‘Inside Out 2’ Review: PUBERTY! OMG! LOL! IYKYK!

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Anxiety meets Joy in Pixar’s eager, predictably charming sequel to its innovative 2015 hit. Sadness is still around, too, as are Fear and Disgust.

When a dumpling of an old lady toddles into the animated charmer “Inside Out 2,” she is quickly shooed away by some other characters. Wearing rose-tinted glasses, she has twinkling eyes and a helmet of white hair. Her name is Nostalgia, and those who wave her off — Joy and Sadness included — tell her it’s too soon for her to show up. I guess that they’ve never seen a Pixar movie, much less “Inside Out,” a wistful conceptual dazzler about a girl that is also a testament to one of the pleasures of movies: the engagement of our emotions.

If you’ve seen “Inside Out” (2015), your tear ducts will already be primed for the sequel. The original movie centers on the life of Riley, a cute, predictably spunky if otherwise decidedly ordinary 11-year-old. What distinguishes Riley is that her inner workings are represented as an elaborate realm with characters who embody her basic emotions. For much of her life, those emotions have been orchestrated by Joy (voiced by Amy Poehler), a barefoot, manic pixie. Once Riley’s parents move the family to a new city, though, Sadness (Phyllis Smith) steps up, and our girl spirals into depression. This being the wonderful world of Pixar, the emotions eventually find a new harmonious balance, and Riley again becomes a happy child.

When “Inside Out 2” opens, Joy is still running the show with Sadness, Anger (Lewis Black), Fear (Tony Hale) and Disgust (Liza Lapira) inside a bright tower called headquarters. It’s here, in the hub of Riley’s mind — an ingeniously detailed, labyrinthine expanse that’s part carnival, part industrial zone — that they monitor her on an enormous oval screen, as if they were parked behind her eyes. They track, manage and sometimes disrupt her thinking and actions, at times by working a control console, which looks like a sound mixing board and grows more complex as she ages. By the time the first movie ends, a mysterious new button labeled “puberty” has materialized on the console; soon after the sequel opens, that button has turned into a shrieking red alarm.

Puberty unleashes trouble for Riley (Kensington Tallman) in “Inside Out 2,” some of it very poignant, most of it unsurprising. It’s been almost a decade since the first movie was released, but film time is magical and shortly after the story opens, Riley is blowing out the candles on her 13th birthday cake with metal braces on her teeth and a stubborn pimple on her chin. New emotions soon enter headed by Anxiety (Maya Hawke), a carrot-colored sprite with jumpy eyebrows and excitable hair. Not long afterward, Anxiety takes command both of the console and of Riley, with help from Envy (Ayo Edebiri), Embarrassment (Paul Walter Hauser) and my favorite, the studiously weary, French-accented Ennui (Adèle Exarchopoulos).

Directed by Kelsey Mann, this smooth, streamlined sequel largely focuses on Riley's nerve-jangling (and strictly PG) interlude at a girls' hockey camp, an episode that separates her from her parents while bringing her new friends, feelings and choices. (Mann came up with the story with Meg LeFauve, who wrote the screenplay with Dave Holstein.) As in the first movie, the story restlessly shifts between what happens inside Riley's head and what happens as she navigates the world. Her new emotions find her worrying, grousing, blushing and feigning indifference, and while Joy and the rest of the older emotions are humorously waylaid at times, you can always feel the filmmakers leading Riley toward emotional wellness.

As she struggles with her new emotions, the movie shifts gears ever so carefully. Riley may be a teenager and overwhelmed by novel bodily sensations and feelings, but the people who made this movie tiptoe through this developmental stage like doting parents, ones who aren't ready to let their girl grow up. To that end, Riley doesn't get her period, sneak out, develop a crush. She also doesn't stare at her phone, the camp hockey coach having, in a narratively convenient move, requisitioned the girls' phones. Riley was a nice, ordinary kid; she still is, and so is everything and everyone else. It turns out that the group hug that she shared with her parents in the first movie wasn't just sweet; it was also a declaration of Pixar principles.



Credit...Pixar/Disney/Pixar, via Associated Press

Joy (Amy Poehler) and Anxiety (Maya Hawke) are two of the voices in the head of Riley, who is turning 13 and acquiring the feelings that come with it

I imagine that one of the reasons that the filmmakers didn't give Nostalgia (June Squibb) a larger role here is that it would have been too on the nose for Pixar, a studio that's conquered the audience — both actual children and inner ones — with its appealing animation and genius for tapping into sentimental longing. For Pixar, every viewer (if especially grown-ups) is a would-be Anton Ego, the unhappy restaurant critic in "Ratatouille," who, on tasting a delicious

dish, flashes back to childhood when his mother tenderly served him the same food. That memory allows Ego to shed his preconceptions so that he can surrender to pleasure as he did once upon a time, much as Pixar insists that you to do while watching its movies.

Franchises often bank on nostalgia, so it's easy to fall for "Inside Out 2," which works largely because the first one does wonderfully well. The new movie conforms to the original's ethos as well as inventive template, its conceit and visual design, so its pleasures are agreeably familiar. Mann tweaks here and there, poking into a few shadowy new corners that never get too dark; he also delivers a dazzling scene in which Anxiety spins out of control, a meltdown that's conveyed as an image of a rapidly rotating orange whirlpool. It's a mesmerizing, rightly unsettling graphic expression of intense emotional turmoil, and it shakes up both you and the movie. It's a perfect example of Pixar's skill for turning ideas into images, some of which actually manage to slip past the safety of its nice worldview with shocks of the sublime.