

My Neighbor Totoro

Tonari no Totoro, 1988, Japan

Film Overview



My Neighbor Totoro is that rare delight, a family film that appeals to children and adults alike. While their mother is in the hospital, 10-year-old Satsuki and 4-year-old Mei move into an old-fashioned house in the country with their professor father. At the foot of an enormous camphor tree, Mei discovers the nest of King Totoro, a giant forest spirit who resembles an enormous rabbit. Mei and Satsuki learn that Totoro makes the trees grow, and when he flies over the countryside or roars in his thunderous voice, the winds blow. Totoro becomes the protector of the two sisters, watching over them when they wait for their father, and carrying them over the forests on an enchanted journey. When the children worry about their mother, Totoro sends them to visit her via a Catbus, a magical, multi-legged creature with a grin the Cheshire Cat might envy. Unlike many cartoon children, Satsuki and Mei are neither smart-alecky nor cloyingly saccharine. They are credible kids: bright, energetic, silly, helpful, and occasionally impatient. Filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki makes the viewer believe the two sisters love each other in a way no American feature has ever achieved. --Charles Solomon, Amazon.com

Hayao Miyazaki is a prominent Japanese filmmaker of many popular animated feature films. He is also a co-founder of Studio Ghibli, an animation studio and production company. In 2006, Time Magazine voted Miyazaki one of the most influential Asians of the past 60 years. In 2005, he was named one of the Time 100 Most Influential People.

My Neighbor Totoro helped bring Japanese animation into the global spotlight, and it set writer-director Hayao Miyazaki on the road to success. The film's central character, Totoro, is as famous among Japanese children as Winnie-the-Pooh is among British ones. (Adapted from Wikipedia)



Cultural Notes

- **Bathing in Japan** Those wishing to show this film in class should note that it contains a scene of a father bathing with his two daughters. Japanese families often share bathing facilities, with children up through late elementary school sharing their bath time with each other or parents, at home or in public bathhouses. Bathing in Japan is very different from the U.S. One washes thoroughly outside of the bathtub, and enters the tub completely clean to soak in very hot water, relaxing, and often enjoying conversation with others. (B. Jordan)
- **Rural Life in Japan** Satsuki and Mei's life in *My Neighbor Totoro* is a fairly accurate, if nostalgic portrayal of rural life in Japan. The house into which the Kusakabe family moves is a typical, rural, Japanese home, more spacious than typical city dwellings. The sliding doors that the father opens when they first move into the house, opening the main rooms to the outdoors, are common architectural features meant to be opened during the day, weather permitting, and closed at night.

Another feature of Japanese home life is seen when the family has gone to bed: often, the large living room of such homes is converted into a bedroom at night, where the whole family sleeps together on stackable mats called futon. This sleeping arrangement is space-efficient and accommodates for smaller housing in a country where living space is severely limited; large furniture is rarely seen in traditional homes, with floor cushions and a low table providing versatility.

The community to which Satsuki and her family have moved is a typical agricultural region, with rice paddies visible throughout the film. Rice cultivation is one of the most important industries in Japan, as rice is a staple of the Japanese diet. (Adapted from the Simple English Wikipedia)