

# Tall tales tell only part of the story

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*Big Fish*, directed by Tim Burton, screenplay by John August, based on the novel by Daniel Wallace

*Big Fish* is director Tim Burton's latest argument in favor of the transformative power of imagination in negotiating life's mysteries and challenges. Burton, whose best films include *Edward Scissorhands* and *Ed Wood*, is known for the visual playfulness and fairy-tale or "gothic" quality of his Hollywood projects. He often deals with eccentric outsiders or misfits.

Based on the novel *Big Fish, A Story of Mythic Proportions*, by Daniel Wallace, Burton's film centers on an awkward reconciliation between a father and son. Will Bloom (Billy Crudup), a news agency reporter in Paris, is summoned back to Alabama, where his father is dying of cancer. Will is estranged from father Ed (Albert Finney) who has engaged in a lifetime of obsessive storytelling—a characteristic that most find charming.

Will, however, resentfully views this quality as his father's self-aggrandizing way of stunting communication with his family. As Will sees it, Ed's yarn-spinning is an expression of his continual need to grab the spotlight at his son's expense. Will's pursuit of a career as a serious, hard-boiled journalist in one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities is an obvious response to his father's Southern, small-town mythologizing.

As the movie jumps back and forth from the concrete present to the legendary past, the fantastical odysseys of the young Ed Bloom (Ewan McGregor) unfold. Not wanting to be a "big fish in a little pond," Ed sets out to make his mark, having as a youngster already seen the moment of his death in the glass eye of the town's witch (Helena Bonham Carter).

The account of his travels forms an anthology of "tall," surrealist tales, each meant to explain a pivotal moment in Ed's life. There is something quite accepting in these encounters with the attractive strangeness of the world and its people. Ed comes across an idealized village whose inhabitants are barefoot and live in perfect, but naïve, harmony; an emotionally needy, but heartbreakingly-friendly giant (Matthew McGrory) ["Has

it ever occurred to you that maybe you're not too big? Maybe this place is just too small?"]; a grossly untalented poet (Steve Buscemi) who evolves into a pathetic bank robber and finally a Wall Street tycoon; and a carnival run by a crooked miser (Danny DeVito), who is in reality a tamable werewolf. A stint in the Korean War brings the protagonist into contact with conjoined twins who assist him in an heroic caper.

Even Ed's account of Will's birth centers on an oft-repeated fabrication: while his wife (the older Sandra Bloom is played by Jessica Lange and the younger by Alison Lohman) was in labor, Ed was trying to catch the biggest catfish in Alabama—using his wedding ring as bait. "There are some fish that can't be caught. It's not that they're bigger or faster than the other fish, they're just touched by something extra."

Another of Will's beliefs is that his father's fantasies are a way of coping with his staid, suburban environment. The senior Ed is prone to remark: "Truth is, I've always been thirsty [for something different]." In response, his devoted wife quips: "I don't think I'll ever dry out."

Eventually, Will comes to understand that a positive legacy has been left him in his father's psychic chimeras.

*Big Fish* is endowed with sweetness and endearing characters, and demonstrates inventive technical skill. But the movie ends up largely being an exercise in marking time in the hope that some elemental truth or other will emerge from the extravagant goings-on. It is a moderately complicated working up of the notion that for life to be memorable, it must be augmented by imagination. Exercising and developing one's originality, argues the film, leave an indelible imprint on humanity, thus creating a certain immortality.

In an interview with *Premiere* magazine, Burton sheds some light on the source of this view: "I grew up in suburbia and I still don't understand certain aspects of it. There's a certain kind of vagueness, a blankness.... Growing up in suburbia was like growing up in a place where there's no sense of history, no sense of culture, no sense of passion for anything. You never felt people liked

music. There was no showing of emotion. It was very strange. ‘Why is that there? What am I sitting on?’ You never felt that there was any attachment to things. So you were either forced to conform and cut out a large portion of your personality, or to develop a very strong interior life which made you feel separate.”

It should be noted that Burton, who was born in 1958, became active artistically in the late 1970s just as a reactionary and conformist period opened up. These things tend to leave their mark.

“America, especially in the era I grew up in, in the aftermath of the Fifties nuclear family—it’s all about winning and the American dream, and we’re all individuals and free. I remember conformity and categorization from the very beginning, so where is all this individuality? The people I have known who have been individuals have always been tortured. There’s this predatory love-hate thing in this culture; they get preyed upon and devoured,” said Burton on the “Tim Burton Dream Site.”

It is perhaps significant that the rather self-involved Burton leaves out entirely from this observation any reference to the period of radicalization and great social upheavals from 1967 to 1974 or so.

Burton’s autobiographical comments might help to explain why *Big Fish* contends that Will *should* be happier believing that his father was wrestling with the legendary “Big Fish” on the day of his birth, rather than the reality that he was away on business trying to eke out an existence as a traveling salesman. It’s one thing to point out the drabness of a salesman’s existence, it’s another—and Burton tends in this direction—to be indifferent to or denigrate the problems and struggles of everyday life and their psychological impact.

Further, Burton never really explores the film’s underlying premise: that commonplace reality is so alienating that survival depends on the ability to transcend it through fantasy. While this might provide the impulse to some significant artistic (and social) probing, it remains only an impulse. Burton’s over-reliance on visual pyrotechnics has to be viewed as an attempt, even unconsciously, to divert attention from the film’s somewhat anemic conceptions.

For example, when the young Ed returns to the formerly heavenlike hamlet of Specter, every business has been bankrupted and all the houses are dilapidated. But a timely loan from the good-hearted Wall Street tycoon and Ed’s enterprising ingenuity restore the community to its former paradisiacal self. Although he despises the soul-

killing character of suburbia, Burton obviously has a few fantasies about the magical operations of the capitalist market!

*Big Fish*’s conclusions are somewhat self-serving and don’t encourage an examination of the source of conformism or its weight on the movie’s characters. Counterposed in a superficial way are the realistic and prosaic (Will), on the one hand, and the sensitive, hip-fabulist/artist (Ed—and perhaps Burton), on the other. This outlook produces limited results that do not really challenge conventional wisdom or official society at the deepest levels. For this reason, Hollywood has found it possible to embrace the eccentric Burton. One is tempted to suggest that his particular brand of creativity would not be so celebrated were it not for his relatively tame ideas.

Burton’s cursory observations for the most part do not extend beyond those of the archetypical, angst-ridden middle class youth who wants to rebel against his parents by getting his own apartment in a more bohemian, but still comfortable part of town, and be free to attend Art or Film School. The director is less a consistent critic of society than a compiler of lists of things that irritate or even oppress him.

The best moments in Burton’s work stem not from presenting imagination as an abstract thing-in-itself, even at times a subversive abstraction. The director is at his best when, in some fashion, he points to the need for an actual struggle. In films such as *Ed Wood*, Burton does actually encourage resisting conventionality and conformism, albeit in a limited form.

As opposed to the impersonal studio product, particularly the bombastic action film, there is undeniable value to *Big Fish*’s celebration of the Spirit of Fantasy with its inventive artifice. But the film’s overall impact is muted and unsatisfying because the director has failed to work his way through any of the critical problems of his own life and times.



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