

## REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

# For the Most Complex Heroines in Animation, Look to Japan

The girls and women of anime tend to experience the conflicting emotions of real life. That's because the auteurs try to create "an everyday, real person."

By Charles Solomon

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At a time of widespread debate over the depiction of women in film, the top Japanese animators have long been creating heroines who are more layered and complex than many of their American counterparts. They have faults and weaknesses and tempers as well as strengths and talents. They're not properties or franchises; they're characters the filmmakers believe in.

Like many teenagers, Suzu in Mamoru Hosoda's "Belle" (released here this year and available on major digital platforms) has a life online that overshadows her daily existence: her alter ego, the title character, is the reigning pop diva of the cyberworld of U. In real life, Suzu is an introverted high school student in a flyspeck town — even her best friend calls her "a country bumpkin." But she still wins sophisticated listeners, as her music reflects the love and pain she has experienced, especially since the death of her mother, who drowned saving a child from a flooded river.

Suzu misses her, but she's also angry at her for sacrificing herself for "a kid whose name she didn't even know." Suzu went so far as to abandon her impressive musical gifts because her mother encouraged them. American heroines may express a longing for a vanished parent, but not the deep, complicated emotions of this reworking of "Beauty and the Beast." The protagonist of the Disney version misses her father when she agrees to become Beast's prisoner, but she never mentions her mother. Nor does Jasmine in "Aladdin."

In a video call, Hosoda said he believed a major shift occurred in animation when the Disney artists made Belle a more independent, intelligent and contemporary young woman than her predecessors. She wanted a more exciting life than her "poor, provincial town" could offer — a desire Snow White or Cinderella never expressed. "When you think of animation and female leads, you always go to the fairy tale tropes," Hosoda said through a translator. "But they really broke that template: It felt very new. Similarly, what we tried to do in 'Belle' is not build a character, but build a person: someone who reflects the society in which we live."



With Suzu in "Belle," the director Mamoru Hosoda tried to create "someone who reflects the society in which we live." Studio Chizu

The beast that Suzu encounters in U is not an enchanted prince, but Kei, an abused adolescent who struggles to protect his younger brother from their brutal father. To save the boys, Suzu discards Belle's glamorous trappings and reveals herself to be the plain high school girl she is. When she sings as herself, she touches the boy she wants to help and her grieving heart, too.

Because Japanese animated features are made by smaller crews and on smaller budgets than those of major American films, directors can present more personal visions. American studios employ story crews; Hosoda, Hayao Miyazaki, Makoto Shinkai and other auteurs storyboard entire films themselves. Their work isn't subjected to a gantlet of test audiences, executive approvals or advisory committees.

Shinkai broke box office records in Japan in 2016 with "Your Name" (now on digital platforms). It begins as a body-swapping teen rom-com but develops into a meditation on the trauma many Japanese still suffer after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Mitsuha is bored with her life in the rural town of Itomori; Taki, a student in Tokyo, wants to be an architect. One morning, they wake up in each other's bodies and have to navigate daily life not knowing where to find anything or who anyone is.

Taki and Mitsuha are caught up in a body-switching tale in “Your Name,” but it is Mitsuha who must overcome her fear to save family and friends. Funimation Films

As the body-swapping recurs, they learn about each other through their surroundings, establishing a bond that transcends physical distance and time. Mitsuha revels in the sophisticated attractions of Tokyo. Taki draws the Itomori he sees through Mitsuha’s eyes, but that leads him to a shattering discovery: The town was destroyed three years earlier by a devastating meteor strike.

Desperate to warn Mitsuha, he reaches out to her through Shinto-inflected magic. They meet briefly at twilight, when the boundaries between worlds become permeable in Japanese folklore. Like any awkward teenagers, they laugh, quarrel, shed tears and vow to be together again, but they also formulate a plan to save the people of Itomori.

When Taki vanishes, Mitsuha acts. She’s not a princess on a quest to preserve her realm like Moana, or Poppy in “Trolls 2.” She’s a frightened girl trying to save her family and friends from a deadly threat. She defies her pompous politician father, and uses her intelligence and resolve to overcome her fear and save hundreds of lives. But any capable high school girl could do what Mitsuha does: She doesn’t need superpowers to save the day.

“Ultimately, Mitsuha still loses her hometown; she moves to Tokyo,” Shinkai said in an interview via email. “Since the 2011 earthquake, Japanese people have been living with the fear that our cities may disappear. But even if that happens, even if we have to move somewhere else, we go on living. We meet someone special. That’s what I wanted Mitsuha to do, who I wanted her to be.”

The trend toward complex heroines isn’t new in anime. Miyazaki’s Oscar-winning “Spirited Away” (released in Japan in 2001 and now on HBO Max) grew out of his dissatisfaction with the superficial entertainments offered to adolescent girls in Japan. “I wanted the main character to be a typical girl in whom a 10-year-old could recognize herself,” he explained through a translator in an interview. “She shouldn’t be someone extraordinary, but an everyday, real person — even though this kind of character is more difficult to create. It wouldn’t be a story in which the character grows up, but a story in which she draws on something already inside her that is brought out by the particular circumstances.”

The protagonist, Chihiro, begins as a petulant adolescent: Her “skinny legs and sulky face” symbolize her overprotected, underdeveloped personality. The trials she faces in Yubaba’s Bathhouse, a spa for nature spirits sullied by human pollution, force Chihiro to develop untapped resources of strength, courage and love. By the end of the film, the sulky girl has been replaced by a more confident, capable young woman who cares about others. Her transformation shows in the animation: Early on, she runs like a fussy child, eyes half-closed. Later, when she goes to save a friend, she runs all out, knees and elbows pumping.

In Isao Takahata’s “Only Yesterday” (1991, now on HBO Max), Taeko has an unexciting job and a tiny apartment in 1982 Tokyo. But she’s 27 and single at a time when Japanese women were expected to marry before 25. Bored with her mundane existence, she decides to visit country cousins she stayed with years earlier.

Taeko is surprised to discover her fifth-grade self has accompanied her on the trip. The spectral presence of the girl she once was triggers a flood of memories: School friendships, fights with her sisters, the onset of puberty. By exploring who she was, Taeko learns who she wants to become in a moving, understated portrait of a woman at a crossroads in her life.

Like Greta Garbo, Chiyoko Fujiwara in Satoshi Kon’s “Millennium Actress” (released here in 2003 and available on the Roku Channel) retired from the screen at the height of her fame. After 30 years of seclusion, she grants a documentarian, Genya Tachibana, an interview. As Chiyoko reminisces, Tachibana and his jaded cameraman find themselves inside her tangled memories — and movies. As an adolescent in the 1930s, Chiyoko fell in love with a wounded artist who was fleeing the dreaded thought police.

Kon effortlessly shifts the narrative from reality to memory to film. In Japanese-occupied Manchuria, bandits attack the train on which the teenage actress is traveling. A door in the burning railroad car opens into a fiery castle in a feudal period film: Chiyoko plays a princess determined to join her lord in death. As a 19th-century geisha, she shields the artist from the Shogun's troops in Kyoto; as an astronaut, she goes on a mission to find him, knowing she won't be able to return. The visual complexity of the film mirrors Chiyoko's personality. Kon depicts her as an independent woman who made her own decisions: what profession to pursue, when and whom to marry, when to divorce, what roles to play, when to retire.

Although almost all Japanese animation directors are male, more women have been moving into important roles in recent years as producers, writers, musicians and more. Their contributions are affecting the way girls and women are depicted onscreen.

O-Ei, in Keiichi Hara's "Miss Hokusai" (released here in 2016, and now on digital platforms), is based on a real person, the daughter of the great printmaker Katsushika Hokusai. Although only a few works can be attributed to her with certainty, O-Ei was an artist in her own right, and many historians believe she assisted her father when his abilities faltered in old age.

Rapunzel in "Tangled" covered the walls of her tower room with paintings, but she shows little interest in art once she escapes. In contrast, O-Ei strides assuredly through 19th-century Edo, confident in her talent and her place in its vibrant artistic culture. She focuses on her drawing and can't be bothered with the traditional female duties of housekeeping. "When the place gets too dirty, we move," she says bluntly.

O-Ei reflects the experiences of women in modern Japan who are escaping the sexism of its traditional culture, including the female artists who worked on the film. Hara explained via email: "I have no direct experience of O-Ei's state of mind: I can only guess. But co-producer Keiko Matsushita, actress Anne Watanabe (who provides O-Ei's voice) and singer-songwriter Ringo Sheena, who are very strong-minded, creative women pursuing their goals with great determination, may have related to O-Ei at a more personal level. The film reflects the love and dedication they put into it."