

Father Knows Best

Peter Pan has changed since we last saw him filling the big screen as an early 1950s Disney cartoon—and not for the better. He's bad tempered, greedy and insensitive. Why, he couldn't even make time to show up for his son's crucial baseball game. But that's life when you're a corporate lawyer too busy for anything except those vital mergers and acquisitions. No wonder Wendy tells him he's become a pirate.

Though the premise of *Hook* seems at first a little bizarre—Robin Williams as a fortysomething Peter Pan—it is, in fact, a technically brilliant rehash. It's not a sequel to Peter Pan, but it is: and it's Peter Pan without the rebel element (i.e. young Peter) who has instead become the father.

'Father': that's a big word in *Hook* and it obviously means a lot to Spielberg, who has a son under ten himself. 13-year-old Charlie Korsmo, playing Peter's son Jack, has that wide-eyed but sulky quality that worked so well for him when he was Junior in *Dick Tracey*. Jack is introduced first of all to us as a boy whose father isn't always 'there' for him; Peter, who long ago lost touch with Never-Neverland, is now out of touch with his own son.

The horror of this, *Hook* seems to be saying, is above and beyond any other evil deed or fantastic voyage that anyone in *Hook* might care to go through. Captain Hook himself, played by a wickedly dashing and over emotional Dustin Hoffman, has the perfect revenge against Peter: to make his kids love Hook more than they love their real father. That this is achieved with comparative ease says little for family bonding, though eventually 'the kids' (did I mention there were two of them? There is actually a younger daughter who is conveniently forgotten for most of the picture) do turn around and love their dad again once he proves himself a flying hero.

Were Spielberg not quite so keen on bringing the Dad/Pan figure (himself?) into things he might almost be a Richmal Crompton for the 90s.

Crompton (author of the William books over a 40 year period in the first half of this century) had a similar faith in the resilience and legendary sturdiness of boys and their myths.



If Spielberg had one arresting concept for us in *Hook* it would be the idea of the power of a boy's imagination: a wide-eyed, grubby boy with a grin from ear to ear. Pre-sex, pre-doubt. All those 'things that boys do' pop up in Hook's scenes among the 'lost boys': pride, warrior spirit, immense hunger and greed. They abide in treehouses atop some fantastic island in the way the J M Barries and Spielbergs of this world assume all boys would like to live.

Which is not to say that Spielberg is unremittingly sexist. After all, here's the man who made *The Color Purple*, even if he did take out all the lesbian content. But his concerns—especially when it comes to fantasy—are extraordinarily male-oriented. This is high-

lighted by the pivotal moment in the story of *Hook*, the moment when Robin Williams sheds a few stone and takes to the skies in an ecstasy of Panness. This is when he finally isolates his 'happy thought': that he has a son.

He flashes back to the moment Jack was born and he recaptures all the pride he feels in his boy. That he is father to a son is what's important: the younger daughter is not mentioned. (For her part, the daughter, when she's occasionally seen, expresses a fairly singular fondness for her mother. Spielberg is challenging Freud on families in this one, it would seem.)

For his part, Jack is starting to model himself on Captain Hook: the sort of scenario where tension or apprehension flies out the window because we know the father-son thing is a bond too strong to break. Nevertheless Jack can't cope for a minute without some sort of father figure in the vicinity—which is why he starts dressing like a pirate and looking confusedly troubled, as only Charlie Korsmo knows how.

Maybe we can hardly blame Jack; there really aren't too many strong female figures in *Hook* at all. Wendy—now fifty years Peter's senior—at least has some stern words for him, but that's about it. One might expect Hollywood's premier female box office draw, Julia Roberts, starring here as Tinkerbell, to put in her two cents. But no: she's so totally besotted with Peter that all she seems capable of is either fond laughter or—at one curiously tasteless point—confessions of deep and almost sexual love. And as for Peter's wife Moira, well, basically, she's seen and not heard.

Of course, one can hardly blame the few female directors in Hollywood from shying away from children's and family movies. But when this freckle-faced, male-oriented boyish Americana is the only option, *The People Under the Stairs* with its rotting corpses, cannibalism and child abuse starts to look rather more attractive.

DAVID NICHOLS is too busy to think.