Cars


Writer/director/editor: John Lasseter
Classification: G
Duration: 120 minutes
We rate it: Two and a half stars.

The latest offering from the Pixar animation studio finds itself in an odd predicament. As the most recent entry in a series of astonishingly entertaining computer-animated films, Cars has an awful lot to live up to, and while the film is by no means terrible, it really does suffer from comparisons with its siblings. Pixar’s Toy Story (1995), A Bug’s Life (1998), Monsters, Inc (2001) and especially The Incredibles (2004) were all brilliantly funny and wildly entertaining; the films set successive benchmarks for the quality of computer-animation, and they all demonstrated their makers’ awareness of the one crucial element that sets extraordinary kids’ films apart from more everyday offerings – wonderful writing. Cars, by contrast, comes off as an extremely technically proficient but ultimately lacklustre effort. Extraordinarily realized in a technical sense, with cutting-edge digital animation that truly boggles the mind, Cars looks and sounds amazing: it’s the premise and the narrative itself that let the film down.

Set in a world that is populated by automobiles with very human characteristics, Cars follows the exploits of a precocious and successful racing car, Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson). McQueen, whose ego is as well-tuned as his engine, is in top form as a racer; his eyes are on the US Championship trophy, the Piston Cup. He has a nemesis, of course, a competitor, Chick (Michael Keaton) who will stop at nothing, not even cheating, to defeat the honest McQueen. After a close race that sees both cars poised to take the final trophy, the teams set off for California to prepare for the showdown. En route, through a spectacular series of mishaps, McQueen ends up stranded alone in an out-of-the-way town off Route 66, a quiet burg called Radiator Springs. After a disastrous attempt to leave the town, during which he wrecks most of the main street, McQueen is sentenced by the town judge, Doc Hudson, to undertake community service and repair the damage before he leaves. With the big race only days away and no other way out of town, McQueen sets about making amends, and in the process comes to know the colourful inhabitants of the town very well indeed.
As we would expect, revelations quickly follow the story’s setup. Doc Hudson (voiced with gravel-crunching style by Paul Newman, a car-racing enthusiast in real life) turns out to have an oh-so-significant past, and he inevitably plays a role in McQueen’s future, as does the feisty Porsche, Sally (voiced in spirited fashion by Bonnie Hunt). Such predictability in the narrative is one of the film’s great letdowns, it must be said, and while much of the action and dialogue is quite funny, it lacks the extraordinary spark that has made all of the other Pixar features so unforgettable. The rivalry between Buzz and Woody from Toy Story, for example, was so hilarious that one was content to follow the film simply to see how that relationship resolved; Cars doesn’t provide a pairing with anything like that kind of comic zing. The other films also worked with settings that were truly wondrous; the city powered by screams in Monsters, Inc., the microcosmos of A Bug’s Life, and the espionage/Superhero setting of The Incredibles were all steeped in wonderment and strange beauty. For me, at least, the world of Cars simply wasn’t terribly interesting.

The filmmakers behind this very polished project clearly demonstrate a nostalgic fascination for the lost world of old Route 66 towns, but for the rest of us that sense of charm and old-timey cuteness may lose a lot in the trip across the pacific. There is much to marvel at in Cars, but the sense of absolutely eye-popping magic that characterised so many of Pixar’s other efforts is sadly lacking here.

Nick Prescott.