

Review Lost in the dystopian nightmare of 'The Maze Runner'

By **SHERI LINDEN**

SEPTEMBER 18, 2014, 2:40 PM



Dylan O'Brien as Thomas in "The Maze Runner." (Ben Rothstein / Twentieth Century Fox)

Bucking the femme-centric trend in YA fantasy fare, boys claim the dystopian spotlight in "The Maze Runner."

The story, based on the first novel in James Dashner's four-book series, finds the XY crowd with their work cut out for them: Deprived of their memories, the future-world teens are dropped into a mysterious social experiment that's a little bit "Lord of the Flies," a little bit "Hunger Games" and a little bit "Survivor."

The franchise launcher, directed by visual effects artist Wes Ball in his feature debut, gets the vision and the grit of the source material but finally feels more like a long trailer than an involving movie. Screenwriters Noah Oppenheim, Grant Pierce Myers and T.S. Nowlin guide the action toward an increasingly pointed setup for the next "Maze" film, putting the main players in place and laying out the concepts in simplified but not always coherent fashion.

Keeping with YA sci-fi tradition, the movie is told from the point of view of a chosen one, a kid who's "not like the others" and feels destined to challenge the group's fate. He's Thomas, played with bland Everyguy heroics by Dylan O'Brien of the MTV series "Teen Wolf." Thomas is the latest boy — and it turns out the last — to find himself in a place called the Glade, remembering nothing of his former life except his name, after a terrifying ascent through darkness in a clanging metal box. It's a hellish rebirth canal and a powerful starting point for the story.

Within the Glade's colossal walls of their captivity, the boys have built an orderly society, collectivist and hierarchical. Led by Alby (Aml Ameen), they're types more than individuals, with Thomas Brodie-Sangster making the strongest impression as the simpatico second in command.

They've got their jobs, their rituals and their rules. At the highest echelon are the brave, athletic Runners, the only ones allowed to exit the Glade when, each morning, the walls grind open (the sound design is potent), giving them access to the massive maze that surrounds their compound. For three years, the boys have been trying to find a course of escape through the ever-shifting maze and its resident monsters. Not the most exciting of foes, those are giant scuttling arachnids called Grievors, part metal contraption and part slimy mollusk flesh.

Low-key but not given to false modesty, Thomas is determined to solve the puzzle. He is soon breaking the rules and rising to the top of the pack — not without resistance, of course: The obligatory antagonist (capably played by Will Poulter, whose character has been watered down from the book) distrusts him, and his suspicions deepen with the testosterone-testing arrival of a girl (Kaya Scodelario) who seems to know Thomas.

Ball tends to slice and dice action sequences in a way that drains them of energy, and his attempts to churn up emotion fall disconcertingly flat. But he does stage a couple of effective adrenaline-pumping chases through the maze's industrial wasteland. Notwithstanding the assumed tech capabilities of the Glade's unseen string-pullers, "The Maze Runner" puts a refreshingly primitive slant on dystopia. Marc Fisichella's production design is a vivid, earthy rendering of Dashner's imagined world, with the wide-screen cinematography of Enrique Chediak emphasizing the boys' place in the terrible scheme of things.

Also emphasizing that is a brief appearance by Patricia Clarkson — further proof, along with turns by Kate Winslet in "Divergent" and Jodie Foster in "Elysium," that no post-apocalyptic nightmare is complete without an icy blond bureaucrat.

calendar@latimes.com

'The Maze Runner'

MPAA rating: PG-13 for thematic elements, intense sequences of violence and action, disturbing images

Running time: 1 hour, 54 minutes

Playing: In general release