told by the real Grace children. Each of the five books opens with a 'reproduction' of a letter, purportedly sent by them to Black and DiTerlizzi, explaining about the book they have discovered and the secrets contained within it. Black and DiTerlizzi are both very interested in faerie lore, but whether or not they really do believe in the existence of such creatures is hard to judge, since there seem to be few interviews in which they come out of character and explicitly drop the story about the children.

While I am a complete sceptic about the reality of fairies, goblins or other magical creatures, the existence of the faerie world within *The Spiderwick Chronicles* has an interesting parallel with real life. The tagline of the film, 'their world is closer than you think', is a claim that another, unseen dimension exists alongside our own, though beyond our awareness. Within the context of advertising a family film, this is troubling to no one. But try making a similar claim in reference to a spiritual, rather than a magical, dimension and there are many within western society who would find it as ludicrous as Black and DiTerlizzi claiming that fairies are real. Richard Dawkins is not alone in suggesting that belief in God is no different from belief in fairies. He dedicates *The God Delusion* to the memory of his good friend, the late Douglas Adams, with a quotation:

Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it?

The implication is obvious: just as the idea of fairies adds nothing to the beauty of the garden, the idea of God adds nothing to the beauty of the world; enjoy it for what it is without overlaying extra dimensions in an attempt to invest it with some magic. Dawkins makes this link repeatedly, but it is cheap point-scoring since the nature of belief in God is radically different from the nature of belief in fairies. A handful of people claim to have had contact with fairies, but billions of people down through history have claimed to have a personal relationship with God. Now the fact that the numbers are so imbalanced does not prove that God-believers are right and fairy-believers are wrong. However, the fact that a very substantial number of people have found belief in

God to be reasonable and justifiable at least indicates that it has some coherence and that it is worth considering seriously. Besides, it is not simply a question of them claiming a personal experience of God, but of lives being radically transformed – something that others can see for themselves.

More to the point is that significant numbers of rational people come to faith in God in adult life, as a result of weighing up evidence. Belief in fairies, however, is almost exclusively associated with childhood, not with later-life 'conversion' and thought-through decisions. Arthur Conan-Doyle is often cited as an example of a rational person who comes to believe in fairies, but there are three problems with this. Conan-Doyle may have created the hyper-rational detective Sherlock Holmes, but he was radically different from his creation, being drawn to all kinds of non-mainstream ideas such as spiritualism and psychic materialisations. Secondly, although attracted to way-out ideas, Conan-Doyle's belief in fairies was based on evidence (the infamous Cottingley Fairies photographs) which many people at the time denounced as fakes, including some within Conan-Doyle's circle. He seemed determined to believe, rather than being persuaded by solid evidence. Thirdly, Conan-Doyle seems unusual in coming to believe in fairies (or did he, in fact, carry this belief from childhood?). On the other hand, there have been many who have become believers in God, including a substantial number who have moved from being complete sceptics: people like Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project and one of the world's leading scientists – hardly someone with a propensity for flaky ideas – who became a Christian having once been an atheist. A notable recent example is the eminent British philosopher Antony Flew. Having built his career as a prominent atheist, Flew has recently come to say that he was wrong, and that the arguments do strongly indicate that God exists. He has not become a Christian, but the evidence has persuaded him to become a theist.

Even more to the point is that the vast majority of Christians, whether or not they formed their faith in their early years, insist that their belief is not held despite a lack of evidence. On the contrary, they point to a range of rational pointers to the existence of God and his coming into this world in

the person of Jesus Christ. There are several philosophical pointers, lines of argument that suggest that the idea of God at least makes logical sense. There is the question of why the universe exists and why we are here. There is the issue of why the vast majority of people through history have believed in something rather than nothing. There is the problem of where absolute moral standards come from if there is no infinite, personal moral law-giver. And there are the identity, claims, death and resurrection of Jesus, which are solidly grounded in good historical evidence and which demand to be taken seriously. These things do not constitute an impregnable, 100% proof of God, but in fact there is nothing that we can prove with this degree of absolute certainty – everything rests on some assumptions. Nevertheless, there is enough weight of evidence to give a high level of confidence, making the final step (rather than leap) of faith a reasonable thing to do.

A further difference between believing in God and in fairies is that the latter makes no demands. It's easy and fun to speculate about the faerie realm. God, however, is a moral being who can rightfully demand absolute obedience and moral perfection from us, who could judge and dismiss us for our rebellion against him, yet who offers us forgiveness and reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and who asks that we become more like Christ as a response of gratitude for this rescue. That is no easy ride; Christian faith is not merely an intellectually stimulating way of passing a Sunday morning.

Please don't try and dismiss Christian belief by comparing it to belief in fairies: they are entirely different kinds of belief. In *The Spiderwick Chronicles* the Grace family all come to believe in the existence of the faerie world because of evidence. Jared's (and Lucinda's) personal testimony and the book should have been enough, but it was too easy for the others to dismiss whatever Jared said. But when the other world breaks through into their own, they are compelled to believe. If there was this kind of evidence for the faerie world, it would be rational to believe in it. There isn't. But there is good evidence for Christian faith, and it is thoroughly rational to believe that there is a spiritual world which is closer than we think.

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