



I've Never Seen...

# Princess Mononoke

**Rob Power** has a confession to make...

**L**ike kiwi fruit or interpretive dance, anime is something I have little experience of. I wish I knew why. I've been trying – and largely failing, it must be said – to nail down the reasoning behind this bizarre cultural gap. I've no aversion to animated features, no crippling fear of girls with big eyes, nothing; there's just no rhyme or reason to it.

As a life-long science fiction and fantasy fan, I've got no excuses. I've regularly encountered anime fans willing to point me in the right direction. I know what the classics are and where to find them. And yet, every time my hand hovered over *Akira* or *Spirited Away*, I ended up gravitating towards something else, usually involving aliens, ninjas, or aliens killing ninjas. The longer I left it, the more distracted I became. Anime had been crowded off of my radar by louder, brasher beasts that grabbed my attention with action sequences and explosions, until eventually any curiosity I had withered away.

Thankfully, *Princess Mononoke* was sent to save me from myself. Settling down to watch it for the first time was about much more than just seeing a classic I'd missed. It would be my gateway to an entire uncharted realm, and I was suitably awed by the prospect. In fact, before the disc had even met the player, I was nervous. What if I just couldn't get on with it? Would I forever remain an anime ignoramus, a philistine who fails to see beauty and brilliance where so many others clearly do? Taking over the front room of my house share and banning all from entry, I created a cocoon in which I could safely make first contact, slid the disc in and pressed play.

## Setting the scene

As a grave voiceover spoke of ancient woods and forest gods, I immediately cursed my absurdly late introduction to this film. I found my jaw dropping as I took in the gorgeous artwork, and as the soundtrack swelled I found myself swept up

on a wave of melody and planted in the middle of an unfamiliar world that had evaded me for far too long.

Right from the off, as Ashitaka takes on the wild boar god and finds himself infected with an evil sludge that he's told will eventually consume him, I knew I was in for a treat. The chilling last



All images © 1997 Nibariki - GND

Raised by wolf gods the fierce San fights to protect the forest.



## Ashitaka takes on the wild boar god and finds himself infected with an evil sludge

words of the stricken attacker and the final gory sight of his flesh melting from his bones; the blunt conclusion of the village elders that Ashitaka's injury will kill him and he must leave; all of this pointed towards a level of maturity that my infantile mind hadn't prepared me for. Within five minutes, *Princess Mononoke* had vaulted straight over my expectations. As I became familiar with the fantasy setting, I pondered where Ashitaka's quest might take him next.

What I was definitely *not* expecting to see was a samurai chopping his blade down into the spinal column of a fleeing civilian. But that's what happened. From the second Ashitaka flexes his blackened arm to terrifying effect, lopping off limbs and heads with wild abandon, the scope of *Princess Mononoke* kept getting bigger and bigger. From fantasy to historical epic in the blink of an eye, this would be the first of many left turns and changes of perspective to come, and I quickly discovered that writer and director Hayao Miyazaki had woven a narrative where nothing is ever quite as it first appears. I found my opinions shifting, changing shape with every twist in the tale, awed by the intelligence and precision of Miyazaki's storytelling craft.

His characters were three dimensional, conflicted – take Lady Eboshi, the aristocratic ruler of Iron Town whose political ambitions and lust for ore have driven her to slaughter the creatures and gods of the forest. On first impression, she is a ruthlessly efficient killer, a leader of men and a cold-blooded harbinger of the forest's doom. Her fortress, Iron Town, sits spewing out noxious smoke, squatting toad-like beside the forest, leeching the goodness out of it.



The Forest Spirit gets ready to change from day to night.

And yet, once Ashitaka is within its walls, Miyazaki deftly challenges the viewer's preconceptions: Lady Eboshi is a woman ahead of her time, struggling to stay one step ahead of the man's world that surrounds her. Iron Town is a refuge to lepers and whores who offer Lady Eboshi loyalty because she gave them a chance when no others would. Of course you could argue that Eboshi is simply manipulating her people to suit her own ends, but she has such clear affection for her charges that it becomes difficult to believe.

And then there's the princess herself, San, half Mowgli, half Wolverine, a whirling dervish of outrage and anger at the plight of her adoptive pack. She's a fascinating, mysterious presence that I found

incredibly appealing, this fearless warrior encased in the size of a schoolgirl. Her relationship with Ashitaka, moving from outright hostility to astonishing tenderness, is beautifully played out. When she has to chew his food for him after the devastating injuries he sustained in Iron Town, she does so with the care of a she-wolf feeding her cubs, naively unaware »





Ashitaka's trusty steed Yakul is an affectionate red elk.



These little guys are friendly Kodama forest spirits.



of the implications her actions might have to human observers. It's a scene that could have so easily spilled over into rom-com fumbling or coming-of-age awkwardness, but never did.

There was so much going on in *Princess Mononoke* that I was beginning to feel overwhelmed. The artwork is just beautiful, and Miyazaki's direction gives it plenty of breathing space as the he basks in the skill on show. Shots linger over landscapes that radiate a beatific splendour, the perfect contrast to the dark, oppressive feel of the parts of the forest consumed with conflict, which seem to pulse with an unquantifiable menace. It's stirring stuff.

### The final countdown

As it tumbled towards its inevitable final confrontation, I was struck by just how brutal a film this really was. Because, much to my surprise, *Princess Mononoke* is a war film. And an uncompromising, unflinching war film at that, where dead bodies float in rivers and men die weeping and in agony. Mass graves, mutilated remains and grief are found lurking around every corner as Ashitaka bears witness to a conflict that has no real resolution. Man will always strive to gouge all of the goodness out of the earth, and nature will always find a way to reclaim it.

“I now feel like I’ve just discovered music, or comics, or something equally as rich and diverse and full of promise as anime so clearly is”

Almost all of *Princess Mononoke* was drawn by hand.



San and Lady Eboshi are great examples of strong heroines.



It’s a deceptively simple message, not unlike a fairytale, although it’s much more primal than that. Here I found a story that speaks of the things that made our ancestors hide in caves and daub stark warnings on the walls. All fairytales are birthed in blood, but most end up neutered, the harsh realities of the world transformed into vaguely allegorical stories with all the bite removed. *Princess Mononoke* is a tale of broken teeth, splintered bone and an unthinking evil that exists in both nature and humanity that can run rampant if left unchecked. And like most fairytales, its central message is incredibly simple – respect the earth, respect others and live your life.

With the end in sight, and the final showdown between the Forest Spirit and those who would see him decapitated in full swing, I reflected on the sheer visual inventiveness on show. From the boars that covered themselves with war paint, to the tree sprites that fell like melancholy confetti as the forest spirit began to falter, *Princess Mononoke* is a film liberally laced with memorable moments. You can’t help but feel a bit spoiled, to be honest.

When I reached the end, I felt more than a little bit stupid. I’m 27 years old, what the hell had I been doing with myself for all these years to have managed to completely miss this film, this art form? It’s a question best left unanswered,

because ‘eating biscuits’ simply isn’t going to cut it, but the point stands. *Princess Mononoke* is clearly a masterpiece, and one I’m overjoyed to have finally sat down and watched. I spent some time marshalling my thoughts, scrabbling to find something negative to balance out what I knew was going to be a gushing report of my first brush with anime, but I came up with nothing. Well, apart from the fact that Ashitaka’s natty outfit makes him look a bit like a massive chicken, but I even liked that. He had the air of a rooster that could kick ass and take names, and that’s my kind of chicken.

I now feel like I’ve just discovered music or comics, or something equally as rich, diverse and full of promise as anime so clearly is. I’m proud that a piece of work as fantastic as *Princess Mononoke* popped my anime cherry. My only fear now is that nothing else will ever come close. So thanks, Hayao Miyazaki, for giving every other film maker such a hard act to follow. I’m already looking forward to finding out what else Studio Ghibli has to offer, and the prospect of many, many more evenings spent in its company. *Princess Mononoke* may well have been the first, but it certainly won’t be the last encounter with anime for this fresh convert. My education begins now. 🐣