

The Boy and the Heron: Animated film by veteran Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki

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The Boy and the Heron is the latest film by renowned and award-winning Japanese animation director Hayao Miyazaki (born 1941 in Tokyo). It is reported to be Miyazaki's final film, but the writer-director has already come out of retirement more than once.

The work's original Japanese title is *How Do You Live?*, which is taken from Genzaburō Yoshino's 1937 novel, although Miyazaki's film is not an adaptation of that book.

The Boy and the Heron has received numerous prizes. It won the award for best animated motion picture at the recent Golden Globes and is up for the same honor at the upcoming Academy Awards.

Miyazaki's new film is a coming-of-age tale about a boy named Mahito Maki, aged around 11 or 12, who is displaced from Tokyo during the Second World War. After Mahito loses his mother in a hospital fire during an air raid on Tokyo, Mahito's father Shoichi moves with his son to the Japanese countryside, where he takes charge of a new factory constructing fighter plane components. (Miyazaki's father was the director of an airplane parts manufacturing company.)

Shoichi is remarried to his late wife's sister Natsuko, whom Mahito meets for the first time when he moves into Natsuko's family home, a lavish estate with a large house, servants, a mysterious old tower and bodies of water rich with wildlife, including a talking grey heron who serves as Mahito's guide into a magical realm where the boy goes searching for his mother.

In the magical realm beneath the tower's floor, souls in the form of babylike creatures called "warawaras" fly up to the real world's surface to be born as people. As one character remarks, "I haven't seen them fly in quite some time," a clear reference to the decline in the birthrate and the general attacks on human life in a major war.

Mahito eventually encounters his Granduncle, a godlike figure who is referred to by residents of the magical realm as their "lord." The Granduncle stacks stone blocks of different shapes and then taps them with a stick, and once the blocks resettle and balance in a new configuration, the Granduncle proclaims, "The world will now last another day." The Granduncle wants Mahito to be his successor, but Mahito wants to return to the real world.

The Boy and the Heron is a contradictory work. The film immediately establishes an intensely compelling picture of life during wartime, only to escape into a far less interesting fantasy world for the bulk of its runtime. And in so doing, the film's driving questions shift from *How will Mahito live after the traumatic death of his mother?* and *How will Natsuko fill her late sister's shoes?* to (more or less) *How will the godlike Granduncle find a successor who can balance the all-important stack of stone blocks in order to satisfy the Great Stone sufficiently to secure life on earth and a more harmonious world?*

This is an embarrassing evasion at best. Even as an allegory for artistic creation, this seems entirely inadequate (the Granduncle character is said to have been inspired by Miyazaki's late mentor and collaborator Isao Takahata, director of the great animated film *Grave of the Fireflies*, which, however, did not turn away from life). Even worse is the film's apparent notion that the origin of war can be found in the "malice" of the fateful stones stacked by the Granduncle, who refers to earth as a "chaotic world full of murderers and thieves" which "will soon be in flames."

Unfortunately, Miyazaki rejected Marxism and left-wing ideas long ago. As the filmmaker stated in a 2013 interview, "There was a time when I dabbled in the

socialist movement, but I must say I was quite naive.”

It must also be said that Miyazaki and his team of animators and artists are masters of the craft of animation. Throughout his body of work, Miyazaki’s human and anthropomorphic figures and his movement of those figures, rendered in exacting realism through meticulous line drawings, represent an achievement which is nothing short of astonishing. In *The Boy and the Heron*, scenes of young Mahito desperately running through the flying embers toward the inferno at his mother’s hospital possess a haunting and disturbing resonance, and a kind of tragic beauty.

But even the greatest application of creative labor and animation skills are not enough to fill the hole left by the absence of a great motivating idea, as evidenced by the dramatic collapse of *The Boy and the Heron*.

However, it is significant that *The Boy and the Heron* and another recent Japanese film, *Godzilla Minus One*, were the top two films, respectively, in the US box office in early December when the films were in wide release in North America.

Both of these recent Japanese films are set during the end of the Second World War and its aftermath, albeit through a lens of fantasy. *Godzilla Minus One* revolves around characters devastated by the war—families killed in fire-bombings, war orphans, neighborhoods turned to rubble. These are not pro-war films. Both of these films express sympathy for the victims of US imperialism, and this is resonating with American audiences as they find themselves threatened, along with the rest of the global population, by the danger of a third world war.



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