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World Premiere of My Secret Country & New York Times Feature

Real-Life Movies Starring Some Imaginary Friends

Several recent films aren't pretending about their plots.

By ERIK PIEPENBURG

In the new family comedy "If" Ryan Reynolds plays a frazzled matchmaker who, with help from a young girl (Caley Fleming), unites humans with imaginary friends.

John Krasinski, who wrote and directed the film, said the idea took shape as he watched his daughters' lights dim during the pandemic. "They were playing fewer and fewer imaginary games and I could see they were letting the fears of the real world in and I thought, this is the definition of growing up," he said in an email.

He said he decided to make the movie, now in theaters, to show his kids that the "magical world they've created, that place of such joy and hope and magic, exists. And you can always go back."

Krasinski isn't alone in bringing imaginary friendships to life this year. "If" is one of five new movies that explore imaginary friends, in a variety of genres: supernatural horror ("Imaginary"), adult comedy ("Ricky Stanicky"), children's animated fantasy ("The Imaginary") and documentary ("My Secret Country").

Why the convergence? Marjorie Taylor, professor emerita of psychology at the University of Oregon and an expert on imaginary friends, wasn't sure. But she said she wasn't surprised, considering that pretend friends, as she calls them, have long been artistic camp.

"Imaginary friends are fascinating for people who write fiction because they are great vehicles for storytelling about feelings and fears," said Taylor, whose book "Imaginary Friends and the People Who Create Them," written with Naomi R. Aguiar, comes out in a new expanded edition this fall.

Imaginary friends can be purely for entertainment, but they can also mirror difficult emotions and stages in a child's life. If a family member is sick, a child's imaginary friend may get sick too, a way to help navigate sadness and uncertainty. An imaginary friend can be a child or an adult, an animal or a fanciful creature or, as in the popular comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," a stuffed animal.

Research by Taylor and colleagues shows that as many as 65 percent of children have interacted with personified objects or invisible friends by the time they are 7. Some pretend friends are retained much longer.

Imaginary friends are considered ageless in both "If" and "The Imaginary," directed by Yoshiyuki Momose and coming to Netflix on July 5. Both films give imaginary friends their own points of view, and both feature young girls as protagonists. Both also focus on how memories of imaginary friends — or "imaginaries," as they're called in "The Imaginary" — are what keep them alive as people age and become less useful of created worlds.

Yoshiaki Nishimura, the producer of "The Imaginary," put it this way in an email: "Imaginary friends are not the only beings that we trust and love very much as children, but forget as adults. I don't remember the faces or names of my kindergarten and elementary school teachers, but they certainly helped me, supported and guided me, and are a part of my life."

Imaginary friends have long fueled the horror genre, where unseen beings possess bodies and minds to evil ends, a manifestation of and metaphor for mental illness. "Imaginary," now on demand, uses the horror convention of a possessed toy — in this case a teddy bear named Chauncey — to explore the dark side of imaginary friendships.

Jeff Wadlow, who directed the film, said what was sinister about a cuddly doll who does bad things was that it was uniquely macabre but also tenderly familiar. Chauncey "had a Paddington look to him but at the same time he's unsettling," he said. "His eyes and ears create an unease. But people love him."

Not all horror movie imaginary friends are pretend, though. In "Psycho," Norman Bates had an imaginary friend, and she turned a shower into a blood bath.

Adults don't have to be mentally unstable to have imaginary friends. Taylor said the author Agatha Christie and the choreographer Paul Taylor had talked about having unseen companions who were a source of support and inspiration throughout their lives. Then again, imaginary friends can be so

cially devitalizing; many Americans have imaginary beliefs about who the president is, or what vaccines do to bodies.

In "Ricky Stanicky" (streaming on Amazon Prime Video), the imaginary friend is a grown man made up by three friends — played by Zac Efron, Andrew Santino and Jermaine Fowler — who pretend to call on him as cover when they want to lie about their whereabouts. When one of their duplicitous plans starts to crack, they hire an actor (John Cena) to make Ricky real.

Peter Farrelly, the film's director and one of six people credited with the screenplay, said his comedy was rooted in very adult concerns about what happens "when your lies come alive."

"You create this lie where you cover all the time and this person protects you, like, this guy bought the beer or this guy bought the weed, and you get out of trouble," said Farrelly, the director of the Oscar-winning "Green Book." "If you're getting good things from lying, he said, 'It's hard to stop. But one day you have to say, I am a liar. It's part of growing up: telling the truth.'"

Are we in an imaginary friend golden age? Mario McKenzie, the director of "My Secret Country" — in which animation makes real children's imaginary friends come to life — sure hopes so. McKenzie said her film, which debuts on June 2 at the San Francisco Documentary Film Festival, was born in part by having worked at a homeless youth shelter where many children with backgrounds of abuse "weren't able to imagine a world where they were loved."

"Imagination," she said, "is way more important than we realize."

Krasinski also finds this to be true. If it

Left, Ryan Reynolds and Caley Fleming, along with some imaginary friends, in "If." Below, from left, Zac Efron, Andrew Santino, Jermaine Fowler and John Cena in the comedy "Ricky Stanicky."

wasn't for Sam Brace, his childhood imaginary friend, "If" may never have been made. "We had a video store about a half mile away from our house," he wrote. "Sam and I would walk to pick out a movie and along the way live through those movies. I have often wondered if it was actually Sam who directed this movie."

Article by: Erik Piepenburg

[Read it here.](#)

Dear Laura,

Summer is upon us, and it's shaping up to be a magical time for imaginary friends! We're thrilled to share some fantastic news with you about our incredible journey.

New York Times Feature

Imaginary friends were spotlighted in the New York Times! The article delves into the delightful anomaly of FIVE movies about imaginary friends all premiering this year, including John Krasinski's hit movie IF. Marjorie Taylor PhD and professor emerita of psychology at the University of Oregon who stars in our movie, shared her insights on why that might be. We're honored to be part of team imagination! [Read the full article here.](#)

🎉 World Premiere Alert 🎉

My Secret Country is making its grand debut this Sunday, June 2nd, at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco at 12:30pm, as part of the San Francisco Documentary Festival. Join us for this special event and immerse yourself in the enchanting tale of imagination and creativity.

After the screening, there will be a special Q&A session with the three stars of movie: Dori, Max, and Maxine. Don't miss the chance to hear their stories and experiences firsthand!!

For our friends far and wide who can't make it to San Francisco, worry not! The movie will be available online for a limited time at the festival website.

🎫 Grab Your Tickets to the Premiere 🎫

[Tickets are here.](#)



📅 Upcoming Screenings 📅

Our journey continues with screenings at the Atlanta Children's Film Festival later in June, and we were also accepted into the Kids First Festival! We'll

keep you updated with screening dates and details on our social media channels, so make sure you're following us.



📰 Bay City News Review 📰

Film critic Randy Myers recommended *My Secret Country* in the Bay City news (below). He has a great point! We also want to hang out in Dori's Kittietopia or with Max's pal Scwigee or in Maxine's Imaginary Friend World for a bit! [The full article is here.](#)



Bay Area filmmaker Marlo McKenzie talks to three youngsters about their imaginary friends in "My Secret Country." (Courtesy SF IndieFest)

<https://localnewsmatters.org/2024/05/27/pass-the-remote-dozens-of-intriguing-true-stories-at-roxie-online-in-sf-docfest/>

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5/28/24, 10:27 PM

Pass the Remote: Dozens of intriguing true stories at Roxie, online in SF DocFest - Local News Matters

"My Secret County": Bay Area filmmaker Marlo McKenzie ("Carol Doda Topless at the Condor") whisks viewers onto a magical journey into the dreamy mindsets of three spirited kids and their alliance with imaginary friends. McKenzie's experimental feature uses animation to bring the youngsters' vibrant worlds to life and to encourage people of all ages to allow their imaginations free rein. "My Secret Country," screening at 12:30 p.m. June 2, is as imaginative in its approach and style as the worlds its kids have dreamt up. University of Oregon psychology professor Marjorie Taylor provides insightful context, but McKenzie's interviews with the kids make the film priceless. And really, who wouldn't want to hang out for a bit in Kittietopia?

💡 Creativity Conference Fun 💡

Our team was invited to the Creativity Conference in Ashland, Oregon, where we held a private VIP-only screening for a select group of academia who research creativity studies. After the screening, we hosted an enlightening panel with some brilliant minds: Michele Root-Bernstein, PhD, adjunct faculty at Michigan State University, Marjorie Taylor, PhD, professor emerita in psychology at the University of Oregon, and Sandra Russ, professor emerita of psychology at Case Western Reserve University. The discussion was incredibly insightful, and we can't wait to share the video with you soon!

But wait, there's more! Michele and Marlo also hosted a super fun, hands-on workshop on how to invent an imaginary friend and world. If you are interested in bringing this imaginative experience and the movie to your organization, please don't hesitate to reach out to us!



| Top: Panel with (L-R), Marjorie Taylor, Michele Root-Bernstein, Marlo McKenzie and Sandra Russ

Bottom: Photos by Michael Davis show the participants in the workshop displaying their imaginary

friend and world creations. |

**Check out the
My Secret Country trailer below.**

AND

Thank you

for being a part of this incredible adventure.

We hope to see you at one of our screenings or online soon!



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