

# THE SECRET OF NIMH

Directed by Don Bluth  
Produced by Don Bluth, Gary Goldman, and John Pomeroy  
Distributed by United Artists  
Released in 1982

This forlorn classic, the first feature offering of Disney renegade Don Bluth, combines exquisite cell animation and a traditionalist story in a manner never to be seen again. One thing this movie shares with the bulk of animated entertainment that followed it is the notion that personal salvation stems from belief in one's self. Thus, Mrs. Brisby can save her children by developing courage sufficient enough to call on the amulet's power when her children are imperiled by the enveloping mud. (More accurately, the amulet seems to make itself available to Mrs. Brisby, propelling itself out of the mud and into her hands.) Closely associated with this theme of salvation through a blind faith in self-help are the now-familiar trappings of New Age mysticism—a crystal, a conjurer, and an illusive power one can tap into. (This power, and its use, closely tracks The Force of *Star Wars*, to the detriment of *NIMH*.)

But the defining qualities of the story are anything but modern. There is a chasm between good and evil in the story (with one intriguing exception to be noted later). The film affirms a woman's primary identity as a nurturer (while demonstrating that a woman can assume the male protector role when she has to [and with her return to passivity the story rejects any kind of Feminist character arc]); the story denounces socialism, eschews victimization, affirms the concept of inherent transcendent wrong (sin); all the while more predictably denouncing greed, power-lust, duplicity, and self-serving violence (basically anything Jenner does). So let's pursue the real secret of *NIMH*.

We begin with a haunting prologue which sketches the themes of loneliness, death, and the burden of knowledge which infuse the entire film. The profoundly beautiful image of a sputtering flame piercing the darkness (a nice symbol for the story), a simple concept elevated here to visual poetry, leads us into a brief credit sequence that carries forward Jerry Goldsmith's sweeping and sentimental music of mystery and triumph. Remarkably, this most eclectic and creative of film composers also scored *First Blood*, *Poltergeist*, and *The Challenge* that same year.

The story proper then begins, introducing us to our heroine, the indomitable Mrs. Brisby. She possesses the most beautiful feminine voice and is a bit overawed and painfully deferential in the presence of 'superiors,' but this just makes her more believable and endearing. As the story progresses, we see that in her relations with male characters traditional male-female roles are affirmed. Justin is always courteous to Mrs. Brisby, Shrew enjoins our heroine from getting emotional when Mrs. Brisby fruitlessly laments Jonathan's passing, Mrs. Brisby uses her wiles to charm Jeremy into submission, and Mrs. Brisby's primary concern is always her children. Also, some things are too tough for women to handle—she never was privileged to learn the secret of *NIMH*. (The film ignores the delicate matter of how Jonathan would be justified choosing any mate when he knew he would never age, while she would grow infirm.) But rather than denouncing Jonathan for hiding his dark secret from her, the film asks us to applaud his reserve and willingness to handle difficult things on his own, as a man. Perhaps he

knew he didn't have long to live, given his precarious, high-stakes existence. The traditional construct of the sacrificial male is exemplified in Jonathan's death, falling to the clutches of Dragon, the cat. And as a bonus, we have Jeremy, the crow. He isn't like the contemporary filmic male, looking for sexual conquest; he wants to get *married!*

Given all that the rats have been through you might think they would nurse some resentments. Not so. There is no victim mentality permeating this story. These super-rats have no grievances. On the contrary, Nicodemus voices his shame of what they were before the awful experiments foisted upon them by NIMH. They were thieves exploiting the labors of mankind. The rats recognize that, even with the suffering of the animals of NIMH (many of which did not steal from man), they were benefited. How? Notwithstanding the pain, now they know the truth. Getting by on their great intelligence, they will face up to their elevated consciences. They will no longer steal electricity from the farmer.

Along the same lines, laziness and not working are slammed by Auntie Shrew (when she mistakes Jeremy for a thief rather than a messenger).

While the film endorses conservative notions of female preoccupation with home and hearth, it doesn't shy from the flip side, but reveals that men are not getting a much better deal. The sacrifices of Jonathan have already been touched upon. But consider his son, Martin. He's struggling to become a man before his time has come. His dad is dead, his brother is deathly ill. He knows he must act, but there's so little he can accomplish. So he overcompensates. He claims to be unafraid of Dragon (his father's killer, it turns out), he tells off Auntie Shrew, and then apologizes to his mom when he discovers that his blind assertiveness is distracting her from her primary mission of saving Timothy. When he sees his mom providing ministrations to her ailing child, Martin's guilt and helplessness is expressed not so much through the animation as it is by our minds (the excellent characterization allows us to project on to his face our sympathies). In the end he seems to have found his true place—not annoying or distracting, just doing what he can—when he directs his sisters on how to stay clear of the rising mud.

This is subtle, but oft forgotten, so a little more amplification than the film gives this notion is necessary. Women functioning in a traditional role as wife and mother do not have much freedom and live pretty humdrum lives—lots of screaming kids, dishes to clean, challenges of endurance rather than intellect. The man seems to have all the advantages. But he also has the brunt of the responsibility. In this setup he must bring money in to feed the family. He must protect his family from those who would cause them harm. He has to worry, plan, and (this is the hardest part) stay strong. If he gets weak, the courage of all the others could fail. So he has a little more freedom, but with that freedom comes great responsibility.

There are some nice surprises in the film:

- Auntie Shrew isn't bad. She's actually a very strong woman who puts the needs of others first (when it counts) and, at a critical juncture, saves the family by disabling the farmer's tractor.
- Mrs. Brisby gets caught by the farmer's son, not Dragon.
- Jacob never comes through with help after he takes Mrs. Brisby to the Owl. Thus, he feels emasculated and totally worthless, making his immediate discovery of new love all

that more delightful. It was his goofiness that attracted his mate, not the heroics he was relying on.

- Mrs. Brisby and Justin don't hook up at the end.
- After the bravura fight between Jenner and Justin that is resolved with a flying dagger piercing Jenner's back, all the rats stand slack-jawed at what happened, marveling at such balletic violence, in awe of martial glory. Underwhelmed, Mrs. Brisby, perhaps tired of seeing men kill each other to achieve power and rather disenchanted with the capacity of violence to accomplish anything, trudges back to the cement block that now seems to imprison rather than protect her children.
- Everybody in the cement block starting with Timothy (who was probably already dead when his siblings were fighting to beat the rising tide of mud), proceeding to the unconscious Auntie Shrew and the kids, all died in that cement block. The amulet didn't just pull the block out of the mud, but resurrected them!

There are several problems with the film, but the treatment of humans stands out. Their faces are sometimes avoided (we see them waist down); sometimes their faces are obscured (as in the chilling shot of the farmer on his Tractor of Death, rendered as but of faceless black specter); and finally, in the flashback and when the farmer is on the phone, humans are rendered quite plainly, which takes away some of the mystery and makes the suspension of disbelief a little more difficult. After all, the rodents are all anthromorphosized. It's a little harder to accept them as human-esque if the humans look and act as the rodents. Since the animals are made to look like humans, how are the humans supposed to be drawn? By default, they look like the animals!

Along the same lines, it is quite obvious this is not a tale applicable to little woodland creatures. This is about the human experience, and we benefit in taking a look at ourselves from a different point of view. Of all the great moments in this remarkable movie, there is one quote that stands out. It is one of the greatest lines in any movie, not for its poetry or humor, but for its efficiency and truth.

Rats are despised creatures. They spread disease, eat our food, instill terror, repulse us, vex us, ruin us. By the time Nicodemus espouses his creed, we've long stopped thinking of these characters as rats. So there's a great *frisson*, a great irony and incisiveness to his words, regarding the farmer and his electricity: "We can no longer live as rats. We know too much."

The rats of NIMH found their consciences elevated by the experiments they were subjected to. As with their intelligence, their newfound knowledge of good and evil was both a blessing and burden. They knew the right way to live, but now they have to dispense with the selfishness that had long characterized them. In the movie, stealing becomes shorthand for sin. The rats stole from man before NIMH intervened. After they achieved an extraordinary power over their environment—over magic, science, and the spiritual realm—they continued to steal. But now it was electricity, not food. At first they rationalized their actions. They were smarter than the farmer. They had a superior need for the electricity. But soon they realized they were just doing the same thing as before; their ingenuity could not excuse the infraction. Some, like Jenner, refused to own up to their responsibilities and wanted the easy times to continue. Electricity gave the rats every convenience. But others, like Justin, knew that the rats needed to

humble themselves, needed to live without electricity and survive by their own sweat in Thorn Valley (appropriately named, indeed).

The real secret of NIMH is sin.

The rats were doing what we do. We justify our wrongs. Perhaps we think we deserve a break for past hardships (as the rats suffered at NIMH) or because we're so much smarter (as the rats were compared to every other creature). The human race is delusional. We must own up to the truth. We are not rats, and we can no longer live like them. We know too much. This is our blessing and our burden.

To ignore the truth is not to change it. We tempt God at our peril.

This movie subtly challenges us to be so much more than we are. About this powerful message is deftly interwoven a story of adventure, childish hijinks, mysticism, and sacrificial love that will continue to entertain and enlighten, if only given a chance.