I Kill Giants preserves its source comic's emotion and mystery

Welcome to Cheat Sheet, our brief breakdown-style reviews of festival films, VR previews, and other special event releases. This review was originally posted from the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, and has been updated to coincide with the film's theatrical and streaming release.

In 2009, comics writer Joe Kelly and artist J.M. Ken Niimura produced one of the year's best graphic novels: *I Kill Giants*, the action-packed story of a defiant, troubled 5th grader obsessed with her private war against giants. Throughout the book, Kelly is coy with his readers about the truth behind Barbara Thorson's private war. Her classmates see her as weird and obnoxious, while school officials consider her imaginative and troubled at best, and dangerously disturbed at worst. No one considers the possibility that she's actually facing down giants – because giants don't exist.

Kelly also scripted the live-action film adaptation, which explains why it's so intelligent and careful about playing the same balancing act with the audience as the graphic novel. Viewers get to see what Barbara (Madison Wolfe) sees – the towering, slow-moving, dangerous forest giant that's haunting her seaside town, the bullying harbingers who taunt her when her traps don't work. But Kelly still encourages viewers to consider whether Barbara is the only sane person in town, or she's fighting her own delusions.

[embedded content]

Either way, she's clearly hurting the people who care about her and are trying to help her, including her sweet new friend Sophia (Sydney Wade), her tentative school counselor Mrs.

Mollé (*Star Trek*'s Zoe Saldana), and her desperate, frayed older sister Karen (Imogen Poots). Even if Barbara is the only one who can see giants and knows how to fight them, her level of obsession with them has taken on a dangerous edge, leading her to act out in school and drive other people away. She acts like this is a natural side effect of her role as the town's protector, but she's clearly lonely, angry, and carrying around a weight that other people misinterpret. The film gradually unravels the nature of that weight, partly as a mystery, but more importantly, as a study of how concealing pain alone is harder and heavier than processing it with other people.

What's the genre?

A little bit fantasy, a little bit horror, a little bit family drama. It's probably best described as a dark fairy tale, equally indebted to Guillermo del Toro and *The NeverEnding Story.* It's something of a giant-monster movie, which makes its release the same weekend as *Pacific Rim: Uprising* feel like a canny choice. And it's something of a "Who's the real crazy person here?" movie, which makes it even more impressive that it's coming out the same weekend as Steven Soderbergh's similarly themed *Unsane*.

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What's it about?

A fair bit of *I Kill Giants* is just about process. It opens with Barbara studiously making and testing bait for the giants, laying out experiments, and observing the results. There's a personal human story going on between Barbara and the various figures in her life. (Virtually all of them female, including the people who support her and the bullies who haunt her; the speaking roles for male characters are minimal.) But the film spends a fair bit of time with her

alone, pursuing her quiet obsession – guarding her school with runes and handmade fetishes, leaving containers of rotting food around town as further bait, and other activities that look like mental illness from one angle, and a lonely, complicated vigil from another. It's impressive how, at such a young age, Barbara is so grimly devoted to her self-appointed duties. She treats other people with fearless contempt because she sees herself as doing more important work, with bigger consequences, than whatever they're using to fill their empty lives. But in a way, she's earned that contempt. She works hard at planning for and dealing with giants. She's an adolescent girl with a full-time job.

But more than that, *I Kill Giants* is about loneliness and how hard it can be to face our fears, let alone to let other people in on those fears. Barbara takes on her solitary task with the ferocity of any hero saving the world because no one else seems to be doing it, but she also tries to let other people into her life. It's telling, and tragic, that she seems to be most balanced and confident when she's keeping everyone at arm's length. Only opening up seems to leave her vulnerable, frightened, and uncertain.

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What's it *really* about?

Grief, denial, the outsized fantasies of childhood, and a couple of different kinds of personal courage. Also: bullies, and the way they heighten every negative emotion. Bullies suck.

Is it good?

This is the feature-film directorial debut of Denmark's Anders Walter, already an Oscar-winner for his short film . As a first-time film statement, *I Kill Giants* is particularly assured and remarkable. The CGI effects around the giants are clearly low-budget and a little shaky, but otherwise, the film looks marvelous. The cool tones of a grayish city and the deep woods around it contrast with the bright colors of Barbara's outfits, emphasizing her separation from the world. The visuals are sharp and striking, fitting for a real-world fairy tale. The graphic novel is visually dynamic and fantastical in a way that suggested it might only work in animation, but Walter gives it a real-world gravitas that falls somewhere between a del Toro film and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*.

The film's biggest flaw may be that the story becomes abrupt and artificially pat toward the end, particularly around the way Barbara's story and her personal issues resolve. The story strongly recalls J.A. Bayona's 2016 film *A Monster Calls* — Kelly's graphic novel hit shelves two years before Patrick Ness' novel *A Monster Calls*, but the movie adaptation of the latter beat *I Kill Giants* to the screen by a year, and the symbolism and even some of the monster visuals are undeniably so similar that *I Kill Giants* feels like it's operating in the other film's shadow.



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But *I Kill Giants* has its own distinct strengths, especially in Wolfe's fierce, nakedly hurting performance. As a girl who unashamedly runs around in mismatched layers and bunny ears (she tells Sophia they put her in touch with her spirit animal), she presents a potentially comical figure. But Wolfe gives her a sense of nuance and humanity. She is just a little silly, as children sometimes are when they take things extremely seriously. But her emotional armor is believable and compelling, and the constantly visible cracks in that armor make her story poignant. A scene where she awkwardly, painfully tries to relate to her sister Karen through puppets and cobbled-together action figures brings across just how much of a struggle Barbara finds in her efforts to relate to people. And yet that scene is funny, as well. There's a lot of emotion coming through in *I Kill Giants*. The way Wolfe performs it, and Walter frames and shoots it, makes Barbara's journey work both as metaphor and as a more literal experience in navigating the particular monsters of bereavement.

What should it be rated?

There's some scary monster action and some painful themes that

may go over kids’ heads, but nothing graphic. It’s a safe enough PG.

How can I actually watch it?

I Kill Giants will have a limited theatrical release in New York and Los Angeles on March 23rd. It’ll be on streaming services, including Amazon Video and iTunes, on the same day.

https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/9/16281330/i-kill-giants-movie-review-joe-kelly-graphic-novel-tiff-toronto