The Lovely Bones

By John Petrakis in the January 26, 2010 issue

Back in 1994, when Peter Jackson was a relatively unknown director, he made the small but brilliant *Heavenly Creatures*, a tale about an "unhealthy" friendship between two teenage girls in 1950s New Zealand that led to bloody matricide. It remains my favorite film by this extremely talented filmmaker. Fifteen years later, after filming *King Kong* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Jackson reenters the domain of the smaller film with *The Lovely Bones*, based on the 2002 novel by Alice Sebold.

It's about 14-year-old Susie Salmon (Saoirse Ronan), who is murdered one snowy afternoon in December 1973 and immediately goes to heaven, where she gazes down and comments on the various ways her friends, family and murderer deal with her brutal departure from this world. In a curious way, the story echoes the climax of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, in which Emily looks back on life from the graveyard and bemoans what she has lost.

The problem is that Jackson can't seem to shed his epic directorial overcoat. This film ends up as a curious mix of large and small filmmaking that never finds its center.

The chief difficulty is with point of view. The novel is in the first person, with Susie participating in every part of the story, either as victim or observer. As the book proceeds, we begin to realize that the story is less about her murder and the way that people cope with it, and more about Susie who watches them cope with it and

continues to grow and mature even after death.

Jackson holds onto part of that conceit, employing a voice-over to examine Susie's reactions to the anger, guilt and grief that is transpiring below. But Jack son also allows the story to drift away from Susie's perspective and develop into something of a murder mystery—prompting us to wonder, for example, if her killer, George Harvey (Stanley Tucci, doing his best Dustin Hoffman impersonation), will be found and brought to justice. This move lures us away from Susie's mesmerizing heavenly perspective and her eagerness to figure out why her father (Mark Wahlberg) and mother (Rachel Weisz) are acting the way they are and how her death affects her brainy younger sister (Rose McIver) and her goofy grandmother (Susan Sarandon.)

This shift in emphasis leads to casting conundrums. Wahlberg is far too strong and powerful-looking to be believable as the meek accountant father, Jack. When Jack becomes obsessed with finding his daughter's killer, willing to do whatever it takes to get revenge, it doesn't feel as if he is acting out of character but merely going back to his kick-ass roots. The glamorous-looking Weisz is also wrong for the role of the mother, Abigail, at least as she is written in the film. (Her part has been severely truncated from the book.) As for Susan Sarandon as Grandma Lynn, she seems to be there for comic relief, which feels inappropriate for such a serious film.

Other subplots that are key to the story's ultimate success are also trimmed back, most notably the story revolving around Ruth Connors (Carolyn Dando), a dark-souled poet who makes contact with Susie just as the 14-year-old is being spirited away to heaven—a brush of the hand that will haunt her for the rest of her days.

Jackson's visual conception of Susie's heaven is impressive—it looks like something from a drug-influenced Tim Burton movie—but it is superfluous, since focusing on its technical marvels distracts us from the more spiritual aspects of the film.

Even with its limitations, *The Lovely Bones* is still worth seeing, if only for the stirring performance by the young Irish actress Saoirse Ronan as Susie. It proves that her fine debut as the conniving liar in *Atonement* was not a fluke.

The Lovely Bones is rated PG-13, probably because the filmmakers eliminated the rape scene that, in the book, precedes the murder. This deprives the viewer of an important piece of information. Even with the rape scene left out, the film should be rated R, for it is far too disturbing psychologically for any preteen.