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S is for Superhero, H is for Heart: *Shazam!* and the Magic of an Inclusive Family  
A Review of *Shazam!* (2019)

Reviewed by Zvonimir Prtenjača

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## **S IS FOR SUPERHERO, H IS FOR HEART: SHAZAM! AND THE MAGIC OF AN INCLUSIVE FAMILY**

Review by Zvonimir Prtenjača

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Sandberg, David F., director. *Shazam!*. Performances by Zachary Levi, Mark Strong, Asher Angel, Jack Dylan Grazer, and Djimon Hounsou. New Line Cinema, DC Films, The Safran Company, 2019. Film.

“Here’s the thing about power. What good is power if you got nobody to share it with?”  
– Shazam (Zachary Levi)

So exclaims the eponymous protagonist of the DC Extended Universe’s (DCEU) seventh instalment, *Shazam!* (2019), a playful flick which injects some welcome levity in its generally sombre cinematic universe. By contemporary superhero standards, the film’s narrative is somewhat generic: when a t(w)een street urchin named Billy Batson (played with powerful emotional tact by Asher Angel) is transformed into a godlike adult superhero by the timeworn Wizard (the unrecognisable Djimon Hounsou), he must confront the power-hungry witch, Dr. Thaddeus Sivana (Mark Strong), and his minions hell-bent on conquering the world, the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man. However, as the film’s good-versus-bad angle intermingles with Billy’s multicultural foster family arc – throughout which he finds a loving home, a sense of identity and unity, and aid in defeating Sivana’s *Gremlins*-like posse – *Shazam!* utilises several generic conventions of a family film to communicate its predominant message: no one is born a hero and not all loving families are those one is born into.

Pitched to director David F. Sandberg as *Big* (1988) with superpowers, the film does not dwell on franchise-building – a phenomenon currently oversaturating the superhero cinematic market – but focuses instead on the coming-of-age story of a troubled fourteen-year-old boy who was deserted by his mother. Navigating his way through childhood, a process itself fraught with numerous changes, Billy bounces from one foster home to another, searching for his biological mother and often clashing with different forms of authority. After one such incident, Child Protective Services arranges for him to live with the ever-welcoming Victor and Rosa Vasquez (Cooper Andrews and Marta Milans) and their five adoptive children. Alone and reluctant to settle down, Billy stubbornly refuses to bond with his seventh foster family. However, it is this very family that imbibes *Shazam!* with its appealing magic – a statement perhaps considered ludicrous given the film’s depiction of mystical powers and almost carnivalesque landscapes. Despite being a pop-cultural entry, DCEU’s outing is devoid of Hollywood’s often cumbersome depiction of foster parents as either monstrous or sacred. Talking to *Deadline*’s Dino-Day Ramos, in “*Shazam!* Director David F. Sandberg Talks

Going Horror to Superhero and Bringing Inclusivity to Family Narrative” (2019), Sandberg insists that the film is “not just about explosions and fights,” but also about “family, which is at the heart of it” (n.p.). In this regard, *Shazam!* emulates the style of films such as *The Goonies* (1985) and *The Incredibles* (2004), interweaving the importance of kinship with the larger-than-life frays between Shazam and Dr. Sivana.

Leading up to these larger-than-life frays, Billy is portrayed as grappling with an ensemble of abilities in a series of burlesque sequences. The film goes to humorous lengths to showcase his superhero growth, as revealed in popping dialogues he shares with his crutch-dependent foster brother, Freddy Freeman (Jack Dylan Grazer in a fun, show-stealing performance), who is also a wisecracking, superhero enthusiast, acutely aware of the meta-human era he grew up in. However, no matter the arsenal of superpowers at Billy’s disposal, none can shield him from having his heart broken by his biological mother. In revealing she deserted him when he was a toddler because she felt inept to raise him, *Shazam!* implicitly tackles the challenges of teenage pregnancy and becomes a “vehicle for exploring Deep Issues about blended families,” as David French deems it in “*Shazam!* Review – When a Boy Needs a Family” (2019) (n.p.).

Regarding blended families, the film is to be noted for its valid depiction of the first racially diverse superhero clan to appear on the silver screen. Though French’s doubts that “the cultural importance placed” on superhero films usually “far outweighs their actual content and substance” may be justified for some of the genre’s entries, *Shazam!* does not fall victim to a merely fleeting representation of its characters (n.p.).<sup>1</sup> This process is challenged by the fact that the film is preoccupied with delineating the personal growth of a white male protagonist, but central to Billy’s story are undoubtedly his Latino surrogate parents, Freddy, and his other foster siblings, all who are developed non-stereotypically: Mary Bromfield (Grace Fulton), an academically driven Caucasian girl; Darla Dudley (Faithe Herman), a kind-hearted African-American girl; the tech-savvy Asian boy, Eugene Choi (Ian Chen); and the reclusive Latino boy, Pedro Peña (Jovan Armand). Additionally, with the latter confirmed to be the first LGBTQ+ superhero on the big screen, *Shazam!* broadens the general representative scope of superhero films and takes many cues from its source material, originally penned by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank in 2011 (Samuel, n.p.). As he confessed to Adam Lance Garcia of *Yahoo Entertainment*, Zachary Levi is ecstatic about such direction:

The fact that our movie, in its own true DNA, is about a foster family made up of a very racially diverse group of kids and parents, that also includes a handicapped child, means that we have a very cool privilege to represent a lot of under-represented people. And that’s very groovy. (n.p.)

Indeed, it is very ‘groovy’ that superhero films – as modern myths permeating popular culture – can be vehicles for role-models whom people of the same age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or familial and material status can look up to and feel a sense of community. *Shazam!* succeeds in this process because it promotes the Vasquez foster family’s human elements, which the viewer

immediately recognises and empathises with. Granted, the character of Billy/Shazam can be read as a limiting factor because the film is mostly preoccupied with his dual origin story, but the foster parents' and children's stories are equally important and represented organically: Freddy copes with being ostracised by his peers because of his disability; Darla grapples with her self-confidence; Pedro struggles with his performance at school; and even Rosa questions some of her actions as a foster mother. Pedro's sexual orientation is treated elegantly as well. When the foster kids are endangered by Sivana, Billy uses his magic to teleport them to the first place that comes to his mind, which happens to be a strip club he visited earlier when transformed into Shazam. Pedro's casual remark that "it's not his thing" queers him in what some may take for a blink-and-you-will-miss-it scene. However, unlike *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), which boasted introducing the first canonically non-straight character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but delivered a disposable cameo by director Joe Russo, *Shazam!* does not seek to profiteer off this interest and instead takes steps to advance inclusivity. As Pedro becomes a valuable member of the superhero family by the end, rather than a simple cameo, the film opens up space for further representation via his individual character arc.

Furthermore, when Dr. Sivana openly threatens his foster family, Billy stops abusing his abilities and becomes a conduit of not only wizardly power but also of the camaraderie of his true family. In the film's climactic sequence, he opens his heart, channels his magic through the Wizard's staff, and distributes it among his foster siblings. By transforming this ragtag team of misfits into the mighty Council of Wizards (collectively known as the adult Shazamily), he literally and metaphorically unlocks his greatest power. With all hands on deck, they best Dr. Sivana and the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, leading Billy to realise, as Safran remarks in his interview with *PinkNews'* Tufayel Ahmed, "that family is not about blood, but about bond" (n.p.). This conception is only furthered by the fact that the last of Dr. Sivana's minions to be defeated is Envy – a scene highly symbolic because it harkens back to Sivana's drive to act wickedly. Continually belittled by his older brother and discarded by his father and the same Wizard who turned Billy into his champion, Sivana eventually self-destructs in his blinding quest for power because he is not supported by a heart-warming family like Billy's.

The aforementioned values are enhanced by *Shazam!* being set around Christmastime, which generally boasts togetherness, peace, and understanding, and sees its titular hero(es) roaming the streets of Philadelphia. Though it may be scrutinised as 'too American' for these creative decisions, much like it was for its disjointed pacing during the first act and the fear-inducing render of the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, *Shazam!* embraces its flaws in the same vein that the Vasquez family embraces Billy, with and without his numerous missteps.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, *Shazam!* may not be a perfectly rounded film, but its derailments are overshadowed by the curious intermixture of the superhero and family film conventions, which highlights a refreshingly endearing message: power truly means nothing if you have nobody to share it with, emphasising the importance of a family that respects you for who you are and helps you become who you want to be. Whether biological, foster, Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Latino, heterosexual, homosexual... *Shazam!* accepts and makes room for everyone. And so, too, should the world.

## NOTES

1. Earlier entries which seem to have both kickstarted and furthered this trend include Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* (2010), Josh Trank's *Chronicle* (2012), Don Hall and Chris Williams's *Big Hero 6* (2014), Dean Israelite's *Power Rangers* (2017), and especially Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018).
2. Sandberg's deliberate portrayal of the Enemies of Man imposes a real sense of danger for the Shazamily, allowing the viewer to empathise with each of its members on a much deeper level than usually presented in superhero films.

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## BIONOTE

**Zvonimir Prtenjača** received his BA and MA degrees in History and English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia. He is a co-editor of the collection of works titled *The Student's Pen Shapes Beauty: Creative Writing in the BA Literature Classroom* and a former member of the editorial board of the student's magazine for literary studies, *Kick*. His research interests range from young adult and children's literature, graphic novels, popular culture, and film studies, to all things superhero and Fantastic (with perhaps a slightly unhealthy affinity towards Batman). He currently lives in Vinkovci, where he works as a teacher.