





# THE BOY AND THE HERON ★ ★ ★

Studio Ghibli released their newest animated film, “The Boy and the Heron,” in December of 2023.

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**H**ayao Miyazaki, Director of the Japanese film studio Studio Ghibli, returns from his ten-year retirement by surpassing \$100 million box office globally for the animated feature film “The Boy and the Heron.” The film tells the story of 12-year-old boy Mahito Maki (Luca Padovan) who moves to the countryside with his father, Soichi Maki (Christian Bale), and his new stepmother, Natsuko (Gemma Chan), after losing his mother in the war. Here, Mahito meets a mischievous gray heron (Robert Pattinson) who leads him to a mysterious tower and eventually takes him on an adventure between worlds to save his mother.

In typical Studio Ghibli fashion, the traditional hand-drawn animation was charming and captivating. The animation is able to bring out specific elements in moments that drive the small details of this fantasy world, curating appeal in even the smallest interactions. The beautiful landscapes, funny creatures, little figurines, and shifting eyes are staples in the classic Studio Ghibli style.

But while these aspects set an interesting base for the story, they did not build the story as well as past Studio Ghibli films have. With the background of Mahito being very limited, his struggle was not fully established to the viewer and the story seemed to jump straight into the plot without developing character detail. His emotions are expressed very vaguely, which completely blows over the whole point of dealing with the grief of losing his mother. It is important in films to express emotion vividly, especially in the main character. Not only does it set up a basis for the plot, but it also helps the viewer understand and connect to the movie on a deeper level. Without the initial character building, Mahito's motives throughout the rest of the story are unclear, as he is simultaneously attempting to save his dead mother and stepmother from a different dimension.

Studio Ghibli has a history of creating wonderful fantasy worlds that may have an air of mystery but were always well-developed. Throughout the movie, many details are left unanswered as it continues to move from

plotline to plotline. It was a lot to take in all at once with minimal explanation, and I have seen Studio Ghibli do much better in past movies.

As the story begins to unfold, information about the inner-workings of the dimensions is slowly developed, but is never fully explained. It begins with tunnels beneath the tower leading to portals between dimensions, and ends with building blocks made of gravestones, with little to no exposition in between. The story begins to jump from place to place to place without fully elucidating each event happening. Stories that deal with multiple dimensions and multiple timelines can be hard to execute. To be able to fully grasp these concepts requires competent clarification for the viewer. The movie had too many elements and plotlines with too little time spent on each, when it should have put more extensive detail into fewer concepts. Overall, it seemed like there were too many moving pieces in the puzzle to build a clear picture.

**T**he constant jumping from place to place not only left holes in plot, but also character development. The sporadic plot along with the fact that there were seven different relevant characters left little room to develop any dynamics. While trying to follow along Mahito's journey through grief, the viewer has to account for six other characters with no clear focus on specific characteristics. In the “happy ending,” the audience sees all of these characters and relationship dynamics magically fixed with no real buildup. Not even the main character has a defined personality or any real substance beyond his grief. The message of continuing to live through a loved one's death is simply passed off when Mahito swiftly accepts the departure from his dead mother across dimensions, which is all the closure the audience receives from his long journey.

The attempt to simultaneously develop seven different characters, explain the inner workings of new dimensions, follow an adventure between multiple new worlds, and teach a lesson about grief all at once was simply overwhelming and cluttered. While

Studio Ghibli will always be the master of beautiful animation and the creation of fun little creatures, the storyline of The Boy and the Heron does not live up to their usual standards. It relies too much on the audience to fully take in and understand each working piece. While the movie was a little disappointing, it was still very much worth the watch, and may just take a second watch to truly enjoy it. •