

Life, Animated: A Film Review

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Deserving winner of a Sundance Film Festival Award, “Life, Animated” is the uplifting documentary about a young man with autism who learns to communicate with others and understand the world with help from his loving family, a dedicated support team and Disney animated films.

Based on Ron Suskind’s New York Times bestselling book, the film introduces us to Suskind’s son, Owen, who appeared to be developing normally until about three years of age when he withdrew and his speech became unintelligible*. Owen was diagnosed with autism and his parents were told that “some of the kids don’t ever speak again.” Owen became silent for several years and his devastated parents recall feeling as though “someone kidnapped our son.” Owen’s brother describes Disney as being the one thing that “made Owen light up around me”. These animated classics led Ron to making a life-changing discovery about his son’s capacity to make sense of the world and express himself through the lens of Disney.

The thought-provoking documentary charts Owen’s transition to adulthood and independence using a combination of interviews, home videos from Owen’s early childhood, footage of daily life and beautiful animation sequences by studio Mac Guff. As we follow his journey we are gently reminded that people with autism are not a homogenous group. Owen loves scripts and those around him believe that he responds so strongly to Disney because it never changes. The characters’ exaggerated expressions and gestures are easier to understand than human facial expressions, dialogue, tone and humour, which can be so confusing to people with autism. When bullied at school, Owen remembers believing that the other students would literally burn his house down. However, he was willing to have his routine disrupted – something many autistic individuals find unnerving – while filmed over a year and has a sweet relationship with his girlfriend. He also demonstrates that individuals with autism may want to connect with others more than they can convey. Once he has the ability to communicate effectively, Owen is able to express his desire to relate to others, to grow up and to find a job.

A film rarely captures all the details of a book on which it is based. Suskind’s text may expand on the “rough, down years” Owen describes as “a glop” and recount happy events not shown. The documentary however is a balanced portrayal of Owen’s fears and hopes and his tightknit family’s joy at Owen’s incredible progression and concerns for how he will manage on his own. You’ll leave smiling, wondering what’s in store as Owen begins to write his own script and direct his own life.

[Call Box Hill Speech Pathology Clinic on 9899 5494](#) if you are concerned that your child may be showing signs of ASD.

*Incomprehensible; impossible to understand.



Images from:

<http://blitz.arc.unsw.edu.au/2016/review-life-animated/>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/life-animated-a-small-boy-the-little-mermaid-and-a-happily-ever-after-20160920-grk9oi.html>

References:

“How Disney helped Owen learn to talk again” (The Age, Thu Sept 29, 2016)

“Owen’s wonderful world” (The Age, Sat Sept 24, 2016)

By Nicola Anglin (Speech Pathologist)