

Mary and the Witch's Flower is everything fans want from Studio Ghibli

Welcome to Cheat Sheet, our brief breakdown-style reviews of festival films, VR previews, and other special event releases. This review was originally published in September, during Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas. It is being republished to coincide with the film's wide theatrical release on January 18th, 2018.

In 2014, a ripple of panic went through animation fandom as the media reported that Studio Ghibli, the beloved Japanese production company behind movies like *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*, was shutting down. With the latest retirement of co-founder Hayao Miyazaki (who has retired, then returned to feature animation, multiple times now), the rumor was that the studio would close. The reality has been more complicated. Ghibli still exists, but it hasn't made a new film since 2014's *When Marnie Was There*. Its roles on other recent projects have varied: advice and support on Michaël Dudok de Wit's feature *The Red Turtle*, co-production but not animation on the TV series *Ronia, The Robber's Daughter*. Recently, Miyazaki confirmed he has come out of retirement again for yet another feature, but that one isn't due out until 2019.

So for longtime Ghibli fans, the release of *Mary and the Witch's Flower* comes as both an immense relief and a significant surprise. Its production company, Studio Ponoc, was founded by Ghibli veteran Yoshiaki Nishimura (producer of the company's *When Marnie Was There* and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*), and the film features a variety of Ghibli vets. It's no wonder it looks and feels so much like a Ghibli film, from the character designs to the story dynamic to the

source material. But given Ghibli's uniqueness in the world, it's still surprising to see another studio so perfectly reproducing all the things that make Ghibli movies magical.

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What's the genre?

Children's fantasy adventure. The film is based on *The Little Broomstick*, a 1971 children's fantasy by author Mary Stewart, best known for her Arthurian trilogy beginning with *The Crystal Cave*. That's in keeping with Ghibli's habit of adapting fantasy novels, solely by women authors – Eiko Kadono's *Kiki's Delivery Service* in 1989, Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* in 2004, Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* in 2006 (into *Tales From Earthsea*), Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* in 2010 (into *The Secret World of Arrietty*), Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie Was There* in 2014. The studio has adapted a short story (*Grave of the Fireflies*), a comic strip (*My Neighbors the Yamadas*), and several manga by men (and some manga by women), but for novels, it's strictly stuck to female fantasy authors. In its first outing, Studio Ponoc went to the same vast well.

What's it about?

Mary Smith is living with her great-aunt Charlotte while her parents are immersed in some distant work project. It's the last week of summer, just before school starts, and Mary is bored because virtually all the local kids in the quaint British town of Redmanor are away on vacation. So when she sees a black cat turn to a gray one, she readily follows it into the woods, where she finds a strange glowing blue flower. This, it turns out, is Fly-by-night, or the Witch's Flower. It blooms only once every seven years, it's exceedingly rare, and it's coveted by witches. None of this means much to Mary, until the flower manifests an incredible power through her,

leading her on a wild adventure.

Like some of the more expansive Ghibli features (*Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, say, or *Howl's Moving Castle*), *Mary and the Witch's Flower* starts in a small domestic place and expands out to a much larger and more intimidating one. It's usually easy to stay about one beat ahead of the story – when Mary discovers a broomstick carved with magical runes, it's clear she's going to be riding it at some point – but it's impossible to predict the story much further out than that, so the less viewers know about it going in, the better.



Studio Ponoc

What's it *really* about?

Knowing yourself, standing up for yourself, having confidence in yourself, not hating or judging yourself because of superficial things like hair color. And if you read between the lines enough, there's certainly a message there about not forcing your choices on other people.

Is it good?

For longtime Ghibli fans who were afraid they were done with new adventures, especially in the Miyazaki mold, it's tremendous. And for people who aren't familiar with Ghibli, but are looking for a beautifully animated, fast-moving adventure fantasy, it's also tremendous. Mary is an approachable, entertaining heroine who starts off the film with some minor self-doubts: she hates her bushy red hair, and she has the usual worries of a kid facing a new school. Later in the film, she veers into some minorly cocky, smug territory when her temporary magical powers earn her some acclaim. But mostly, she's what kids' adventures most often call for: a

determined, brave hero who dives into every challenge that awaits her.

And what a world she's diving into. Visually, *Mary and the Witch's Flower* is indistinguishable from a Ghibli film. Director Hiromasa Yonebayashi also directed Ghibli's *When Marnie Was There* and *The Secret World of Arrietty*, and he worked as an animator on Ghibli projects from *Spirited Away* to *Howl's Moving Castle* to *Ponyo*. He gives *Mary and the Witch's Flower* the same lush, hyper-detailed pastel look. (Just as in Ghibli films, it's notable here how easily viewers can distinguish the air bubbles in a slice of bread, the fat marbling in a slice of meat, even the tiny fibrous ribs in Brussels sprout leaves. The environments are immaculate and luminous, but the food in particular looks like a series of still-life paintings ready for a museum.) His co-writer, Riko Sakaguchi, is also a Ghibli vet (on *Tale of the Princess Kaguya*), and he gives the story a familiar arc of self-discovery, as Mary moves from self-doubt to world-doubt to understanding and accepting the responsibilities her actions have caused.

The one major flaw in *Mary and the Witch's Flower* might be that its particulars are *too* familiar for longtime Ghibli fans. The recognizable character designs are reassuring, but they can also feel recycled, as when one of the villains has roughly the same face as Kamaji, the many-armed boiler operator in *Spirited Away*. For that matter, Mary's climb up a scary cliffside staircase and her quiet late-film visit to a house surrounded by water both closely evoke *Spirited Away*. So does the blobby, rapacious, all-consuming monster that shows up in the third act, much like No Face in *Spirited Away*. There are all sorts of familiar Ghibli images in *Mary*, from a dancing, talking flame that recalls Calcifer in *Howl's Moving Castle* to Mary's broom-riding adventures and black cat familiar, so reminiscent of *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Generous viewers will call it all homage, with Studio Ponoc's creators

acknowledging where they came from, and filling their story with in-jokes. Less generous viewers could understandably consider it theft, or just a sign of limited creativity.



Studio Ponoc

But one thing that distinguishes *Mary and the Witch's Flower* from most Ghibli movies is that it does have recognizable villains. Their motives are perhaps a little gentler than those of a standard Western animation antagonist. *Mary's* antagonists aren't out to destroy or rule the world, and they think their cause is just. But they aren't just mildly misunderstood, and they aren't quickly defanged into friendly figures, like so many Ghibli bad guys. They're strange and cruel and dangerous, and that gives *Mary and the Witch's Flower* a touch of tough edge.

But that edge doesn't take the film away from Ghibli's long-standing covenant of joy, where at heart, the story is about excitement, wonder, and exploring the world. For that matter, Studio Ponoc has seized on other elements that have always obsessed Miyazaki, particularly the thrill of flight, and the

unpredictable, sensual power of magical transformation. *Mary and the Witch's Flower* doesn't just borrow elements from Ghibli, it feels like a complete continuation of the studio's work. It's a welcome relief for every animation fan who thought that particular era of Japanese animation had, after 30 years, quietly come to a close.

What should it be rated?

Like Studio Ghibli's movies, this is an entirely kid-friendly film. The littlest audience members may find some scares in the movie's monsters, but if they were okay with *Ponyo* or *Howl's Moving Castle*, they should be okay here. Call it a G.

How can I actually watch it?

New York-based animation distributor GKIDS picked up the North American distribution rights. The film had a limited theatrical release in late 2017 in order to qualify for the Academy Awards. It will be released in American theaters on January 18th.

<https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/25/16358234/mary-and-the-witch-s-flower-movie-review-anime-studio-ghibli-ponoc>