

David Rush
'The Lovely Bones'
Directed by Peter Jackson

How can one make a PG-certificate film about the rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl? Director Peter Jackson provides an answer of sorts with an adaptation of Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones*, which leaves the murder unseen and the rape unmentioned.

Jackson's candy-coloured fantasia - reminiscent of 1970s concept-album artwork - takes us through the afterlife of Susie Salmon, a small-town child in 1970s Pennsylvania who is killed by the local pervert (a very seedy looking Stanley Tucci) and looks down on her scattered, shattered family from her place in limbo. She sees her mum (Rachel Weisz in a series of bad wigs) flee the coop and her dad (Mark Wahlberg) come apart at the seams. From this celestial vantage, she starts to fear for the safety of her little sister (Rose Mclver), whose jogging route leads her regularly past the killer's suburban home. Susan Sarandon is totally wasted, portraying Susie's grandmother as a sex- and alcohol-starved chain-smoking hot Nana, and not much else.

Jackson has successfully filmed hobbits in Middle Earth and aliens in South Africa, but he struggles to relate to the teenage girl in limbo and the ordeals of a family in hell. Too often it feels like another unwanted M Night Shyamalan movie, with Wahlberg again looking stunned, the closest he ever gets to conveying genuine emotion.

Seemingly enchanted by the challenge of creating limbo as imagined by a 14-year-old girl - all landscapes and pretend photo-shoots - Jackson seems not to know what to do with the rest of the film. Not so much a detective story as a film representation of a teen girl's idea of heaven, *The Lovely Bones* emerges as a cross between a Hallmark card and the Disney channel.

So infuriatingly coy and so desperate to preserve the modesty of its soulful victim that it amounts to an ongoing clean-up operation.

The imagery kills the fear. In a film which is essentially about a child serial killer, the constant blossoming of visual possibility leaves the reality of what happened to Susie both hidden and cold.

It's completely overwrought. Every single moment in the film is an emotional climax of some kind. At no point is there any kind of middle ground.

The finale - though tense - lacks that visceral gut punch. Ultimately, Jackson spends too long in the clouds and loses touch with the real drama on ground level.