

Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre was first published as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* Edited by Currer Bell in 1847, Currer Bell, of course, being Charlotte Bronte. The dark, brooding novel has been a classic ever since, taught in schools and beloved by readers. It was no surprise when Hollywood finally got around to making a film of it, for its characters, settings, and plot were so filmic to begin with. The first version to hit the screen was produced in 1934 by B-movie studio Monogram, an ill-conceived, heavily rewritten 62-minute programmer starring Virginia Bruce as Jane and Colin Clive as Rochester. It was directed by the very prolific director, Christy Cabanne, who noted film historian Kevin Bronlow called one of the dullest directors of the silent film era.

A higher-toned version was developed by producer David O. Selznick after his success with *Rebecca*. But for whatever reasons, he eventually sold the project to Twentieth Century Fox, who assigned Robert Stevenson to direct. Stevenson was a wonderful and very underrated director, and he ended up being just the right choice for the film – his work on *Jane Eyre* was absolutely superb. He would much later find huge success with his work for Walt Disney, which included such wonderful movies as *Old Yeller*, *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*, *The Absent-Minded Professor*, *In Search of the Castaways*, *Son of Flubber*, *That Darn Cat*, *The Love Bug*, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, and, of course, the movie for which he will always be remembered, *Mary Poppins*.

The screenplay was the work of several writers, some credited some

not, including director Stevenson, novelist Aldous Huxley, and John Houseman. Fox assembled a great cast for the film, including Joan Fontaine as the adult Jane, and Orson Welles as Rochester, along with the amazing character actors Henry Daniell, Agnes Moorehead, and Sara Allgood, and Margaret O’Brien and Peggy Ann Garner as young Jane (a subtle and beautiful performance), and an unbilled, young Elizabeth Taylor as Helen Burns. One interesting little tidbit is that Ether Griffies, who played Grace Poole in the earlier Monogram film, plays the same role here. The gorgeous photography was by veteran George Barnes. The resulting film, released in 1943, was a highly condensed version of the novel (running just 97 minutes), but a truly remarkable movie – evocative, gothic, romantic, and managing to capture the dark, brooding essence of Charlotte Bronte’s masterpiece. The performances are especially wonderful, but everything just clicks somehow. As *Variety* said in its review, “Charlotte Bronte’s Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre*, reaches the screen in a drama that is as intense on celluloid as it is on the printed page.”

The studio attempted to persuade classical composer Igor Stravinsky to make his film debut with *Jane Eyre*, but that didn’t happen. Bernard Herrmann really wanted to score the film but didn’t think he had a chance – as he wrote to wife Lucille Fletcher, “There isn’t a chance for me to do the score as I am sure that Al Newman will first resign from the studio before he lets me be brought in.” But happily, Newman, head of the Fox music department, was a fan of Herrmann and he did bring him in,

thus beginning Herrmann’s long and brilliant association with Fox. At that point in his just-beginning film scoring career he’d done only three films: *Citizen Kane*, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Herrmann could not have made a more auspicious debut at Fox than with *Jane Eyre*, a perfect marriage of film and composer. The score captures the Bronte world right from the main title, which, unlike today’s abbreviated main titles, immediately draws you in and sets the tone of the film. Herrmann has such an affinity for musical storytelling, and he clearly loved the Bronte world, since he would go on to write a wonderful opera based on Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. His incredible string and reed writing is especially evident in this score, and his themes are simply stunning. The Herrmann musical signature is in evidence in every bar of the score – his music never sounds like any other composer and is instantly identifiable. *Jane Eyre* remains one of the cornerstones of his film-scoring career, as fresh, mysterious, beautiful, and vibrant today as it was back in 1943.

Jane Eyre was previously released in the Varese Sarabande Bernard Herrmann at Fox box set, that sold out almost instantly. It’s been great to be able to make so much of the contents of that box available in separate releases for those who missed out.

— Bruce Kimmel