

# 'The Secret World of Arrietty' Offers Big Lessons on Life

by Alan Mowbray



As a father of two, I'm always looking for a teachable moment. If you're smooth about it, your kids won't even know that you're instructing them on life.

Based on a children's book called *The Borrowers*, a popular title originally published in 1952 by British author Mary Norton, *The Secret World of Arrietty* is one of those covert teachable moments—actually, it features several of them.

The movie was the year's top grossing film when it was released in Japan in 2010, winning the Animation of the Year award. Translated, dubbed by an American cast and distributed stateside by Walt Disney Pictures, *The Secret World of Arrietty* was made by legendary Studio Ghibli (*Spirited Away* and *Ponyo*).

Arrietty (voiced by Disney TV star Bridgit Mendler) is 4 inches tall. She and her family are Borrowers. They live in the recesses of a suburban garden home, unbeknownst to the homeowner and her housekeeper Haru (voiced by Carol Burnett). Like all little people, Arrietty (AIR-ee-ett-ee) remains hidden from view, except during occasional covert ventures beyond the floorboards to "borrow" scrap supplies that their human hosts won't miss.

Arrietty is 14, and the limitation of her 4-inch stature means nothing to the girl. In Arrietty's eyes, the whole world is hers to explore, even if her easily agitated mother, Homily (voiced by Amy Poehler), and her father, Pod (voiced by Will Arnett), say otherwise. "Better be careful," they would warn,

relating an oft-repeated story about a long-lost relative eaten by a frog.

One day, a boy arrives at the house. Shawn (voiced by David Henrie) is a sickly 12-year-old with a bad heart who has come to rest at his grandmother's house. He is supposed to have absolutely no excitement in preparation for a heart operation scheduled the following week or so. The first day, he spots Arrietty during one of her unauthorized forays into the real world and attempts to befriend her. Over the next few days, a secret friendship blossoms between the two—putting the lives of Arrietty and her family in danger.

The life of a Borrower is hard and sometimes dangerous. Arrietty is of the age to start doing what Borrowers do—taking things from the “beings” (normal sized humans) that they won't miss. Her first borrowing adventure involves the *Mission Impossible*-like acquisition of a single cube of sugar, which, for a Borrower, is probably enough for a week or more of sustenance.

Arrietty's father guides her with a strong but gentle hand. Not once does he raise his voice in rebuke in order to teach her something. Guilty as charged, I related to this immediately. When teaching necessary life skills to children, yelling is never a good choice to get your point across. Rather, experience and sometimes even failure, makes for a better teacher.

Another little tidbit I noted was in the proud joy of Arrietty's father, who was finally able to work side-by-side with his child in the family business. I remember when I was old enough to contribute to the more glamorous work on our family farm—driving trucks, working the fields in the tractor, getting to leave school at lunch to bring in the crops—I experienced a great sense of belonging! Kids need to know that you not only love them, but you also like to be around and work with them.

With a bad heart, Shawn has dealt with the possibility of death his whole life. His choice is to face it with strength and not fear. Each day is a new day to be thankful. Each day is a new adventure. Whether or not the operation helps, Shawn has decided to move forward. Arrietty has always feared death, so this is a very different life outlook. What a valuable lesson. Even more, Shawn discovered that true friendship can strengthen a person in unexplainable ways. He felt stronger, as if the damage to his heart was being reversed by the love of a friend. Metaphorical or not, we all can attest to the benefits of having a friend.

*The Secret World of Arrietty* is a fun, child-safe adventure. Yes, there are moments where Arrietty takes some dangerous risks and disobeys her parents. As in real life, consequences remain even though she was forgiven. A true teachable moment, parents are offered a gift-wrapped opportunity to discuss positive and negative consequences of our children's choices and decisions.

During the screening, which I attended with my wife, almost 11-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter, I noticed that the audience was very connected to this movie from beginning to end. Bottom line? *The Secret World of Arrietty* is a great family movie with real life lessons.

**Content Watch:** *The Secret World of Arrietty* is rated G—though younger children could be frightened by scenes of peril as the Borrowers have to be watchful of bugs, rats, cats, crows and “beings.” With no questionable language or messages, this movie is very safe for the little ears in your family. Even the “borrowing” is explained to be only for survival. Loving affection between different characters was prevalent, but always appropriate.

About the Author: Alan Mowbray is a husband, father of two children and technical writer for an Orlando, Fla., area software company. Visit his blog by clicking [here](#).