

MISSING GOLD IN MUPPET TREASURE ISLAND

Muppet Treasure Island. By Jerry Juhl, Jim Hart, and Kirk Thatcher. Dir. Brian Henson. Produced by Henson and Martin G. Baker. Jim Henson Productions / Walt Disney, 1996.

We all enjoy playing these characters in classical literature. And, of course, it's a very good story.
(Kermit the Frog on the set of *Muppet Treasure Island*)

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and successful movie versions in 1934, 1950, 1972, and 1990 have thrilled generations with Jim Hawkins' life-and-death pirate adventure. Unfortunately, *Muppet Treasure Island* alternately abandons and sanitizes Stevenson's classic. Having lost the novel's treasure map (namely, strong characters and highspirited adventure), the film runs aground on the shoals of cheap gags and superficial morality. One of the film's singing pirates would "like to get [his] hands on whoever wrote this script;" so too might Stevenson.

Shot in Britain, the film's sets and scenery — the inn, the *Hispaniola*, the island — are spectacular. The opening song, combining human pirates with singing Muppet skulls, and the battle scenes, are fun. But musical theatre clichés and half-baked humour undermine the story's suspense and drama. Anachronisms, aimed mainly at adults, prove tiresome: Blind Pew is "visually challenged;" Billy Bones has a Henry Kissinger book on diplomacy. The film answers the novel's literal embarrassment of riches with rats on water skis and the Swedish chef. Stuck as ship's figureheads, the Muppets' grumpy old men conclude: "It could be worse — we could be stuck in the audience."

It didn't have to be this way. Scottish comic Billy Connolly's Billy Bones is perfect — his drunken violence and paranoia immediately expose the story's complex brew of good and evil. Tim Curry's Long John Silver is charmingly diabolical, even if stilted song business makes him wooden (in more than his bad leg). Curry becomes mawkish, though, when faced with Kevin Bishop's saccharine Jim. Too innocent, too uncomplicated, too constantly smiling, too soprano, it is not surprising that Blind Pew mistakes Jim for a "pretty little girl."

This antiseptic Jim kills nobody. In fact, after Billy Bones' demise, nobody seems to die in the Disney universe. In one of the film's frequent attempts at self-reflexive humour (adult "in jokes" at worst, limp distractions at best), Rizzo the Rat explains why: "[T]his is supposed to be a kids' movie!" While Stevenson only had to come up with pirates who don't curse, the 1996 filmmakers feel compelled to posit violence that doesn't hurt: Gonzo is stretched on the rack, but he likes it, now that he's "taller." In its closure, the film is bowdlerized by the film industry's archaic logic of compensating moral values. While in the novel, Jim and readers feel both complicity and relief when Silver escapes the gallows to wander free, in the film, Silver must pay for his evil deeds by losing his treasure and by being condemned to spend the rest of his days exiled on an island listening to a rock statue's bad jokes.

by his rich, halfwit son (Fozzie Bear); Silver's parrot Polly by a lobster of the same name; and mad Ben Gunn by Benjamina (Miss Piggy) who gets her treasure by sleeping around with Flint, Silver, and Captain Smollett (Kermit the Frog) when she's not busy being Treasure Island's resident love goddess, Boom Sha-Ka-La-Ka-La. While the novel intentionally ignores women, the film seems to hate them: Muppet Piggy and Jim's human innkeeper-guardian (Jennifer Saunders) are both porkers, comic only in their obesity, vulgarity, and ability to beat up Muppets and men. The love interest between Piggy and Kermit seems simply out of place: "We saved the pig and the frog," observes one grumpy old Muppet. "Well, it was too late to save the movie," concludes the other.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS / ANNONCES

The 8th Annual Canadian Jewish Book Awards were presented on June 5, 1996. The awards are co-sponsored by The Jewish Book Awards Committee at the Bathurst Jewish Centre, the Koffler Centre of the Arts, the Holocaust Remembrance Committee of the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem. The Rachel Bessin Memorial Award for Writing for Young People was presented to Walter Buchignani for *Tell No One Who You Are* (Tundra Books). Gary Clement received the Louis Lockshin Memorial Award for Children's Literature for *Just Stay Put* (Groundwood Books), Eric Koch received the Yad Vashem Prize for Holocaust Writing for *Hilmar and Odette* (McClelland & Stewart) and Eva Brewster received the 1996 Biography-Memoir Prize for *Progeny of Light/Vanished in Darkness* (NeWest Press).

Winners of the 7th annual Mr. Christie Awards for the best Canadian children's books have been announced. In the seven years and under category the winners were Pierrette Dubé and Yayo for *Au lit, princesse Émilie* (Edition Raton Laveur) and Nan Gregory and Ron Lightburn for *How Smudge*