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In the beginning, there was “The Croods,” an agreeable enough 2013 cartoon about an overprotective early man named Grug (Nicolas Cage), who was so worried about the perils of the outside world that he kept his clan confined to a cave. Then his adventurous teenage daughter Eep (Emma Stone) met an outsider, Guy (Ryan Reynolds), and the family was forced to confront the possibility that maybe they had been a little limited in their thinking.

From that rudimentary concept, “The Croods” managed to conjure a surprisingly lavish CG world for these goofy cavepeople to explore — one in which the creatures and environments were so richly detailed, they easily distracted from the threadbare storytelling. (The movie was basically a feature-length sitcom treated as a runaway theme-park ride.) When all was said and done and the Crood family had learned its lesson, there was no organic reason to continue the story, but that didn’t stop DreamWorks Animation, which is in the business of wringing sequels from stones.

Sometimes it works (look how far it’s stretched the “Shrek” and “Madagascar” franchises), but it’s hard not to be cynical about a strategy that involves spending a ton of time and money developing original toons in the hope that they will generate future installments, spinoff TV series and lots and lots of merchandising. That’s how we got “The Croods: A New

Age,” a largely unnecessary sequel — from an audience perspective, at least — in which the Guy-and-Eep-sitting-in-a-tree romantic subplot from the first movie gets drawn out for another 90 minutes when Grug stumbles across the Bettermans, a significantly more evolved family with a teenage daughter of their own. They’ve invented agriculture, personal hygiene and indoor plumbing. Plus, they have a much better tree.

Director Joel Crawford (graduating from the “Trolls Holiday” special) presents all of these details as jokes, and if that sounds like fun — watching Guy learn how to use a toilet, or hearing Cloris Leachman (as Gran) interrupt every so often with a crack about how things were back in her time — then this movie could be your jam. But for those who wish they’d just slow it down and tell a decent story, “The Croods: A New Age” feels like an assault on the cranium, a loud and patently obnoxious 21st-century “Flintstones” with far more sophisticated technology, but nothing new to offer in the script department. (At least the partial reopening of cinemas makes it possible for theatergoers to appreciate all the attention put on production design.)

Frankly, it was more fun seeing Fred Flintstone use a long-billed bird as a stone-age record player, though the screenwriting team of Kevin and Dan Hageman, Paul Fisher and Bob Logan do come up with pretty good sight gags. Or perhaps those contributions come from the production team, which employs the latest digital tools to push some of the core principles of hand-drawn animation to an extreme: exaggerated facial expressions, “squash and stretch” poses and hyperactive movement. For instance, it’s an old-school trick to show the silhouette of a character punched through a wall, like a chalk crime-scene outline, and here we see that both “indoors” (a novel concept for the Croods) and in the side of a giant watermelon, suggesting oldest son Thunk (Clark Duke) took a running jump at the jumbo-sized snack.

Whereas the Croods lived in a desolate land of rocks and dirt and dangerous beasts (it’s a running theme that the creatures they encounter are either hybrids of existing animals, à la “wolf spiders” and “chicken seals,” or fearsome predators, like a “land shark”), the Bettermans have cultivated a stunning DayGlo garden — even wilder and more demented than the trippy Systar System from the “Lego Movie” follow-up. Their new hosts are friendly at first, but it turns out that they secretly want to lure Guy away to marry their daughter, Dawn (Kelly Marie Tran), then cast the Croods out of the garden.

“We need to help them understand they have a bright future outside these walls,” Hope Betterman (Leslie Mann) tells her husband, Phil (Peter Dinklage), who has a weird rule about not touching the bananas — clearly intended as a clue that this paradise may be under the control of some kind of King Kong-like monster. What is it about certain animated sequels that inspires creatives to venture so far afield from what they’d done before? The

Peter Max-like lunacy of “The Croods: A New Age” recalls the equally unhinged “Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs 2,” in which the mutant food of the first movie came alive.

With the heavy lifting of exposition out of the way in the first film, wouldn't it be preferable to slow things down and let the sequel breathe? But in the case of “The Croods,” the movie never gets around to establishing the ground rules, which in turn allows the filmmakers to rewrite them as they go. The team's most frequently used comedy tactic involves pointing audiences' expectations in one direction, then pulling the rug out from under them. (The King Kong twist is a good example, which the film flips several times for laughs: Instead of a massive gorilla, the banana eater is revealed to be a cute little punch monkey ... who belongs to a swarm of the critters ... who make sacrifices to a massive gorilla after all.)

In some cases, it pays off to play against type. Rather than seeing each other as rivals, Eep and Dawn hit it off, heading out on adventures together. And once the movie hits its truly crazy streak in the final third, it's the men who are captured and offered to the monster, while Gran and her “Thunder Sisters” do the rescuing. But I would be lying if I said I wasn't exhausted long before the movie turned into a sequence of antic action scenes. In fact, that feeling set in after the first five minutes, when the Croods were battling giant “kangadillos” in a breakneck canyon race. (It doesn't help that Mark Mothersbaugh's busy score elbows into every moment where we might catch our breath.)

For all its hyper-caffeinated energy and irreverence, the movie reduces to a relatively simple, square message: The family that sleep-piles together stays together. But scratch away at the prehistoric setup, and one might find an ugly parody of the cultural divide racking America in the year 2021, as a belligerent political divide finds the country torn between Croods and self-anointed (yet hypocritical) Bettermans. Is the movie trying to appeal to one tribe or the other? Might such a fable serve to bring the two parties together? Sure, that could happen, but this is “The Croods” we're talking about. We should be grateful for a DreamWorks toon that doesn't resort to fart jokes — which is one small sign of progress already.

It's also now available to watch on some VOD platforms, meaning you can watch it wherever you are in the world.

Tom and Jerry Is Getting Two More Sequels

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