

Japanese Magic: The Girl-Friendly Films of Hayao Miyazaki

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Miyazaki, Hayao. *My Neighbor Totoro*, 1993; *Kiki's Delivery Service*, 1989, *Spirited Away*, 2002

Hayao Miyazaki is Japan's most famous animator, but until recently he has been overlooked in the United States. He creates wonderfully imaginative tales that often focus on the adventures of young girls. Unlike most Disney films, which cast the heroine in some way as a romantic subject (e.g. Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, Pocahontas in *Pocahontas*, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*), in all of Miyazaki's films, romance is at best a minor aspect of his story. These protagonists face both small and large trials—from what it means to become an adult and the responsibilities that come with it, to one's relationship to nature, to coping with the illness of a family member. The young girls face their trials not without tears or struggles but as a process that they resolve with a true wonder and joy in the world. The beauty of Miyazaki's art dazzles. His fascination with flight—a central image in many of his films for adults and for children—soars through sweeping aerial sequences that are breathtaking, but he never forgets that the story is what counts.

Although most of his films are aimed at adults, these three films are sure to delight any girl. *My Neighbor Totoro* (1993) features two young sisters who move with their father to an old country house to be near the hospital where their mother is recovering from tuberculosis. Rather than filling the gap in their lives with a fairy godmother or evil stepmother, Miyazaki allows the girls to learn to cope with the absence and to reconcile themselves to the difficulties their mother's illness creates. In the attic of their new home, Satsuki and Mei encounter “soot sprites,” the little spirits responsible for dirtying unoccupied houses. They drive the mischievous sprites away with laughter and lots of scrubbing. In the woods, the girls come upon the Totoros, the shy guardian spirits of the forest. Totoros, an invention of Miyazaki, come in all sizes and live in a stately camphor tree. They play ocarinas (small egg-shaped wind instruments) in the evening, help the little plants to grow and occasionally hop aboard the amazing “catbus”—a cat who has taken on the shape of a bus with mice as head and taillights. Their wise father teaches the girls to honor these protective spirits. The Totoros return the favor when little Mei, disappointed at the cancellation of her mother's visit home, runs away. This movie is full of enchanting images and joyful wonder; it lifts the spirit.

Kiki's Delivery Service (1989) spins the tale of a young witch. Kiki, like her mother before her—and all the women of this tradition—must leave home at thirteen, under a full moon, and carve

out a life for herself in a new town. Accompanied by her opinionated cat Jiji-and her father's transistor radio-Kiki flies on her broom to a far city by the ocean's shore. But this modern city has forgotten about real witches. Kiki is at a loss until she's taken in by a kindly, pregnant baker. Although flying is her only accomplished magical skill, Kiki finally figures out a way to make her living: delivering packages around town. The determined girl has her ups and downs (quite literally-Miyazaki's soaring artwork gives viewers a vicarious thrill in the many flying sequences), but Kiki finds ways to fit in the big city life and make a few friends. However, after a series of disappointments, Kiki begins to lose her confidence-and her magic. She can't fly or understand her cat's language anymore. Her friend Ursula arrives and the cheerful painter helps Kiki to realize that her art-her magic-is only an expression of what is in her heart and mind. The young witch starts to regain her confidence, and just in time-her friend Tombo's life is in danger, hanging by a rope from a runaway zeppelin. If she can only fly again, Kiki might be able to save him.

The Oscar-winning *Spirited Away* (2002) follows the adventure of Chihiro, whom we first meet grumbling from the back seat of her parents' car. She's angry because they are moving away from her friends and her school. Taking a wrong turn on the way to their new home, the family discovers what appears to be an abandoned theme park. But all is not as it seems; when her parents magically transform after eating food meant for the park's ghostly inhabitants, Chihiro runs away in panic and confusion. She must fight to return to the spirit world and rescue her parents from the control of the devious Yu-baaba, who runs the town. Unlike many of Miyazaki's girls, Chihiro is not spunky from the start, but timid and seemingly powerless. Her courage and resourcefulness develop as she faces many trials: she learns to work hard at Yu-baaba's bathhouse; she fights to remember her name and her identity in this non-human place; and she must decide who she can trust among the characters, including Haku, who has a few secrets of his own. A large part of the visual delight comes from the fantastic inhabitants of the spirit world whom Sen (as she is renamed) must attend in the bathhouse. Ghosts, gods and other spirits who allow Miyazaki to explore the farthest reaches of movement and form.

Stunning art work such as flowing rivers and rippling winds that look almost real, expressive faces, extraordinary creatures are perhaps the most salient features in Miyazaki's films. Yet, the touching and positive stories will echo for a long time to come. These films will please feminists with their depiction of girls as complex, interesting people, rather than simply offering escapist romantic fantasies. Tales like Kiki's, Chihiro's, and Satsuki and Mei's move without ever slipping into sentimentality. They will make you cheer for their triumphs and suffer with their disappointments. The evocative music supplied by Joe Hisaishi fits each change in mood without

ever overwhelming, and kids love singing along with the catchy tunes from *Totoro*. That kind of inspiration is what Miyazaki's films are all about - don't be surprised to find your girls searching the woods for Totoros or riding broomsticks with your cat. These films will give them dreams to grow on.

For more information on Miyazaki's many films, visit www.nausicaa.net on the Web.