

Writing a Brief Movie Review for a Magazine

A movie review for a magazine (print or online) does not have to be as thorough or serious as an academic analysis of a film. The paragraphs, for example, do not have to be very long and there are no references to research materials. Of course, each paragraph should focus on one topic or idea.

Content:

- (1) Identify a theme in the film that your readers would know or find interesting. Or choose something interesting about the director or main actor in the movie. This is the lead, which should get the reader's interest.
- (2) Briefly profile the director and the cast: What previous films is the director famous for? Who are the actors in the film? What is the film genre? comedy, thriller, science fiction / fantasy, romance, etc.?
- (3) Briefly outline the plot of the film. (But don't give away the ending.)
- (4) Briefly discuss strengths and weaknesses of the film: your involvement in the story; your opinion of the characters (Are they interesting people?) and of the acting; the production values, including special effects; and overall enjoyment of the film. How does it compare to films in the same genre or story type?

Format:

- (1) The review should be no more than 6 paragraphs or 500 words in length.
- (2) The title can be simple: A Review of Walt Disney's *Cinderella*. Or it can focus on a theme in the film.
- (3) Write a tagline below the title, summarizing the review and including your full name.
- (4) Do not use subheadings in the body of the text.
- (5) Include the following at the end of the review: title of film, name of director, production studio, year of release, running time in minutes.
- (6) Please include your contact information in the draft.

A Review of Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*

Roger Ebert recommends a classic Japanese animation for the whole family

My Neighbor Totoro has become one of the most beloved of all family films without ever having been much promoted or advertised. It's a perennial best seller on video. On the Internet Movie Database, it's voted the fifth best family film of all time, right behind "Toy Story 2" and ahead of "Shrek." The new Anime Encyclopedia calls it the best Japanese animated film ever made. Whenever I watch it, I smile, and smile, and smile.

This is one of the lovingly hand-crafted works of Hayao Miyazaki, often called the greatest of the Japanese animators, although his colleague at the Ghibli Studios, Isao Takahata, may be his equal. Miyazaki has not until very recently used computers to help animate his films; they are drawn a frame at a time, the classic way, with the master himself contributing tens of thousands of the frames.

Miyazaki's films are above all visually enchanting, using a watercolor look for the backgrounds and working within the distinctive Japanese anime tradition of characters with big round eyes and mouths that can be as small as a dot or as big as a cavern. They also have an unforced realism in the way they notice details; early in *Totoro*, for example, the children look at a little waterfall near their home, and there on the bottom, unremarked, is a bottle someone threw into the stream.

The movie tells the story of two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei Kusakabe. As the story opens, their father is driving them to their new house, near a vast forest. Their mother, who is sick, has been moved to a hospital in this district. Now think about that. The film is about two girls, not two boys or a boy and a girl, as all American animated films would be. It has a strong and loving father, in contrast to the recent Hollywood fondness for bad or absent fathers. Their mother is ill; does illness exist in American animation?

There is none of the kids-against-adults plotting of American films. The family is seen as a safe, comforting haven. The father is reasonable, insightful and tactful, accepts stories of strange creatures, trusts his girls, listens to explanations with an open mind. It lacks those dreary scenes where a parent misinterprets a well-meaning action and punishes it unfairly.

I'm afraid that in praising the virtues of *My Neighbor Totoro* I have made it sound merely good for you, but it would never have won its worldwide audience just because of its warm heart. It is also rich with human comedy in the way it observes the two remarkably convincing, lifelike little girls (I speak of their personalities, not their appearance). It is awe-inspiring in the scenes involving the totoro, and enchanting in the scenes with the Cat Bus. It is a little sad, a little scary, a little surprising and a little informative, just like life itself. It depends on a situation instead of a plot, and suggests that the wonder of life and the resources of imagination supply all the adventure you need.

My Neighbor Totoro. dir. Hayao Miyazaki. Ghibli Studios, 1993. 90 min.