



# 'Call of the Wild 3D' a touching tribute to Jack London classic and Montana's beauty

By Brent Northup - IR Film Review - 06/11/09

Jack London's "Call of the Wild" is a great novel about the exciting and harrowing adventures of a dog named Buck. In London's spare fashion, the book begins quickly and ominously:

"Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego," wrote London to start the 1903 tale which was first serialized in the Saturday Evening Post (earning him \$750).

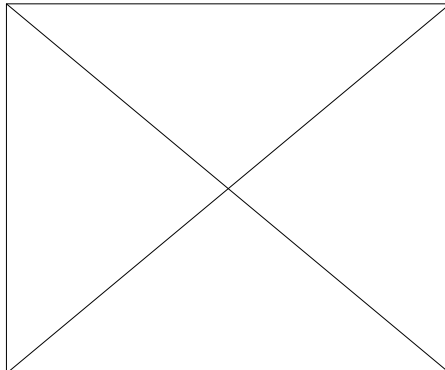
That classic novel is the inspiration for director Richard Gabai's new film, "Call of the Wild 3D," which uses London's tale as a backdrop for a modern, Montana-based adventure about a "wolfish" dog. (Gabai himself will be at Helena's Cinemark theater today to greet moviegoers and introduce the film.)

The creature in the new story is, of course, named Buck — and he shows up wounded one night at a cabin near Lincoln, Mont.

In the cabin lives an old widower named Bill, whose granddaughter Ryann has come from Boston for a visit. Ryan discovers the injured animal and coaxes her granddad into keeping it around and nursing it back to health.

And so granddad and granddaughter begin an adventure — caring for the wolf dog by day, and cuddling up together to read the original "Call of the Wild" at night.

To the film's credit long passages of the original "Call of the Wild" are read aloud, verbatim from London's text. I went back to check the quotes against the original text and they are very faithful, often precisely accurate.



The moment this former eighth-grade English teacher heard London's original being treated with such respect, my admiration for the movie increased exponentially. Most films reduce family classics to clichés and/or distort them along the way. This production should delight librarians who always hope films inspired by great novels will inspire kids to read the classics.

The actual story in this film does not pretend to be an adaptation of the London book, but rather just a story in which the London book provides a frame for an original story. That honesty is also refreshing because it honors the book by not revising it.

Christopher Lloyd, 70, perhaps known best as Doc Brown from "Back to the Future," does a wonderful job portraying a loving Montana grandfather who loves our Montana land and loves his granddaughter. Lloyd once owned a home in Darby, Mont.

Young child actress Ariel Gade, 12, is equally convincing as the granddaughter who evolves from Big City snob who is "stuck here in Montana" to a sweet country girl. When Ryann hugs Buck, both girl and dog appear genuinely blissed. When she snuggles up to hear another chapter of London, the warmth between Gade and Lloyd is heartfelt.

Almee Teegarden of "Friday Night Lights" has a small but charming part as a sweet popular girl who wins the attention of a shy boy who is helping Ryann win the race.

Moments such as those nudge "Call of the Wild" toward becoming a classic family adventure in the tradition of "National Velvet." But the power is diluted by a less-than-realistic side-plot about a villain named Heep (Timothy Bottoms) who tries to steal Buck from Ryann.

One moment in particular stretches Montana cowboy hats a bit too far. Faced with a conflict between Bill and Heep over ownership of the dog, the lady sheriff offers her ruling: hold a sled dog race, using part of the Race to the Sky trail, and the winner gets the dog.

And so the training begins and may the best team win.

Exciting? Yes. Believable? Not so much.

Another subplot, however, is both touching and powerful. A Native American named Hatcher, who lives alone in a secluded cabin near Lincoln, lurks on the edge of the story at first before becoming central later on.

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Although first regrettably portrayed as unnecessarily menacing (fingering a knife; toting a gun), Hatcher evolves into a compassionate character.

Hatcher is played by Wes Studi, an Oklahoma Cherokee, who has appeared in "Dances with Wolves" and "Last of the Mohicans," to name just two. Studi brings a depth and credibility to his role, entirely fitting for a Montana-based story of our people and our land. The sympathetic portrayal of a Montana Native American, albeit not one of our indigenous tribes, is welcome and appreciated.

"Call of the Wild 3D" is a breathtaking tribute to Montana. Scott Peck's cinematography captures some of the gorgeous landscape around Lincoln and Philipsburg, the two primary locations. There are lovely helicopter shots of Lolo Pass and much of the sled dog race is filmed on land in Lincoln belonging to the Fishers and the Cains.

The dogs in the racing scenes with the two kids belong to Liz and Jerry Cain of Lincoln. Buck is played by Bubba, a "star dog" from Los Angeles. Buck had a stunt double named Merlin, a Siberian husky, owned by Dyan Walker of Helena — who locals say needed make-up for his big moments.

One Peck shot in particular, of young Ryann in a cabin window, is exquisite — a framed moment that recalls the best of John Ford.

The Race to the Sky trail is featured, too, as are Philipsburg shops such as Doe Brothers soda fountain, The Sweet Palace candy story and Moose Mercantile. The main cabin in the story is actually two locations near Lincoln — one for outside shots, one for inside.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer was offered a walk-on cameo part, but his schedule intervened during the 2008 winter shoot.

The film was shot in digital 3D, the first all-live-action film in that format. Cinemark theaters agreed to install 3D equipment at the Helena theater, in part because of the enthusiastic support of Cinemark's president Tim Warner, a Butte native.

I previewed the film in traditional 2D, so I can't speak to the 3D effects yet.

Overall, "Call of the Wild in 3D" is a fine family film which pays tribute to Jack London in the best of ways: by treating classic literature with reverence, by portraying Buck as a smart, courageous, lovable non-talking dog and by portraying the love between a granddaughter and her granddad so sincerely.

Montana can proudly claim this family film as its own. We welcome the director's dream to adapt London's "White Fang" and encourage him to film that in Montana as well, which Gabai says is definitely possible.

The movie ends nicely, including the reading of the final paragraph of London's classic book, a passage often praised as among his most memorable.

"But he is not always alone," writes London to end his tale. "When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, Buck may be seen running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack."

Libraries and bookstores: Place London's works prominently in your windows and encourage young Helena readers to make it their own by taking it home.

That would be the ultimate gift the film "Call of the Wild" could bring to children.

"We can only hope," agreed director Gabai, who himself fell in love with London's "Call of the Wild" at age 11. "After reading that book, I actually said to myself that would make a great movie."

The 11-year-old Richard waited a few years until he could upgrade his Super 8 camera, but now his dream's come true.

Call of the Wild 3D

At the Cinemark

Rated PG

Grade: B+



4 stars with 1 rating.

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