

Review • Movie

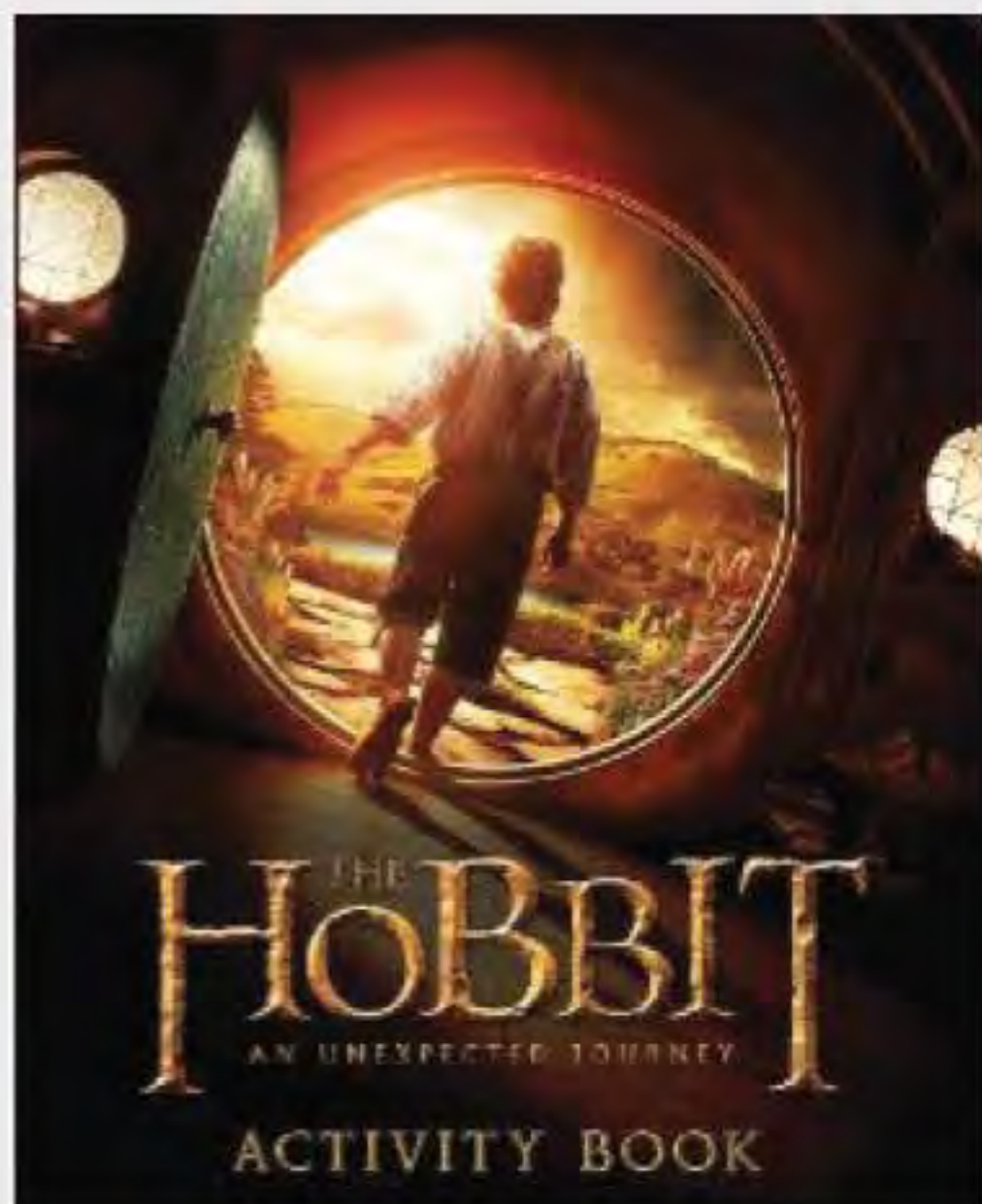


THE HOBBIT: Returning to Middle-earth

by Stephen Eldridge

Nearly a decade after Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy ended in grand style by sweeping 11 awards at the Oscars and making over a billion dollars at the international box office, Tolkien's Middle-earth is returning to the screen with a new trilogy based on the classic children's book *The Hobbit*.

Perhaps no film could live up to the limitless expectations set forth by the stunning *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* certainly tries. Despite running nearly three hours—and being based on the first third of a book that isn't all that long to begin with—the film is packed with action, adventure, and wonderful things to see.



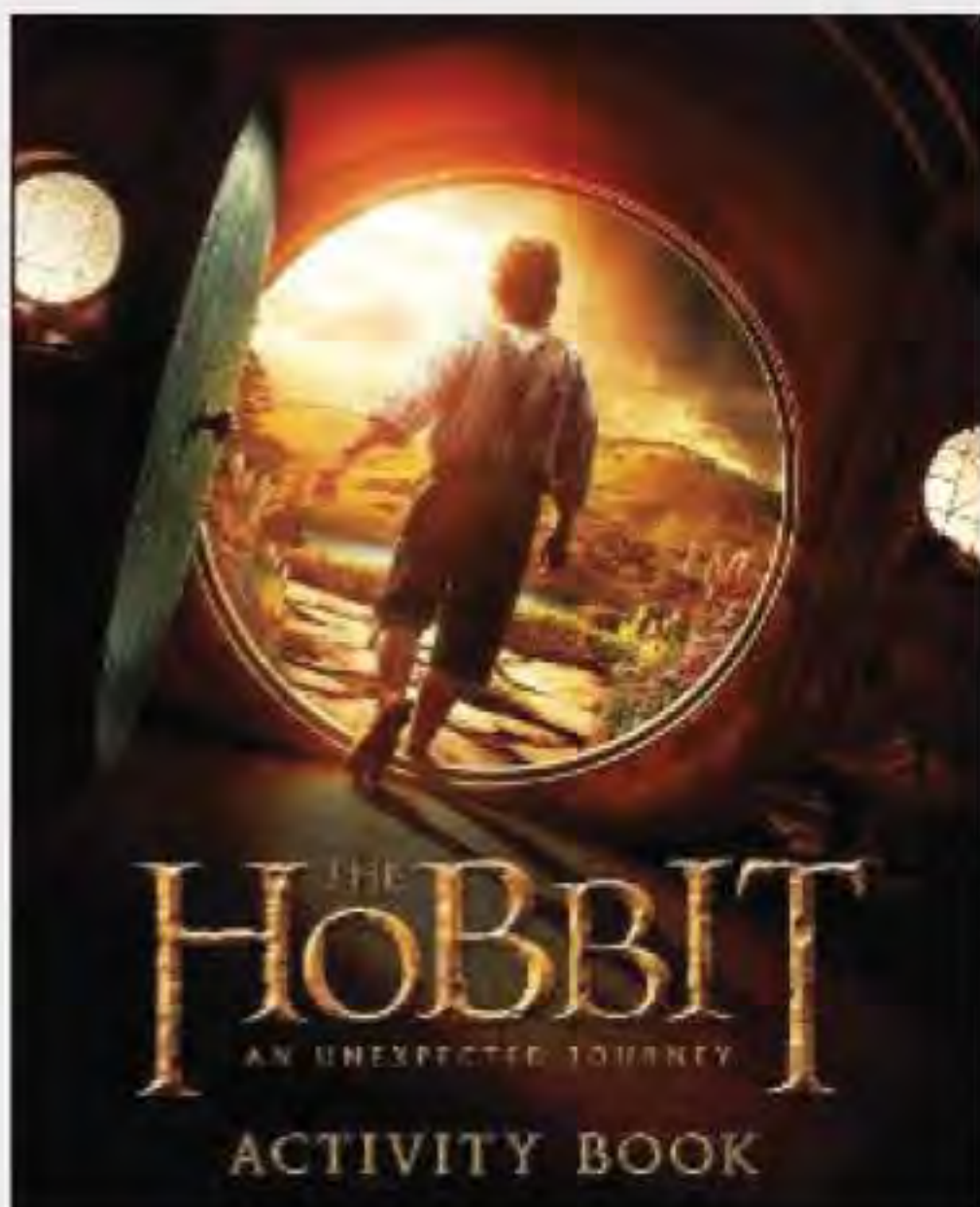
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The film begins with the elderly Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm) documenting a story that made him a legend in the Shire sixty years before. The film plunges into this narrative, and gives us little sense of what life was like for the younger Bilbo (Martin Freeman) before he was presented with a quest—and eleven dwarven house guests—by the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellan). The film spends more time building up its third lead, the dwarf king Thorin (Richard Armitage). Thorin is about as commanding and impressive as it is possible for one of Jackson's dwarves, who are often played for comedy, to be, and if the film sometimes seems to lose focus on Bilbo's story, we largely forgive it and enjoy this diversion.



The film may spend so much time with Thorin in part due to a valid insecurity that the stakes of its story don't match the grandeur of its presentation. While in Lord of the Rings the fate of the world rests on Frodo's diminutive shoulders, in *The Hobbit* Bilbo is



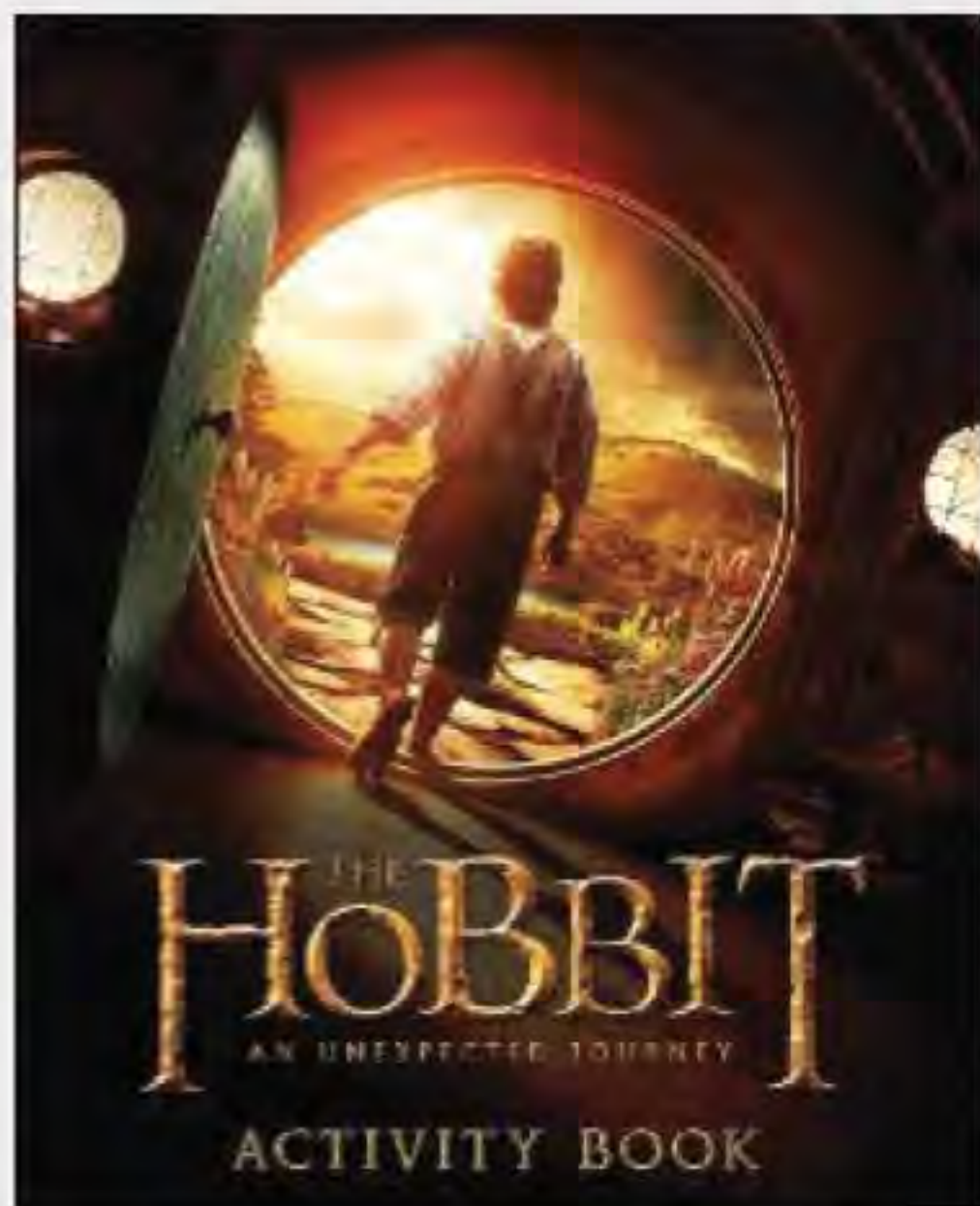
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The film may spend so much time with Thorin in part due to a valid insecurity that the stakes of its story don't match the grandeur of its presentation. While in *Lord of the Rings* the fate of the world rests on Frodo's diminutive shoulders, in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is fighting for the fate of a single long-abandoned dwarf kingdom. After the sixth or seventh scene of a dozen small, bearded men bouncing off the walls like pinballs, you do begin to wonder if the kingdom they're trying to reclaim can possibly be worth the effort.

Where the movie really struggles, though, is in finding the correct tone for all these grand goings on. The problem is that the *Lord of the Rings* films were largely serious, adult-oriented affairs that pushed the boundaries of their PG-13 ratings, while *The Hobbit* is a children's book. Trying to preserve the playful tone of the original novel while giving audiences the high-impact adventure they expect leads to battle scenes that are cartoonish in their action, but detailed in their brutality. This isn't a movie suitable for all children, so I'd see it before recommending it to your students or taking your own younger kids.

These flaws take some of the shine off of what should be a pristine film, but they don't keep *The Hobbit* from being a fun, and often exhilarating, adventure movie. Elven cities and Orc strongholds are breathtakingly detailed. The acting ranges from good to first-rate—a meeting of the great leaders of Middle-earth, especially, is a wealth of talent. There's also a mountaintop brawl that's guaranteed to be unlike anything



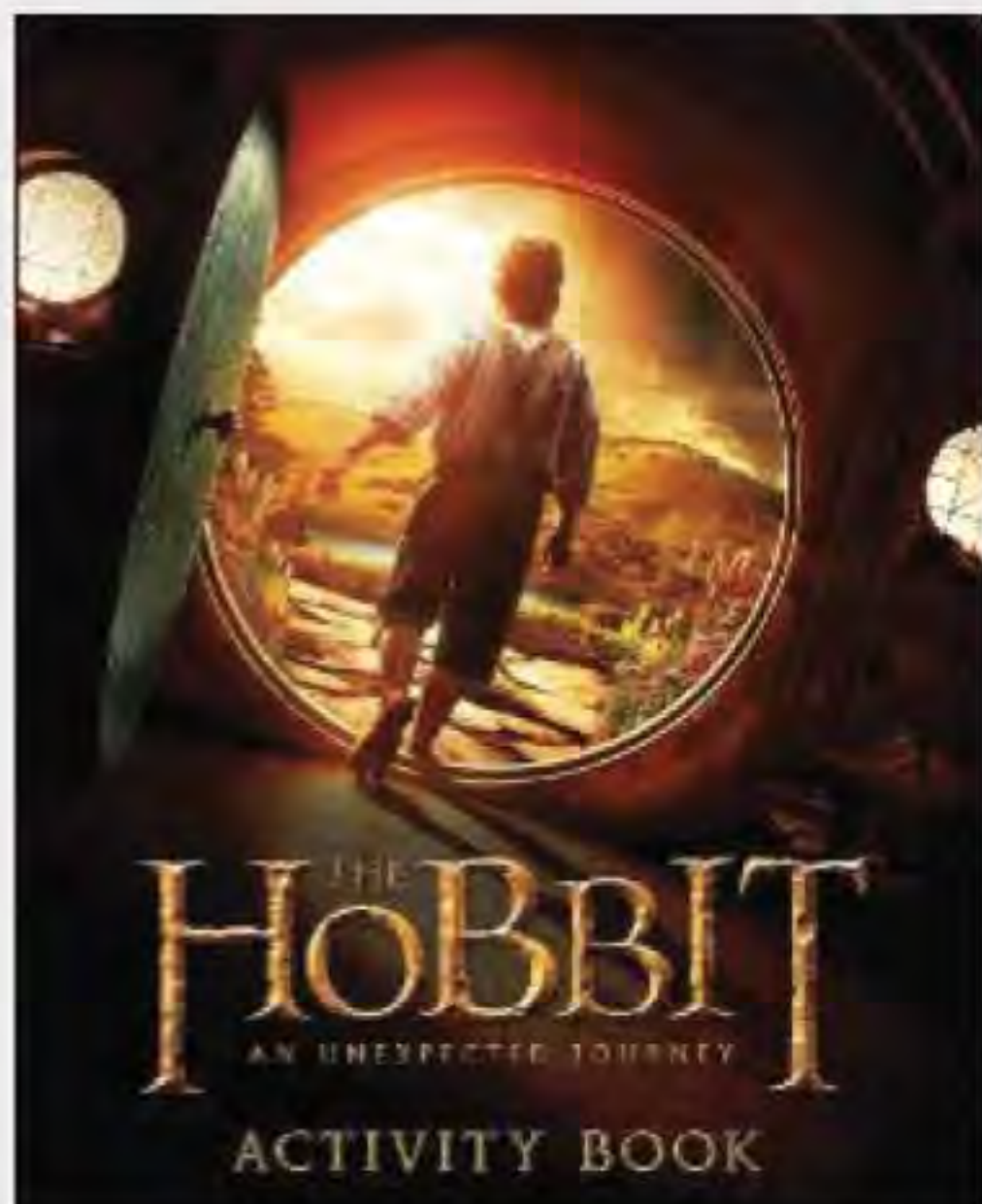
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Special mention should be made of the presentation of the film. *An Unexpected Journey* is being presented both in 3D and at a high frame rate. The high frame rate is an unusual move, and it gives the film a very distinctive look—almost like an extremely high-definition television soap opera. Sometimes this makes the film feel immersive, other times it looks staged and fake. One thing it does do is greatly improve the quality of the film's 3D technology. 3D movies have never looked this fluid and natural—rather than the pop-up-book look most of them have, you feel as though you're simply looking through a window at a real scene playing out before you.

As an exercise in style and technology, *An Unexpected Journey* could hardly be more of a success. As a film, that success is qualified.



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