

The Bee Movie; A Beekeeper's Review By M.E.A. McNeil

The Bee Movie is not much about bees. Still, we beekeepers are hoping that the fun of it will be a good enough thing to boost awareness. Here's a movie where bees, mostly demonized or ignored in animated films, are heroes. Pollination is shown to be important to our well being -- never mind that it is done by macho drones, not the female bees that in life gather nectar and pollen.

The story begins when a bee named Barry B Benson (the voice of Jerry Seinfeld) is reluctant to work in the hive and goes out as a forager to see the world. He meets a human, Vanessa Bloome (voiced by Renee Zellweger), who saves him from being swatted, and he quickly develops a cross-species crush on her. When he learns that the honey that bees labor to produce is sold in stores, Barry takes the entire human race to court (the voice of the judge is Oprah Winfrey and the bloviating opposing lawyer is John Goodman). However we get to this, a great swarm of bees brings a jumbo jet in by the laws of Looney Tunes physics.

The DreamWorks movie, written by Jerry Seinfeld is very Seinfeld: His lead bee Barry is parented by a bee couple with Jewish accents. (At this point if you know anything about bees, it's best to give up. The real-life egg-laying queen mates with 20 or so drones, all of whom die for the favor.) Barry makes his way to the Upper West Side of New York City, 67th and Columbus, the scene of Seinfeld's television sitcom. Bee puns prevail, together with Seinfeld's signature ethnic jokes (If your date is not Bee-ish, your parents will kill you. Well, she's not a WASP).

"The trouble with it is, you have this story — which is such a nuisance," Seinfeld said on NPR. "You know, in stand-up you just tell the funny part. But in a movie, the audience demands that you tell them some sort of story that makes sense. And this is a tremendous handicap for me."

It seems so. It is not because the characters are anthropomorphized or the film is silly, which it is: these are privileges of animation that we love. Sure, bees don't talk or have four legs, but this is not the Nature Channel. And there are, after all, beehives kept in New York City.

The problem is that the plot is not born from the characteristics that make bees unique and marvelous. If you do know bees, you might wish that the researchers whose names roll by on the credits had been bee people, or if they were that they could have gotten in to see Seinfeld.

It is not a preposterous concept that an entertaining animation could be based on the real workings of the hive. The Bee Movie is said to have come out of a joke by Seinfeld, at dinner with Steven Spielberg, about making a B movie (with a play on bee). There was no plot; anything could have been made of it. Even Seinfeld acknowledges the need for a factual basis: "How far can he fly? ...Every single thing you have to decide."

Could such a movie be based on the fact that workers in nature are all female, not the testosterone driven "pollen jocks" of this film? Improvisational theater begins with core ideas often more outlandish. Indeed, the scenes between Seinfeld and the comedian Chris Rock, the voice of the mosquito, were improvised, and those scenes, among the funniest, reference real mosquito behavior.

It would, of course, be a different movie – hey, perhaps a chick flick where Seinfeld and his best bee friend (voiced by Matthew Broderick) beg for food from their sisters and hang around a drone congregation area until they get kicked out of the hive in the fall. All right, it's a slacker film.

Not to quibble, but why insist that a worker is limited to a single job for life; in nature, she evolves through a series of roles, beautifully adjusting to the needs of the colony like a single organism. Likewise, since hybrid long stem roses are not pollinated by honey bees, why not another kind of flower. Male bees do not have stingers, which are evolved from ovipositors, the female egg laying tube. The bees in the film are called cousins rather than the accurate, and arguably more interesting, sisters or half-sisters. A bee colony in a cartoon tree is the shape of a wasp's nest. An entomologist-cum-clothing-designer would have rejected the shiny flight jackets of the "pollen jocks" because a slick exoskeleton distinguishes the wasp from the fuzzy bee – who could wear a fleecy sweater.

The movie is what it is, though, and there is a lot to enjoy. The computer animation is altogether brilliant. Some scenes, remarkable for a bunch of cartoon bees, are breathtaking. Twice bees soar in the sky through box kites; the joy is contagious. In a sequence both artful and terrifying, Barry is caught in a rainstorm and dodges raindrops nearly his size.

For a beekeeper, it was refreshingly funny to see people reacting hysterically to the presence of a docile honey bee in their car. A subtext of adult gags runs through the PG film: The hive is a business --

Honex, a division of Honesco, part of the Hexagon Group. When humans are sued over bee rights, Barry says “They won’t say, ‘Honey, I’m home’ without paying a royalty.” Plastic flowers are “flowers that have had some work done”. In a reference to the classic pool scene in “The Graduate,” where Dustin Hoffman is trying to make sense of adult life, Barry the bee goes through similar angst by a pool of honey.

So what is this film to beekeepers, apart from replacing “Have you read *The Secret Life of Bees?*” as a new acquaintance’s opener. All told, beekeepers, who in real life nurture their bees, would just as soon not be cast as villains, with the bees keeling over when they are smoked. (The smoke masks an alarm pheromone.) On the other hand, it’s valuable for the public to know that bee pollination is responsible for much of what they eat. Hyperbole is the stuff of animation, so perhaps we can let go of the scene of scorched earth, from want of honey bees that are on strike. That there are wind and self pollinated plants as well as native pollinators is perhaps too subtle for this venue.

The National Honey Board has a website (www.honey.com) with a Bee Movie page for kids offering Real Bee Facts. A short video explains the role of beekeepers, and a fact sheet outlines clearly how the hive functions.

Promotional products related to the movie are hardly related to bees: For example, General Mills makes “Bee Movie Fruit Flavored Snacks” sweetened with corn syrup and sugar – beeswax being listed as the smallest ingredient, following all of the preservatives. Neither bees nor beekeepers consider wax to be food.

Matthew Broderick, the voice of Barry bee’s sidekick said of the film, “I probably didn’t do as much research as I should have done. But I did find out recently that bees sometimes eat each other’s heads.” (More Sciencefeld.) Summing it up, he concludes, “We don’t care about bees, particularly.”

Well, we beekeepers do. Particularly. And we’d like to set the record straight.

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