

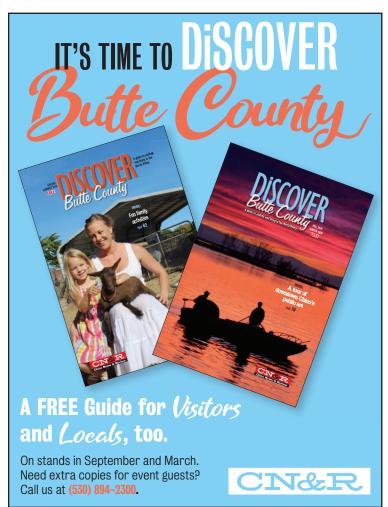
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## Call of the mild

## A domesticated version of Jack London's wild novel

Agrumpy, growly Harrison Ford sporting a David
Letterman beard stars alongside a CGI dog in this latest cinematic take on Jack London's classic The Call of the Wild.

by **Bob Grimm** bgrimm@ newsreview.com



the Wild Starring Harrison Ford. Directed by Chris Sanders. Cinemark 14, Feather River Cinemas. Rated PG.

Shooting for a safe PG, much of the violence—against humans and dogs alike—has been removed in favor of a more family-friendly take on the man-and-his-dog fable. The adaptation of the original 1903 text might have been forgivable, but add to that the unrealistic and distracting CGI-animal antics and the results are fairly underwhelming.

Don't get me wrong, I don't want to see real dogs getting hit with clubs and pulling sleds across frozen tundra. But "Buck the Cartoon Dog" would've been far more suitable as a completely animated affair. The CGI beasts and the humans don't ever look like they belong together, but

when alone-in the scenes where it's just humans sitting around or a bunch of dogs fighting one another off on their own—things look OK.

Ford plays John Thornton, a character who shows up much deeper into the novel than he does in the movie. In the book, Thornton was one of the many men prospecting for gold in the Yukon. In director Chris Sanders' film, he's a grieving, boozing loner who has left his wife after the death of their son. He rescues Buck from sled-team drudgery and bonds with his new four-legged prospecting partner. (Chewbacca was essentially a big walking dog, so who better than Han Solo to play a drunk guy who talks to his dog a

Buck, the big house dog who was kidnapped from his California home and sold into pulling a mail sled in Alaska, is a curious enough technological creation. Buck doesn't look bad; he just doesn't look and act

"real." And he's intelligent in unrealistic ways, such as figuring out that booze is bad for John, and stealing his bottles. Again, this is the stuff of cartoons.

Another big departure from the novel is the portrayal of Hal, a brief negative presence in the book, but a full-blown villain in the movie. As played by Dan Stevens, with a mustache-twirling spin, Hal has an extended stay in the film, and he's a little over-the-top. Karen Gillan might have been fun as his spoiled sister Mercedes had she been given more than five minutes in the movie.

The scenery of the Yukon is breathtaking as shot by famed cinematographer Janusz Kamiński, so that's a plus. And as Ford narrates the movie with his huffy grumble, his onscreen persona has a surprising nuance. (He smiles sometimes!) He makes much of the movie watchable, even heartwarming in places. But then Buck the dog bounces around like Scooby-Doo and kills the moment.

Because the violence has been toned down and the film is coming in with a PG rating, I'll give it a mild recommendation if you are looking to take the kids out to the theater. Heck, my parents took me to see The Adventures of the Wilderness Family and low-grade Disney movies like *The Apple Dumpling Gang* when I was a kid, and I dug the hell out of them. This movie slips into that category of clumsy family fare that will please the kids and allow the parents to watch comfortably knowing that nobody gets fully naked or rips somebody's tongue out. (Hey, it might even inspire a nice "Say kids, see how bad alcohol is?" conversation on the ride home.)

For adults with no kids, however, The Call of the *Wild* probably won't do the trick.











**Excellent** 

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