

Marvel's The Avengers

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

Writer-director Joss Whedon, the creator of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, saves the world from destruction yet again in the first of the summer blockbusters, *Marvel's The Avengers*. The adventure is moderately enjoyable but rather exhausting.

If you haven't seen previous Marvel comic book movies—*Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*—or if you've seen them but haven't retained the plot threads, it may take you half an hour or so to get your bearings.

Beamed down on earth from the distant planet Asgard, Thor's megalomaniac brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston) steals a blue cube that can empower him to destroy the earth and rule the universe. So Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the leader of the secret spy and law enforcement agency known as S.H.I.E.L.D., brings together a quartet of superheroes to fight Loki: Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), Captain America (Chris Evans), the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson). Thor (Chris Hemsworth) joins the force as well. Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), the fifth member of the crew, is placed under a spell by Loki and turned against his comrades.

The movie's distinctive quality is its ironic humor. The joke at the heart of Ruffalo's performance is that he's a brilliant doctor who has to keep himself in check because anger turns him into a Neanderthal with a penchant for smashing things up—yet the physical prowess available to him as the Hulk is the superpower he has to learn to harness. The film pits Iron Man, hipster playboy genius Tony Stark, against Captain America, straight-arrow World War II hero Steve Rogers—a mutually disdainful pair who have to learn to work together. Stark gets the movie's funniest lines; you can feel Whedon's delight in writing for Downey, who can do more with a joke than anyone since Groucho Marx. And Evans, who has a gift for making squareness comic, provides Downey with the ideal foil.

Renner unfortunately misses out on the fun. The role of a bewitched do-gooder gives him nothing to play, and when he snaps out of the spell, Whedon doesn't supply him with a character to slip into. And Loki is a standard-issue villain; he even talks in that dreadful faux-classical dialect Hollywood has fallen back on since Cecil B. DeMille.

A larger problem is the overscaled fight scenes. The movie goes on for nearly two and a half hours—a good 40 minutes too long—and more than half of this is taken up with epic combat sequences. They aren't done badly, but all that hardware and computer-generated imagery become mind-numbing after a while. In the climactic scene, the Avengers have to field multiple threats to the world's very existence. Then Whedon interrupts the end credits to prep us for a sequel. But what on earth can he whip up for an encore?