

Classic's fresh face

THIS WELL-ACTED GOTHIC ROMANCE BRINGS JANE EYRE TO LIFE

The pretty, moody, well-acted new adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* rests on a key early scene between Australia's Mia Wasikowska, as Brontë's protagonist and narrator, and Michael Fassbender, as the storm warning known as Edward Rochester.

This is one of the most famous getting-to-know-you passages in 19th century literature, chronicling the second encounter and first civil conversation between the new governess of Thornfield Hall and her employer.

With a disarming mixture of candor and restraint, Jane acquits herself so nimbly in the face of so much bluff, it's as if the charismatic bad boy with a secret were discovering a new species – a rare object of fascination and adoration.

Thanks to the enduring draw of Brontë's 1847 two-volume novel, generation upon generation of readers have made the same discovery.

Without making any provocative new discoveries, the latest film version of the novel, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, honours the source material. It's certainly a start and, if you have the right actors, sometimes it's enough for a satisfying finish.

We'll get to what's missing from this *Jane Eyre* in a minute. Here's what works, and what makes it worth seeing.

For starters, Wasikowska. If the actress playing Jane Eyre, the only potential pity party in popular fiction to rival *Oliver Twist*, begs for our sympathy in any direct fashion, the story dies faster than you can say 'Helen Burns'.

Brontë's Jane is bullied, beaten, cowed, humiliated and – worst of all



WHAT

Jane Eyre
Rated M

WHO

DIRECTED BY: Cary Fukunaga.
Stars: Mia Wasikowska, Michael Fassbender, Jamie Bell, Judi Dench, Holliday Granger, Sally Hawkins

REVIEWER

Michael Phillips

– marginalised by her guardians, her Lowood schoolmasters and the wider world around her. Then she arrives at Thornfield Hall and her destiny.

Wasikowska, who starred in the recent *Alice in Wonderland* and co-starred in *The Kids Are All Right*, has many virtues as an actress, but above all, she is as honest as the day is long. She seems to act very little, which sounds lazy or easy, but in fact requires great skill.

Fassbender's Rochester has the dash and spirit of a Byronic antihero; crucially, he also has a sense of humour about his harrumphing character's unexpected attraction to this pale, watchful governess. In their lengthy scene by the fireside Wasikowska and Fassbender appear to be sussing each other out, pushing each other's buttons, in all the right ways. It is a crisply paced highlight.

Screenwriter Moira Buffini has restructured Brontë's narrative so that the story begins near the end, and then

flashes back. This works well.

What is lacking? I hesitate to use the most hackneyed two words in English, but: character development. The 1944 Robert Stevenson version of *Jane Eyre*, a wild-eyed, visually striking black-and-white affair starring Joan Fontaine (post-Rebecca) and Orson Welles (more effective in his uncredited design contributions than in his performance), has many flaws, but its screenplay manages a gradual and convincing coming-together of the main characters. This latest version radically condenses the process. Here, it's one scene and bam: love, hard and fast. Brontë wrote of the "cord of communion" between Jane and Rochester, pulling them toward one another almost against their will. The movie gives that cord a strong yank early on – too strong, I think.

Director Fukunaga's previous film was *Sin Nombre*, about Honduran nationals trekking north, perilously, to Mexico and eventually America. That film's mixture



of realism and melodrama was very much like the unsteady world Fukunaga creates in *Jane Eyre*, veering from windswept, hand-held-camera walks against the grey skyline of Derbyshire to classically minded camera swoops and glides. The results are all over the place visually.

And to no one's surprise, the story still works like Gothic gangbusters, thanks in part to reliable backcourt support from Judi Dench (as Mrs. Fairfax) and Sally Hawkins (as Jane's venal guardian).

I couldn't help but feel this adaptation needed more of the thing for which Jane herself yearns: a sense of freedom.

At their best, though, Wasikowska and Fassbender hint at their well-worn characters' inner lives, which are complex, unruly and impervious to time.

MUST READ

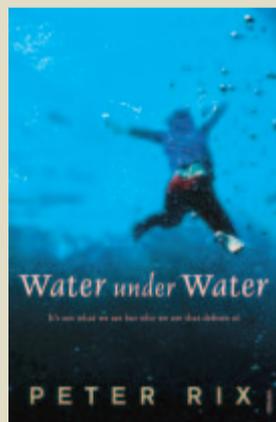
WATER UNDER WATER

BY PETER RIX

\$29.95 RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

JIM and Fran are happily married with a son, James, when Tom is born. Their delight is shattered when they learn that Tom has Down syndrome. Author Peter Rix has a daughter with Down syndrome and she and her friends with intellectual disabilities inspired this book. For once, we hear how a father, rather than a mother, deals with this horrific news. Jim has to learn so much. From believing that the baby should go into a special home, through trying to deal with friends who shy away from the once-happy family, life becomes agonising. Their first meeting with anyone in their situation is with Martin, who calls on new parents to help them get started. As he shows pictures of his daughter riding a bike, Jim is astounded. He has no idea that a Down syndrome child could live any sort of normal life. The book continues from the points of view of both Jim and Tom and when Tom helps a small boy with crutches, we are allowed to see how both view the situation. As so often happens, Fran and Jim disagree about many of Tom's problems, causing a huge rift in their marriage. James, however, is very caring of Tom and doesn't feel his father's embarrassment when people keep away from his brother. This is a story of fear, agony, friendship, discovery and great love. Everyone should read it to gain a better understanding of people who are seen as 'different'. As the author says, "it's not what we are but who we are that defines us".

Verdict: A beautiful, funny and sad book, but a must-read. – BEV BLAAUW



BE DIFFERENT: ADVENTURES OF A FREE-RANGE ASPERGIAN

BY JOHN ELDER ROBISON

\$29.95 BANTAM AUSTRALIA

AS Asperger's syndrome isn't as obvious as schizophrenia or extreme autism. People with little experience of it have trouble identifying it or understanding it. Is a person who behaves differently from others wilfully selfish or arrogant, or does the person simply not understand nuances of behaviour that are so obvious, even instinctive, to the observer? John Elder Robison, a lifetime Aspergian who was only diagnosed shortly after the condition was identified, presents a collection of his experiences, observations and perspectives as someone who's had to learn by trial and (often painful) error the meanings behind the seemingly illogical and nonsensical behaviours the rest of us exhibit. In doing so, he explains the reasoning and processes behind those behaviours that teachers and authority figures in his youth were quick to label as rebellious or disruptive. Don't think of this work as deadly serious or didactic; Robison is witty, wry and poignant. *Be Different* is an illustrative and reassuring book for people struggling with Asperger's syndrome, whether Aspergians looking to make sense of their lives or friends and family looking to understand Aspergians.

Verdict: A fantastic insight into the eccentrics and misfits in our lives. – ROB FARQUHAR



PRIVATE LIVES

BY TASMINA PERRY

\$32.99 HACHETTE AUSTRALIA

AS the sun glittered on Capri and the hot young actor at the peak of his career took the time to show our heroine (an ambitious female lawyer) his favourite part of the island, share a cigarette and open up, I paused to roll my eyes. It's so unrealistic, I thought. A couple of chapters later, back in London, Hollywood's hottest young actress was winking at the new male lawyer and offering him a lift. Unrealistic? I didn't care. I was hooked and you will be too as the story zips between locales and characters, zooming through the seedy side of celebrity and the legal wheeling and dealing that helps keep the illusion of glamour intact. Infidelity, divorce, murder and media mayhem will keep you turning the pages.

Verdict: Fast-paced celebrity-laced escapism. – KATE WATSON

