

The Bear ★★★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: France

Verdict: See It

Director Jean-Jacques Annaud must not think very highly of dialogue. His third film, *Quest for Fire*, chronicled the adventures of some primitive cavemen who never said anything because they hadn't yet developed a language. His fourth film, *Name of the Rose*, was set in a Monastery. And now his fifth effort, *The Bear*, continues this tradition of minimal dialogue; its two main characters are a 2,000 pound Kodiak bear and his adopted cub. And guess what? They don't speak English, or Japanese, or Swahili. They speak in Bear talk, which consists of roars, growls, and yelps.

The film is based on the 1916 novel "The Grizzly King," about a couple of bear hunters in British Columbia circa 1885. Unlike the book, which adopts the hunters' point of view, the movie assumes the bears' perspective. The film milks this gimmick for all it's worth. Not only do the two bear actors get top billing in the credits, they also get more screen time and give better performances than do their human counterparts. The plot is pure and simple: hunters shoot adult bear. Bear gets away. Orphaned cub licks the wound. Adult adopts cub. Hunters track them with dogs. It's your basic man versus beast scenario, except in this case we're rooting for the beasts.

The Bear already has grossed over \$100 million in Europe so any business it generates in America is merely icing on the cake. The movie arrives on our shores with a ton of advance hype. It's being hailed as the *E.T.* of the '90s and as one of the greatest adventure films of all time. But let me tell you, unless you're an animal lover or a nature-freak, the movie is nothing to phone home about. Don't get me wrong: *The Bear* is exhilarating and heartwarming, but it's just not the ground breaking wonder it's hyped to be.

The gimmick of using the bears as protagonists is the film's main strength and also its main weakness. The animals certainly make lovable heroes.

The young cub is so cuddly and playful you want to lift him right off the screen and take him home. The little orphan is played with great aplomb by Douce, who may give Beasley (Hooch in *Turner & Hooch*) some Oscar competition. The adult male, played by Bart, is so majestic that you're overwhelmed by feelings of respect and awe. The two bears should be a dream-team for movie tie-in merchandise; don't be surprised if they show up on theme cups at McDonald's.

Unfortunately, the movie gets carried away with showing us the cub's psychological point of view. In one scene he's chasing a frog and in the next he's dreaming about frogs! The movie includes two surrealistic dream sequences, and that's two too many. In the middle of the film, the cub receives a lesson in sex education, but he gets bored so he wanders off and eats some wild mushrooms. Then, believe it or not, you get to see the psychedelic images that float through his head as he trips out. Now, the last time I checked there was no way of knowing what goes on inside a bear's head when he's dreaming or doing 'shrooms. Maybe there is something about the director I don't know. Annaud goes to great lengths to create a sense of authenticity; he tries to fool you into thinking you're watching the real thing. But whenever he tries to take us into the cub's head, *The Bear* just seems like science fiction.

Annaud also sometimes shows poor judgment in making the bears seem too much like humans. It's hard to stay absorbed into the film when you're constantly asking yourself whether the bears' behavior is realistic and natural.

Still, for all its flaws, *The Bear* wows you with its breathtaking wilderness setting and its powerful condemnation of hunting. Maybe we can learn something from these two magnificent bears who display more nobility and honor than do many humans.