

# THE Hollywood REPORTER

## 'A Walk in the Woods': Sundance Review

2:41 PM PST 1/23/2015 by Todd McCarthy



Courtesy of Sundance International Film Festival

### The Bottom Line

*A delightful journey with fine star turns by Redford and Nolte that should prove a good draw for finicky older audiences.*

### Venue

Sundance Film Festival  
(Premieres)

### Cast

Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, Emma Thompson, Mary Steenburgen, Kristen Schaal, Nick Offerman

### Director

Ken Kwapis

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**A welcome showcase for wonderful star turns by Robert Redford, who also produced, and Nick Nolte.**

Rather like a fun, geriatric version of *Wild*, this long-aborning film version of **Bill Bryson's** enormously genial 1998 book *A Walk in the Woods* is a jolly good time, sparking dozens of chuckles and a few strong laughs. Nothing special cinematically, it still provides a welcome showcase for wonderful star turns by **Robert Redford**, who also produced, and **Nick Nolte** as two oldsters who attempt to hike the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. With smart handling, this breezy entertainment should become one of those occasional films that draws a significant older audience out of their homes and into cinemas.

Redford has been trying to launch this project for at least a decade, and there were moments along the way when he, and then **Larry Charles**, were slated to direct. The biggest difference that Bryson's legions of readers will recognize is that in the book, the two men who take the adventure are 44 years old, whereas Redford and Nolte are in their seventies. Their years of experience and, in Nolte's case, precarious physical condition, only add to the enjoyment.

That screenwriters **Rick Kerb** and **Bill Holderman**, as well as director **Ken Kwapis**, have hit upon the right droll tone is evident from the set-up in the opening scenes, in which Redford, playing Bryson himself, gives an awkward TV interview and then says all the wrong things at a friend's funeral. It's amusing that such an accomplished writer is shown as having such a bad way with

words socially, but he does communicate well with his adorable English wife (a splendid **Emma Thompson**), who's against her husband's impulsive decision to undertake the marathon walk (there are justified fears about bears, reptiles and insects and even human killers) but knows well enough not to put up a fight.

Turned down by everyone he can think of as a traveling companion, Bryson is then surprised to hear from a voice from the distant past, the gravelly-voiced Katz (Nolte), who's heard about the expedition and wants to go along. The men had a falling out decades earlier, but Katz is enthusiastic and Bryson would like the company, so what the hell.

There's a simple, old-style TV straightforwardness to Kwapis's presentation of events. The majority of scenes, including some delightful ones as the men shop for equipment and make arrangements, are aimed for, if not outright laughs, then smiles, little hiccups of amusement or at least a sort of nodding recognition of the little truths about inter-personal relations that are registered throughout. Bryson is smart man, no middle-brow, so the story doesn't deliver homilies or life lessons but, rather, provides small but amusing insights into the way people cope, rationalize and carry on. When Nolte's Katz, for instance, contemplates his old pal and observes, "You really pulled it off," he's not only speaking about Bryson but, in context, about Redford. That's all that's said and all that's necessary.

Katz, to put it mildly, is a human wreck. Fat, grizzled, short of breath and unsteady on his feet, he looks like something those mountain bears might claim as one of their own, and he looks exhausted before the men have even hiked a mile on the first day; most people, it's pointed out, quit the trail after the first week. But they persevere through lovely green territory, nothing too challenging in terms of terrain.

Early on they find themselves unwillingly joined by Mary Ellen (a game **Kristen Schaal**), a complete dingbat who speaks nonsense on every subject and never shuts up; this ordeal requires a quick, if rude, escape on the men's part. There are other female encounters along the way that provoke various reactions. A lonely motel and restaurant owner (**Mary Steenburgen**) makes her interest clear to Bryson, who takes a pass. Katz, meanwhile, gets into an awkward and funny spot with an abundantly proportioned woman he meets in a laundromat, which ultimately requires the old coot to escape out a back window.

Anyone expecting this epic journey to result in profound insights into the human condition will be disappointed; at a certain point, whether the men reach the physical end of the trail or just hop off when they feel they've done enough, the hike will end but life will continue. The film is equally unpretentious, not posing as something it isn't but, at the same time, reminding that there are options, including temporary ones like a jaunt in the mountains, that can represent breaks from the routine and put you in a different place mentally as well as physically.

Most of all, then, *A Walk in the Woods* serves as a terrific showcase for two exceptionally durable stars. Although it doesn't make nearly the demands upon him as did *All Is Lost*, this film pushes Redford into certain uncustomary emotional and physical places, while his native intelligence makes his playing a highly acclaimed author entirely plausible.

But Nolte has the juicier character and makes the most of it. Given the shambling, out-of-shape figure he cuts, it's quite a sight just to behold him making his way up mountains, through snow and rivers and trying to extricate himself from a precarious perch. His gravelly voice and engraved face bespeak many misspent days and nights, as does his dialogue; when he gets Bryson to admit that he's never strayed from his wife in 40 years, the old rogue replies, "I've been with way more married women than you have."

As in much else in life, it's not so much the destination as the experience of getting there, and so it is with the almost entirely pleasurable *A Walk in the Woods*.

*Production: Wildwood Entertainment*

*Cast: Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, Emma Thompson, Mary Steenburgen, Kristen Schaal, Nick Offerman*

*Director: Ken Kwapis*

*Screenwriters: Rick Kerb, Bill Holderman, based on the book by Bill Bryson*

*Producers: Robert Redford, Bill Holderman, Chip Diggins*

*Executive producers: Jeremiah Samuels, Jake Eberts, Jay Stern, Russell Levine, Lee Jea Woo*

*Director of photography: John Bailey*

*Production designer: Gae S. Buckley*

*Costume designer: Leigh Leverett*

*Music: Nathan Larson*

*Casting: Mark Fincannon*

*No rating, 104 minutes*