

Grave of the Fireflies: Two children fighting for survival in wartime Japan

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Written and directed by Isao Takahata, based on a novel by Akiyuki Nosaka

Grave of the Fireflies (Hotaru no haka) is a remarkable animation feature about two orphaned children during the US firebombing of Japanese cities in World War II. The movie was screened at this year's Sydney Film Festival—one of the rare occasions that it has been shown in an Australian cinema since its Japan release more than 25 years ago.

Directed by Isao Takahata and produced by Studio Ghibli, the 89-minute movie centres on the relationship between a teenage boy, Seita, and his four-year-old sister, Setsuko. The resourceful boy and the tenderness of his relationship with his sister allow the pair to endure, for a time, the hardship and horrors produced by the US firebombing campaign, one of the lesser-known war crimes of WWII.

Grave of the Fireflies does not provide viewers with a detailed examination of the US bombing campaign—Japanese knowledge of the war horrors was well-known when the movie was made in 1987—and so some details about the brutal US operation are required here.

The firebombing campaign was initiated under US Strategic Air Force (USAF) general Curtis LeMay in 1945, a few months before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the final Japanese surrender. The operation began in early March with hundreds of B29s dropping tonnes of napalm, phosphorus and other incendiary bombs on scores of cities. These were aimed at sparking massive firestorms that the inadequate Japanese emergency services were incapable of fighting, destroying the country's urban infrastructure and maximising civilian casualties. "Killing Japanese didn't bother me very much at that time," USAF commander LeMay later chillingly admitted, but "I

suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal."

LeMay's campaign lasted five months, devastating more than 60 Japanese cities, killing an estimated 500,000 civilians, injuring 400,000 and rendering five million homeless.

In Tokyo over 100,000 residents died and 260,000 buildings were incinerated in six hours. One survivor described the streets as "rivers of fire" with wooden homes, furniture and people "exploding in the heat" and "immense incandescent vortices...swirling, flattening, sucking whole blocks of houses into their maelstrom of fire."

Kobe was bombed a few days later with almost half the city—a manufacturing, business and transport hub—totally destroyed. Eight thousand were killed and 650,000 of the city's one million inhabitants rendered homeless. *Grave of the Fireflies*, which is set in Kobe, is based on the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Akiyuki Nosaka, one of the thousands of Japanese children whose parents were killed in the bombings.

The movie begins on 21 September 1945, just after the Japanese surrender. The emaciated Seita is found dead in Kobe's Sannomiya Station by a railway cleaner. The story then flashes back to the firebombing raid on Kobe, where the young boy is preparing to flee with his sister Setsuko to an air raid shelter. In a brief tender moment—one of many throughout the film—the boy ensures that his young sister is safely secured to his back and then stoops to pick up her doll which is almost forgotten in the rush.

The two children survive the bombing and subsequent inferno but many around them die of horrific burns and the city is devastated. We later learn that their mother—who failed to make it to a bomb

shelter—is badly burned and eventually dies. She is shown tightly wrapped from head to foot in bloody bandages with only her closed eyes and charred lips visible.

With their mother dead and their father serving in the navy—uncontactable, presumed dead—the children are forced to rely on the charity of a distant but harsh aunt. The aunt persuades Seita to sell his mother’s kimonos in order to buy food and when that is consumed she becomes increasingly spiteful towards the children.

Seita tries to shield his sister from the woman, shows her how to catch fireflies, which delights the little girl, takes her to the beach to swim and play, and gives her fruit candy drops to cheer her up and ease her hunger pains. Eventually they find it impossible to continue living with their aunt and make a new home for themselves in a disused tunnel near a river. It is here that the film’s title is borne out.

One morning after the siblings have caught many fireflies and marvelled at their twinkling lights, Seita discovers Setsuko burying the insects that have perished overnight. The little girl has made a connection between the dead fireflies and their mother, and Seita is overcome with emotion. The fireflies, in fact, becomes a complex visual and emotional symbol for the children—of the firebombing itself, which they do not talk about, but also of life, intimacy, of spirit and of the sibling’s close bonds.

When it was originally released *Grave of the Fireflies* represented an important departure from the subject of animated films that usually focused on escapist fantasies or science fiction stories. The genre was rarely, if ever, used to openly explore social themes. Director Isao Takahata, however, had been influenced by post-WWII Italian neo-realist movies and their examination of the lives and struggles of working people or those living on society’s margins.

In contrast to the black-and-white semi-documentary approach of the neo-realists, Takahata’s film has a quiet, nuanced quality and its visual lines are delicate with the children’s faces soft and expressive.

Many of the scenes, particularly those in which Setsuko and Seita survey the bombed out ruins of their city, have a painterly, almost watercolour appearance. These are counterposed against the gentle light of the fireflies and the bird sounds at the children’s riverside temporary tunnel home. Takahata often lingers on the

rural scenes for extended periods, giving the viewer time for reflection.

Grave of the Fireflies is an engrossing and convincing work. The children experience the death of a family member, starvation, homelessness and other catastrophes produced by the war, but throughout these ordeals Seita remains absolutely devoted to his sister and infused with an instinctive belief that they have the right to live a happy and normal life.

Many Western film critics have rightly praised *Grave of the Fireflies* as an important exposure of the horrors of war with several hailing it as a powerful anti-war movie. These critiques, however, have been rejected by Takahata and the novelist Akiyuki Nosaka who insisted that the work has no political content.

Nosaka, whose sister died of starvation and whose adoptive father was killed in the Kobe bombing raids, has said that his novel was written to assuage the deep sense of guilt he felt about her passing. The film, Takahata told one interviewer, “is not at all an anti-war anime and contains absolutely no such message.”

Notwithstanding these denials, *Grave of the Fireflies* speaks for itself and like the best work of the Italian neo-realists sensitively explores how World War II impacted on children, the most vulnerable members of society. The movie is a valuable antidote to the scores of action-packed glorifications of militarism and war dominating cinemas and televisions and should be watched by adults and children alike. The movie is widely available on DVD and Blu-ray in multi-language subtitle or dubbed versions.



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