

DISNEY'S DESECRATIONS

By Michael Giltz

We've entered a new golden age for the family film. Almost every major studio has a division devoted to creating live-action movies for kids, and 1995 saw the release of at least three such films that will one day be considered classics: *Babe, A Little Princess*, and *The Secret of Roan Inish*. Only *Babe* did well at the box office, but all three will make a fortune when they are released as videos. Kids love to hear the same stories told over and over again in the same way, and parents love to plop the kids in front of the TV for an hour and a half of relative peace. So sales are booming; even commercial and creative flops, like the flaccid remake of *Miracle on 34th Street*, can sell truckloads.

Any Hollywood boom features an immense amount of dross along with the gold, and the great irony of the current creative resurgence of the live-action family movie is the fact that not a single good one in recent years has come from the foremost brand name there is: Disney. While studio after studio tries and fails to match the intelligence and craft of Disney's animated films, Disney's live-action movies for children have been abysmal. Worse yet, the studio has faltered by foraging through texts of classic children's literature and wreaking havoc on them. From Mark Twain to Rudyard Kipling, great works have been desecrated, sometimes to ensure they conform to Hollywood

ideology, and sometimes just because their makers and producers are remarkably bereft of taste and judgment. *Babe, A Little Princess*, and *The Secret of Roan Inish* are also derived from books of some distinction. But while they never shy away from the cold hard truths at the heart of their stories, the Disney adaptations show a level of disrespect for literature that studios usually reserve only for audiences. When filmmakers try to skirt the prickly truths of these stories, they rob the tales of dramatic

be found in his tales about Mowgli, Disney denudes them of their insight and originality anyway.

In the Disney version, Mowgli is a sweet and innocent creature who plays and frolics with his animal friends. White men are evil and stupid or at best benignly foolish. Though he attempts to join human society, it's deeply distasteful to him. Looking at a stuffed tiger in a trophy room, Mowgli says, "The more I learn what is a man, the more I want to be an animal." At the climax, he peacefully faces down the tiger Shere Khan, reporting proudly, "Shere Khan sees me not as a man, but a creature of the jungle."

None of this has a thing to do with what Kipling wrote. Shere Khan, for example, is an almost mythically evil presence in the stories and constantly on the lookout for a chance to murder Mowgli. And at the climax of Kipling's tales, Mowgli gleefully lays a trap for Shere Khan and kills him. Revenge isn't just a fact of life in the jungle to Kipling, it is a noble pursuit in and of itself. Kipling's jungle isn't an idyllic Eden separate and better than the world of man; it mirrors the world of man, complete with pettiness, kindness, anger, friendship, hatred, and sacrifice. Mowgli survives and rules over this world not despite the fact that he's human but *because* he's human—none of the other animals can even look him in the eye for more than a moment. In the end, Mowgli joins the world of man because that's where he belongs.

Disney distorts and dilutes Mark Twain's undeniably progressive

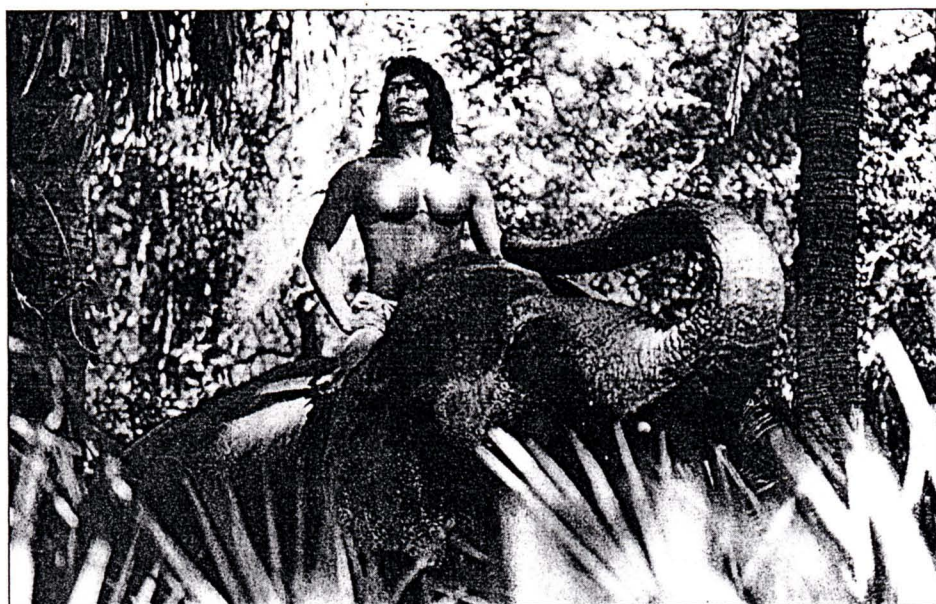


Tom and Huck: *Never Mark Twain shall meet*

power and inadvertently hold up a mirror to their own prejudices and failings.

Consider *The Jungle Book*. First turned into a cutesy cartoon by Disney in the 1960s—hardly a memorable effort apart from Phil Harris's singing "The Bare Necessities"—Kipling's stories of a boy raised among the animals of India was again made into a movie by the studio last year. Kipling has, of course, fallen severely out of favor because he was unapologetically fond of colonialism and sometimes condescendingly fond of India and its people. Though little of this can

Michael Giltz last wrote for THE WEEKLY STANDARD about Andrew Kimbrell's *The Masculine Mystique*.



The Jungle Book: Don't look for Kipling's bare necessities here.

worldview just as thoroughly as it does Kipling's colonial ideology. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* generally scares the bejesus out of filmmakers, because it deals so forthrightly with slavery and the racial attitudes of the 19th century. But Disney's *The Adventures of Huck Finn* wouldn't even frighten Aunt Polly. Huck hangs out with the slaves and goes to Jim for advice. And who wouldn't? Jim is clearly far more intelligent and thoughtful than Huck, giving little speeches about equality and the evils of slavery. And when the two of them are rafting down the Mississippi, Jim always has a plan in mind or takes the time to teach Huck the difference between right and wrong.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is a far less controversial novel, though even here Twain gently and persistently mocks the conventions of society. But *Tom and Huck*, the newly released Disney version of the book, still finds plenty to fiddle with. In the novel, Tom and Huck are basically equals. Still, while Tom takes special delight in Huck's notoriety, he won't go so far as to be seen with him in public. In the

movie, Tom is sweet and good, while Huck is generally bad—a selfish and scared coward (though the movie is quick to point out he was abused as a child by his drunken Pap). Tom teaches Huck the importance of friendship with maxims like, "When a friend's in trouble, you don't run away." Even minor characters like Becky Thatcher are perverted out of all reason; a willful, interesting girl-child in the book, Becky becomes a distractingly modern woman in the movie, pushing Tom into a creek at one point and punching him out at another. At the finale of *Tom and Huck*, Twain's intractable Huck jumps at the first opportunity to be "civilized." Tom is aghast when Huck talks excitedly about going to school before running off to escort the Widow Douglas to a church social. Perhaps the only real surprise in this movie is that they didn't change the name of the bad guy: Injun Joe.

These three fiascos teach a very interesting lesson about the dangers of tampering with the works of significant authors. For

when filmmakers shy away from the complex and subtle characters of these classics, they often inadvertently inject the ugly stereotypes they thought needed avoiding in the first place—vulgarity the original authors could never even imagine.

In the recent *Jungle Book*, for example, Mowgli easily outwits the white men. When he's captured, it's always by treacherous and blackhearted Indians. Inadvertent message: The dark-skinned natives are even more wily and evil than the worst white people. Kipling may have

coined the phrase "white man's burden," but his ideas about the differences between the races were layered and ambiguous. If there were stereotypes in his works, they were balanced by complex, engaging characters, such as the title role in his masterpiece *Kim*. No such balance exists here.

In *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, Twain's giddily optimistic finale is taken to even further extremes when the slave Jim is dressed to the nines and exchanging pleasantries with his former captors shortly after being freed. And throughout the film, even most of the slave owners are pictured as wonderfully concerned about their property and wracked with guilt about the whole arrangement. Inadvertent message: Slavery wasn't so bad, owners were generally good people, and everyone was relieved when it was ended. This, it goes without saying, is a travesty of the lessons of Twain's novel, one of the deepest explorations of the idea of freedom in literature.

In *Tom and Huck*, the newly modernized Becky endangers the safety of her and Tom by refusing to heed his warnings not to yell at

the top of her voice while they're in the caves outside town. Her willful heedlessness causes a cave-in that traps the two and almost costs them their lives. Inadvertent message: Girls should remember their place, especially when doing dangerous things like exploring caves that are better left to the boys.

Parents looking for "safe" enter-

tainment for their kids should avoid these three movies and, until there's some suggestion the studio has learned the error of its ways, whatever live-action literary adaptations Disney attempts in the future. Mush is never part of a well-balanced diet. And well-intentioned mush is the most unhealthy mush of all. ♦