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“ REVIEW

## Kensuke's Kingdom: This magical British animation is very 80s – in a good way

★★★★☆

With Cillian Murphy among its starry voice cast, this adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's children's novel is thoughtful, tender and beguiling

Tim Robey, FILM CRITIC

1 August 2024 • 12:05pm



There's a retro quality – specifically, a 1980s quality – to the gently magical British animation **Kensuke's Kingdom**. This is down to the story unfolding 40 years after the end of the Second World War, but it carries through to the style of illustration, too, which is a savvy choice. The film, adapted by Frank Cottrell-Boyce, renders its hand-drawn characters against picture-postcard backdrops of a desert island paradise, where 12-year-old Michael (voiced by newcomer Aaron McGregor) is washed ashore, and must grow up fast.

Through errors of his own making, he's blown far from his family's boat during a round-the-world adventure. Against the orders of his parents (Sally Hawkins and Cillian Murphy, lending love and gravitas), Michael has smuggled the family dog Stella on board, and while he's trying to save her, both are swept away by a storm. They scrape up on a seemingly uninhabited isle, described as “peanut shaped” in the much-loved 1999 children's novel by War Horse author Michael Morpurgo.

Mysteriously, water and foraged food are left out for them one morning, and Michael realises their benefactor is Kensuke (Ken Watanabe), a gaunt Japanese sailor who has lived there in solitude since the end of the war. His wife and boy were killed in the bombing of Nagasaki, a life-defining tragedy which the film sketches with the most delicate of strokes. Kensuke's skilled draughtsmanship brings his loved ones to life in a tiny flashback, and an ink blot does the awful job of obliteration.

The film is thoughtful, tender and generally quite beguiling, even if Michael's immaturity makes him an irritating protagonist in the first half: he makes a string of selfish blunders and is bad at learning from them. His respect for the island's ecosystem grows after a panicky run-in with a clan of orangutans, who are Kensuke's closest thing to a new family.

## 'Kensuke's Kingdom' Official Trailer



At exactly the right moment, the film gains some bad guys – a trio of poachers who stomp ashore with cages for everything they can get their hands on. The fates of some unsuspecting creatures hit hard, in a sequence given pulse and power by Stuart Hancock's pleasingly old-school orchestral score. I'm still thinking about the heartbreaking keen of a flying lemur as it's carted off.

The film earns its reverence for the wonders of nature, and could hardly seem less like any kind of pushy environmental tract. But it's the mentorship Kensuke offers Michael, a fragile bond with a rather secretive essence, that catches the heart.

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*In cinemas from Aug 2*

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