

Duck, Death and the Tulip

Duck, Death and the Tulip (WDR, Germany) is an 11-minute animation short adaptation of the very popular German picture book by Wolf Erlbruch. It tells the story of a duck who suddenly realises that Death has been following her all her life (cf. screenshot 1). What then unfolds is a heartwarming story of friendship (cf. screenshot 2) and acceptance (cf. screenshot 3) as the two characters discuss life, death and the afterlife (cf. screenshot 4). In the end, the duck dies due to an illness (cf. screenshot 5), and Death is even a little bit moved by her passing (cf. screenshot 6, 7). As the last line in the film goes: “For a long time he watched Duck going down the river. When she was lost to sight, Death was almost a little moved. But that’s life.” (cf. screenshot 8)

Duck, Death and the Tulip was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012 finalists in the 7-11 Fiction category.

International experts’ opinions

International experts shared their opinions about *Duck, Death and the Tulip* during the discussion sessions at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012. The short film was praised as moving as much as it was controversial. The experts were divided on the film, with most people admiring its ingenuity and boldness in portraying and discussing death. Meanwhile, some experts questioned the appropriateness of the topic for young audiences and found it too dark and negative for children.

On the whole, the film was praised for its beautiful animation, message and story. Experts also admired the way the film tackled the delicate issue of death.

“I found wonderful the way the relationship was constructed between the Duck and Death.” (female expert, Germany)

“I thought that it was beautifully delivered and because it’s also difficult to talk about death with children and those who experience it.” (male expert, Bhutan)

A female expert agreed, expressing her admiration for the German broadcaster for showing this on television because “this may not be natural, but I loved this very much. And it’s very, very educational for German children.” (female expert, Mexico)

“It’s a very, very nice story. It’s making death not so dangerous, something you’re kind of supposed to be so afraid of.” (female expert, USA)

Many viewed the film as refreshing, with its straightforward, unpretentious approach to death. One expert surmised: “It’s very philosophical, and we don’t see too much philosophical programs for children.” (female expert, Germany)

While the film’s attempt to make death accessible and open to children earned a lot of praise, a few experts expressed concerns on the appropriateness of the topic for young audiences. Many in the panel discussions found the program dark and depressing, a topic that they felt may be unsuitable for children.

“I liked seeing it, but I wonder if children related to it?” (male expert, Canada)



Ill. 1: Duck meets Death for the first time



Ill. 2: Duck and Death strike a friendship



Ill. 3: Duck talks about death



Ill. 4: Duck muses about the afterlife



Ill. 5: Duck passes on

“I don’t really think it is for kids. I think it’s made for us as adults...it could be offensive to any family from any religious background, or to any parent that just wants to explain to their kids that there’s another life, afterlife or whatever. It was just very cynical.” (female expert, Chile)

One of the most memorable qualities about the film, albeit disturbing to some, was the brazen characterization of Death – a walking, breathing, talking skeleton. This idiosyncratic style did not sit well with others. In particular, they were concerned with the context in which the film was presented.

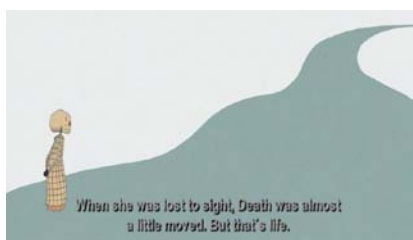


Ill. 6: An endearing scene between Duck and Death

“I don’t think kids in the United States by and large would even understand what was going on there.” (male expert, USA)

Another expert added: “I liked it. But...if a kid is just watching by themselves and they’re very young, are they left with the message – with the possibility that, if you get very cold, then you die, because that’s what happens. The duck says, ‘I’m so cold,’ lies down, and then is dead.”

A female expert from Germany clarified the circumstance in which the film was presented: “it was broadcasted on a special day here in Germany. It’s a Sunday, a traditional day where all children go to the graves with [their parents].” However, even when the context was clarified, some still expressed ambiguity on the purpose of the film: “[there are] books that I know help children deal with death, it’s a lot about how you cope when you’re the one who is left behind. So, you’re given the tools to deal when somebody very close dies. This was actually about dealing with your own death, which I just think that’s harder to understand when you’re 10 or 11.” (female expert, UK)



Ill. 7: Death watches as Duck flows down the river

On the other hand, some believed that it was the exact candor of the film that helped to make it a great opportunity for parents to talk to their children about death.

“That’s what you have to discuss, just acceptance. It’s true for all of us” (male expert, Germany)

“I think it’s designed for children to watch and for parents, relatives and friends to discuss together ... it was about embracing [death]” (female expert, USA)

In one of the group panels, the discussion turned to the anxiety that children might feel about death after seeing the film. Some experts felt that without adult guidance, children might get the wrong idea that death comes easily and this might create unnecessary tension. There were some disagreements

on this notion, with one expert saying: “I wouldn’t be afraid if my child watched this, because if you look at fairy tales, it’s – at the end, you know the wolf eats the Chaperon Rouge [Little Red Riding Hood]. They learn with this. I think children are not that fragile” (female expert, France)

“I love the fact that it deals with death. I think there’s not enough children’s television that does deal with serious issues like death, because kids, as we all know, deal with death all the time, whether it’s grandparents or whatever.” (female expert, Canada)

Karen Palomo (Centennial College, Toronto, Canada)

Target Audience 6.90	Idea 7.97	Script 8.00	Realization 8.54
Average Score per Category by experts’ voters at PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONALE 2012			