

500 Words or Less Review: Watership Down (Netflix/BBC)

Watership Down, the novel written by Richard Adams, is one of my favorite books of all time. When I try to explain why I love it so much, words tend to fail me. It is a book about rabbits, after all. How could a book about rabbits be something an adult man would love? Easy. Think of it less as a book about rabbits and more as an epic story about friendship, survival, and hope. The ties that bind these heroic rabbits are easily identifiable and relatable.

That's the book. The new Netflix/BBC series is a different thing. Fortunately, it's not different enough to significantly lessen its impact. A few caveats about the new series: First, the animation is not up to the big-budget *Pixar* or *DreamWorks* standards. That might be a deal-breaker for some. Trust me and be patient with it. The story is worth it. Second, if you are a book purist, try to set that aside as much as possible when watching this series. Stuff gets changed. Know that going in and it might save you some frustration.

There is good news, though! While liberties are taken the filmmakers prove they have a deep love for the source material and do their best to maintain the spirit and the tone of the book. The series is divided into four 51 minutes sections – each with their own title and focus. I loved this format because it gave the filmmakers a chance to really dig into the story – more time than a two-hour film – but not too much time which would have tempted them to really mess with the key dynamics. It's a good balance and makes for a mostly focused story.

For my money, the two standouts in this version are the voice actors and the music. The cast does great work in bringing these wonderful characters to life. We get to know Hazel,

Fiver, Bigwig, Kehaar, General Woundwort, and the rest. James McAvoy and John Boyega are particularly good in their key roles. And the original score by Federico Jusid is in turns epic, subdued, and poignant.

One of my favorite aspects of the novel is that while these characters are relatable, they also operate on very non-human levels – driven more by instinct and need. For the most part, the series gets this right. There are attempts to shoehorn in a few modern points of view, but they wisely avoid making those things the focal point.

I highly recommend this new series by Netflix and the BBC. It is entertaining and moving. There is a beautiful melancholy that hangs over most of the series, which is also true for the book, and that made my heart very happy indeed. A word of warning: neither the book or series are intended for young audiences, even though they are about rabbits. Older children should be fine but be aware that the story goes to dark places and there is some bloodshed as these brave rabbits fight for their futures.