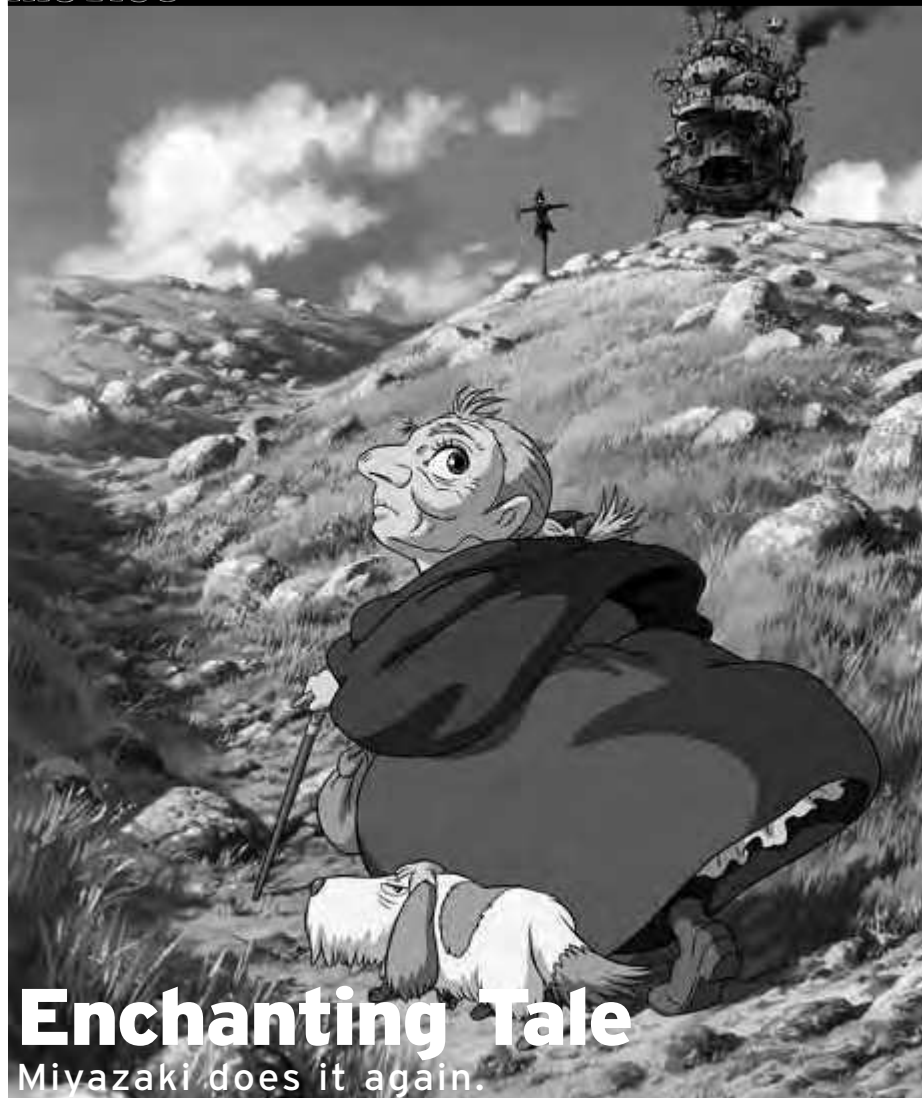




Enchanting Tale

Miyazaki does it again.

HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE: Written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Based on the book by Diana Wynne Jones. U.S. Production: Directed by Rick Dempsey and Pete Docter. English language adaptation by Cindy David Hewitt and Donald H. Hewitt. Produced by Rick Dempsey, Ned Lott. Executive producer, John Lasseter. Starring Christian Bale, Emily Mortimer, Jean Simmons, Billy Crystal, Lauren Bacall and Blythe Danner. Studio Ghibli. Walt Disney Studios. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2005. PG, 129 minutes.

If there is one frustrating thing about wholeheartedly recommending *Howl's Moving Castle*, the latest magical confection from Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, it's that English seems insufficient to convey the beauty of the film. Part adventure, part social commentary and mostly fairy tale, *Howl* (based on the book by Diana Wynne Jones) takes elements from Miyazaki's work thus far and combines them into a soaring delight.

The heroine of *Howl's Moving Castle*, Sophie (Emily Mortimer), is a steadfast, generous girl, a hatmaker in a quaintly European sort of village, when she first encounters the dashing, charismatic Howl (Christian Bale). Sophie's quiet life is thrown into upheaval, but not because of Howl (who's rumored to eat the hearts of beautiful young women). It seems Howl's attentiveness to Sophie caught the eye of the corpulent Witch of the Waste (Lauren Bacall), whose jealousy leads her to put a spell on poor Sophie: She turns into a 90-year-old woman (voiced by Jean Simmons), unable to tell anyone how she got that way.

Though Sophie doesn't really know it yet, she is, like all Miyazaki heroines, plucky and adaptable. She only seems to mope about her fate for a day before heading off into the Waste, where the witches and wizards are. An encounter with a peculiar scarecrow leads her to Howl's castle, where she sets herself up as the cleaning lady (an employee Howl clearly needs) after striking a deal with Calcifer, the fire demon who powers the castle.

And what a castle it is: Creaking, lumbering, a conglomeration of sheds, domes and pipes, with a strong suggestion of a face, this castle is a magical masterpiece on four chicken legs. Its

inhabitants tend to be as changeable and peculiar as its facade: Howl may be a powerful magician, but he's also a sulky, petulant boy, and Calcifer is a strange juxtaposition of immense power and childlike appearance. Far from the willful blue sprite of the book, this fire demon is bright orange and, well, very much like a regular old fire, just with huge, round eyes and the voice of a pleasantly restrained Billy Crystal.

Sophie's part in this strange family (which also includes Howl's chipper young apprentice, Markl) grows with her confidence: Stripped of her youthful concerns and fears, Sophie finds unexpected strength in her old-woman guise. She speaks her mind, does what she feels is right and welcomes the adventures that come her way as a result — including the adventure that is falling in love with a vain and powerful wizard.

Secondary to Sophie's story and her somewhat sidelined quest to turn back into her young self is a slightly murky plot concerning the war between Sophie's land and a bordering kingdom. While he has, at times, laid on his message a bit strong (as in the environmentally weighty *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*), here Miyazaki resists the impulse to over-emphasize the folly of war. He shows rather than tells: Speeches are replaced with stunning landscapes, some barely touched by civilization (though Howl admits to using magic to help the flowers grow) and others utterly devastated by battles.

As Sophie comes into her own and Howl comes to terms with himself, his power and a deal he made long ago, Miyazaki's light touch and the gifted work of the voice actors bring the story's many threads together into an exciting climax, and one that's made more magical for the admirable way the translators refrain from spelling everything out for the audience (a trait that hurt the dubbed version of *Spirited Away*, which nonetheless won an Oscar for Best Animated Film). Uplifting and enchanting, *Howl's Moving Castle* becomes, by the end, a strikingly heartfelt film about being true to yourself — and having an open heart. **EW**

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