

From Book to Movie: A Review of *Secret of Nimh*

Rated G

Runtime: 82 min

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Secret of Nimh is a 1982 animated film directed by Don Bluth. It was written for the screen by Bluth (as well as his long-time collaborators Gary Goldman, John Pomeroy, and Will Finn), and adapted from the classic childrens' book by Robert C. O'Brien titled *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*. It tells the story of a widowed mouse (in the film version named Mrs. Brisby to avoid copyright infringement issues with the Frisbee company) whose family is in grave danger; their underground home is threatened by the plow of the farmer whose land they are occupying, and this means "moving day" is on the horizon. But Mrs. Brisby's son Timmy (Ian Fried) has fallen ill with pneumonia, and the chill in the air during a move could kill him. Encouraged by her headstrong neighbor Auntie Shrew (Hermione Bradley), Brisby visits the Great Owl (John Caradine), who tells her to seek help from the rats who live nearby.

Once she ventures into the dark and mysterious woods at the edge of the farm, Mrs. Brisby encounters Mr. Ages (Arthur Malet) and Justin (Peter Strauss), a pair of rats who, along with a whole race of others, have gained super intelligence as the result of cruel experiments by the National Institute of Mental Health, or "Nimh," as they are referred to in the film. They are led by the old wizard rat Nicodemus (Derek Jacobi) and though they have spirited debates amongst themselves, they are civilized and have learned to cultivate magic and technology in their neck of the woods. Mr. Ages and Justin wish to leave the farm and stop stealing food and electricity from the humans, but there are those who oppose this plan, like the scheming Jenner (Paul Shenar). Brisby must seek help from the rats to move her home - "They have their ways," booms the Great Owl - while discovering the secret of her husband's death and avoiding Jenner, who becomes the film's main villain.

This was the first feature directed by Don Bluth, who would go on to make *An American Tail*, *The Land Before Time*, and *All Dogs Go to Heaven* as well as many others. He was an animator at Disney, working on films such as *The Rescuers* and *The Fox and the Hound*, and he left the company, frustrated that he and his fellow

animators were being forced to cut corners and produce cheaper results. He then formed his own company, Don Bluth Productions. His goal was to create animation that succeeded at the level of some of the great Disney classics of the 1930s through the 1950s. In the years since, it has received a cult following and Bluth's early work is often considered a darker, stranger alternative to what Disney was producing during the 80s and 90s.

The voice cast, led by Elizabeth Hartman (*The Beguiled*), does a mostly excellent job. Their voices are warm, emotional and dramatic, perfectly matching the lush imagery on screen. The animation is, of course, spectacular; it really does resemble Disney during its golden age. Viewers will be able to tell this was made in the 1980s; it's a bit rough and beautifully imperfect, and this type of hand drawn animation is rarely seen any more in U.S. theaters. Dom Delouise (*Cannonball Run*), who would star in many other Bluth productions, gives a fun performance as a clumsy crow named Jerome, though his antics wear out their welcome as the stakes rise in the story. The film could have used a couple less scenes of him getting tangled in nets and shouting, sneezing and just general buffoonery, and more scenes establishing the world of the intelligent rats. His sections slow the movie down unnecessarily, making the 82-minute film feel slightly longer than it is. The murderous villain Jenner is a very late addition to the story, and he's fairly one-note. This guy is pretty frightening to be sure, with thick dark eyebrows floating nearly off his head, and a black cape sweeping over his every prowling step. However, he is underwritten and feels more like a last-minute hasty plot point than a developed character in his own right.

Bluth's film also introduces magic into the story, which was not a part of the original source material by O'Brien. The rats have advanced so far into their intelligence that their leader, the great Nicodemus, can influence Brisby to visit the Owl from miles away. Like the owl he sees with glowing yellow eyes, and he can make his staff float to him with his mind. This magical element makes the film quite fantastical and visually dazzling during several exciting moments, but it also introduces a late-film solution to a deadly problem that comes slightly out of nowhere and feels like a bit of a cheat. With some tweaking the fantasy elements of the film could have been more smoothly integrated into the tale.

On the positive side, the environments, from Brisby's home underground to the farm, to the woods and the muddy swamp, are incredibly atmospheric, filled with mist and deep shadows. The score by Jerry Goldsmith is a delight as well, calling to mind the work of John Williams (*Harry Potter*). This film is a bit frightening at times; there are a few scary encounters with the farm cat Dragon as well as some disturbing

imagery of rats being injected with needles. There's also a sword battle late in the film which yields a bit of blood when some rats are wounded. This is a G-rated feature, but it was originally released in 1982; had it come out today, it would almost certainly be rated PG. One of my most potent movie-watching memories as a child is being frightened yet fascinated by this flawed but enchanting film. It is an exciting and mysterious fairy tale that many older children and their parents will enjoy.

7.5/10 stars.

This film is available on DVD in the Marshall District Library collection and on DVD through MeLCat. It is also available through Hoopla.