

REWIND & RECLAIM

# THE IRON GIANT

The Film That the Studio Forgot to Promote and the Audience  
Never Forgot

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## Introduction: The Highest Test Scores in Fifteen Years

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In the spring of 1999, Warner Bros. was in the awkward position of having accidentally made a masterpiece.

The film was *The Iron Giant*, directed by Brad Bird in his feature debut, animated by a skeleton crew working with half the budget and half the time of a typical studio animated feature, set in Cold War Maine in 1957, and concerned with the friendship between a nine-year-old boy and a fifty-foot alien robot who is, by design and original purpose, a weapon. Test screenings produced the highest audience scores the studio had recorded in fifteen years. Bird described the response as shocking to the executives who had been treating the film as a liability.

None of this translated into a marketing campaign. There was no Burger King toy promotion, despite one being planned and then dropped. There was, according to Bird, exactly one teaser poster produced, which ended up serving as the film's only poster. No cereal boxes. No fast food tie-ins. The studio had given all of its promotional energy that summer to *Wild Wild West*, a film it had much higher expectations for, and had effectively scheduled *The Iron Giant* as something to fill a gap rather than lead a campaign.

The film opened on August 6, 1999 to reviews that were, almost universally, superlative. Critics who had spent years arguing about what animated films could and should do found themselves running out of appropriate language. It earned \$31.7 million worldwide against a budget of approximately \$50 million and was gone from most theaters within weeks.

What happened next is the actual story, and it is one of the cleanest examples in the history of the animated form of a film that the institutional machinery failed and that the audience rescued. Not quickly, not in a single dramatic reversal, but slowly, over years, passed from parent to child and child to sibling and friend to friend, on VHS and then DVD and then streaming, until the film that the studio had all but discarded was sitting on virtually every list of the greatest animated films ever made.

This is the story of where *The Iron Giant* came from, how it was almost not made, how it was made brilliantly under circumstances that made brilliance nearly impossible, and why it has never stopped finding new people to break open.

## **Chapter 1: The Source**

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Ted Hughes published *The Iron Man: A Children's Story in Five Nights* in 1968, and the title tells you several things at once. It is a children's story, which is a different category of thing from a children's book. It is a story in five nights, which is how a parent reads to a child at bedtime across a week, installment by installment, living with the story between sittings. And it is about a man made of iron, which means it is about a thing that is also an idea, a figure from the tradition of myth and folklore rather than realistic fiction.

Hughes was, at the time, the most talked-about poet in Britain, a man whose work in adult poetry had made him famous and whose personal life had made him infamous. His first wife was the poet Sylvia Plath, who died by suicide in 1963, leaving Hughes with two young children. *The Iron Man* was written, according to the Ted Hughes Society and various biographical accounts, partly

as a comfort for those children, a story that was also a myth about a world that could be broken and also healed.

The story is not what Brad Bird made it. The novel's Iron Man has no explained origin and no memory, arrives from nowhere, falls off a cliff, reassembles himself from his scattered pieces, and gradually negotiates a place in the human world through a process of mutual accommodation. He eats metal and becomes a guardian of the earth. The story's antagonist is a cosmic force from space, defeated in a contest by the Iron Man's patience and endurance. It is a more purely mythic work than the film, less interested in psychology, more interested in the grammar of legend.

In the 1980s, Pete Townshend of the Who became entranced by Hughes' novella and adapted it as a concept album, released in 1989 as *The Iron Man: A Musical*. A stage musical followed at London's Old Vic. Producer Des McAnuff, who had brought Townshend's earlier work *Tommy* to Broadway, saw the theatrical production and began developing a film version. The rights eventually made their way to Warner Bros., which was in the process of building an animation division to compete with Disney.

Brad Bird entered the picture in 1996, when the studio was looking for a director. His background was in television animation, having worked on *The Simpsons* and developed *The Critic*, and he had an instinct for character and a passion for the classical Hollywood tradition of animation that set him apart from most of the people working in the medium at that moment. He brought in screenwriter Tim McCanlies to work from his story treatment. He made the film his own.

The adaptation's central move was to give the Giant a psychology. Hughes' Iron Man is a force of nature. Bird's Iron Giant

is a being with a choice, and the film's entire thesis turns on whether and how that choice is made.

## Chapter 2: The Making

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By the time Brad Bird took over *The Iron Giant*, the film had already been through enough development iterations to have generated substantial confusion about what it was and who it was for. The original impetus had come from Pete Townshend's musical, which was a very different kind of work from what Bird was building, and the studio's involvement had introduced commercial expectations that sat uneasily with the story's underlying seriousness.

Warner Bros. Feature Animation had been established in 1993 with the ambition of creating a Disney-scale animation operation. The first significant release from the division was *Space Jam* in 1996, a live-action and animation hybrid built around Michael Jordan's cultural stardom, which was a commercial success large enough to fund the division's further ambitions. The second was *Quest for Camelot* in 1998, a traditionally animated musical that cost approximately \$80 million and performed disastrously at the box office, earning somewhere around \$22 million domestic and devastating the studio's confidence in the animation enterprise.

*The Iron Giant* was in production when *Quest for Camelot* came out, and the fallout was immediate. By Bird's account, executives began departing the studio's animation division at a rapid rate, until virtually no one remained who had originally commissioned the project. He described making the film in a state of institutional abandonment: they were allowed to finish because it was cheaper than stopping, and they were largely left alone because there was no one left to interfere.

This abandonment, which was the most significant commercial failure of the film's production story, was also its

greatest artistic gift. Bird and his team made the film they wanted to make, without the micromanagement that had helped destroy Quest for Camelot, and the creative freedom produced something that no level of executive supervision would likely have allowed.

## **The underfunded miracle**

The constraints were extreme by any standard. The crew was understaffed. The schedule was compressed. The budget, reduced from what had been promised by the Quest for Camelot fallout, was approximately half what a conventional studio animated feature required for comparable running time and ambition. Bird recruited student animators from CalArts to fill gaps in the crew, working alongside the veterans who had transferred from the Quest for Camelot production, and the combination of relative inexperience and institutional knowledge produced a specific kind of creative pressure that, in retrospect, drove the film to do more with less.

The visual approach was traditional animation for the human characters, with CGI used specifically for the Giant himself and for certain effects. This hybrid was not universally praised at the time, as the tonal gap between the hand-drawn, slightly stylized human world and the three-dimensional rendered Giant was visible to careful viewers. It was also the right creative choice, for reasons that the film earns over its 87 minutes: the Giant is different from the human world, and looking slightly different from it is accurate, not a production compromise.

The film was set in 1957 specifically because Bird wanted to work in a period of American cultural history when the anxieties about weapons, about the military-industrial complex, about the thing that the Cold War required Americans to be, were visible and

legible. The Sputnik launch, which appears in the film's first act as a moment of national paranoia, was a real event from October 1957 that had shaken American confidence and intensified the arms race. Bird used it as the cultural weather of the film, the air that all the characters breathed.

## Chapter 3: The Voice Cast

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The casting of an animated film is the moment when an ensemble of names becomes a world, and the ensemble assembled for *The Iron Giant* was notable both for its quality and for the diversity of what it brought.

Eli Marienthal voiced Hogarth Hughes, the nine-year-old protagonist, and he was himself nine years old when the work began, which gave the performance a quality of genuine childhood in the delivery rather than an adult approximating childhood. Hogarth is a specific kind of boy: a kid who reads science fiction comics, who eats too many sugary cereals, who is too intelligent and too energetic for the small town around him, and who is fundamentally decent in the way that children can be decent before the social world has taught them to be cynical. Marienthal gives him a nervous quick-wittedness that makes every scene with him feel inhabited rather than performed.

Jennifer Aniston voiced Annie Hughes, Hogarth's mother, at a moment when Aniston was among the most recognizable faces in American popular culture through *Friends*, and the choice to put her voice in a hand-drawn animated character rather than on screen in a more conventional role was itself a quiet statement about the film's ambitions. Annie is not a comedic character, not a sidekick, not a love interest in any conventional sense. She is a widowed working mother in 1957 Maine who is trying to keep her family financially stable and her son intellectually stimulated, and Aniston gives her a quality of loving exhaustion that makes her one of the most fully realized parental figures in American animation.

Harry Connick Jr. voiced Dean McCoppin, the beatnik artist who becomes the film's third point of a triangle with Hogarth and the Giant, and his particular quality of warmth and Southern-inflected ease fit the character precisely. Dean is the adult who has not lost his ability to see the world as Hogarth sees it, who can recognize the Giant as something extraordinary rather than something threatening, and who provides the moral support structure that the film's two more vulnerable characters need.

### **The villain and the voice of the Giant**

Christopher McDonald voiced Kent Mansley, the government agent who serves as the film's antagonist, and the performance is a masterclass in a very specific kind of villainy: the villainy of ideology rather than malice. Mansley is not evil. He is afraid, and fear, in the film's argument, produces the same outcomes as evil. He genuinely believes the Giant is a weapon and that weapons must be destroyed. His error is epistemological rather than moral: he cannot revise his belief about the Giant in the face of evidence, because his belief is not based on evidence but on a worldview about the nature of threat. McDonald gives him a barely contained quality of anxiety, a man who is always on the edge of a panic that he is presenting as authority, and the performance is funnier and more disturbing for never tipping over into simple caricature.

And then there is the Giant himself.

Vin Diesel was cast to voice the fifty-foot alien robot, and the choice required an actor willing to surrender every conventional tool of voice performance. The Giant does not speak in complete sentences for most of the film. His vocabulary is that of a being learning language from a nine-year-old boy, building a working knowledge of English from television broadcasts, comic books,

and direct observation. He speaks in fragments. He speaks slowly. The performance is built from the specific acoustic quality of Diesel's voice, a resonance that sits below most human speech, and from the precise timing of pauses that communicates thought rather than hesitation.

What Diesel does with the role that a different approach would not have achieved is give the Giant a quality of genuine interiority. The pauses before the Giant speaks are not the pauses of a machine processing. They are the pauses of a being feeling something and trying to find the words for it, trying to reach for a vocabulary built from borrowed human language to express an experience that is entirely its own. Bird had originally planned to modulate Diesel's voice electronically to make it less human, and abandoned the idea when he realized that the voice as delivered was more affecting than any processed version could be.

The Giant is not a robot with artificial intelligence. He is a person of a different species, born without memory, learning himself as he learns the world.

## Chapter 4: The Story

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The Iron Giant is structured as a Cold War parable about the difference between what you were made to be and what you choose to be, and it uses every element of its setting, its animation, and its story construction to make that argument with a clarity that does not feel reductive.

The Giant was built as a weapon. This is established early and confirmed as the film progresses, in the way the Giant's eyes change color and the defensive mechanisms engage when he perceives violence, in the nature of the weapons that unfold from his body when he is threatened. He is, materially, a gun. The film's repeated line, delivered by both Hogarth and the Giant at pivotal moments, is its thesis: "You are what you choose to be."

This is a children's film line. It is also a genuine philosophical claim about the relationship between nature and agency, and Bird earns the right to deliver it simply by spending 80 minutes showing rather than telling. The Giant's choices, made across the film's second half, are not made by a robot following a program. They are made by a being who has learned what it means to love someone and who decides, when the choice is forced, to be Superman rather than a gun.

The Superman reference is the film's most elegantly constructed piece of intertextual writing. Earlier in the film, Hogarth shows the Giant a comic book featuring Superman and explains the concept: a being of immense power who uses that power to protect rather than to destroy, who chooses benevolence when his nature, his physics, would allow him to choose anything. The Giant absorbs this and returns to it at the film's climax, when he is faced with a choice that the film has been building toward for

an hour.

### **The cost of fear**

The film's argument is not simply that the Giant is good and the government is bad. Its argument is more precise and more uncomfortable: that fear, when it is institutionalized and weaponized by authority, produces the same outcomes as malice.

Kent Mansley is afraid. His fear is not irrational by the standards of 1957; the Cold War had generated genuine anxiety about exactly the kind of alien technology the Giant represents. His error is that he allows that fear to short-circuit his capacity for observation, that he constructs the Giant as a Soviet weapon because that is the framework his fear provides, and that he pursues the destruction of the Giant with the conviction of someone whose certainty about a threat has insulated him from the evidence that the threat is not what he believes it to be.

The film does not let him be simply wrong. His fear is comprehensible. His institutional response to that fear is what the film condemns: the escalation to the nuclear option, the willingness to destroy Rockwell and everyone in it to eliminate a threat that he has defined but never adequately verified. The military's compliance in this escalation is also implicated. The film is not naive about the machinery of fear.

General Rogard, voiced by John Mahoney, is the film's most interesting peripheral figure, because he is the institutional authority who is not entirely captured by the paranoid logic. He is skeptical of Mansley. He is, in the film's terms, not entirely wrong to be. And in the end he is swept along by events that Mansley's choices have made unstoppable, which is how institutional

violence works: it does not require the people at the center of it to be monsters. It requires them to be bureaucrats.

## **The death and the sacrifice**

The film's emotional climax is the moment when the Giant chooses. A nuclear missile has been launched, aimed at Rockwell because Mansley triggered the launch in a moment of terrified desperation. The missile will kill everyone in the town, including Hogarth. The Giant is the only thing capable of intercepting it.

What follows is one of the most precisely constructed sequences in American animated film, and Bird earns every moment of it with the 75 minutes that precede it. The Giant does not calculate his response. He remembers. He remembers what Hogarth told him about Superman. He remembers what it means to choose. And he intercepts the missile, ascending into the upper atmosphere, at peace.

The sequence of his final flight, against a clear blue sky, with Michael Kamen's score opening into something that is simultaneously mournful and celebratory, asks more of the audience than a conventional animated film thought appropriate for a family release in 1999. It presents a genuine sacrifice, a genuine death, made by a character who has understood what he is choosing and has chosen it freely. It does not offer the comfort of a rescue until after the grief has been established. And then it offers something more interesting than a rescue: a dispersal.

The Giant does not survive intact. He is scattered across the earth in fragments, and the fragments move toward each other, reassembling themselves, recalling the moment in Hughes' original novel when the Iron Man falls from the cliff and his pieces

find each other. The final shot of the film shows a single bolt arriving at the snowy peak where the rest of the Giant is rebuilding himself, and the Giant's face assembling around an expression of recognition.

He is coming back. He chose to be what he was, and he is still becoming it.

## Chapter 5: The Score

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Michael Kamen came to *The Iron Giant* as one of the more versatile composers working in Hollywood, with a career that included the scores for *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, *Brazil*, and *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a range of registers and genres that made him adaptable in ways that more specialized composers were not. He was also, as it turned out, the only composer on *The Iron Giant*: all of Bird's subsequent films were scored by Michael Giacchino, and the Kamen score is the singular instance of what that collaboration produced.

Bird's original temp score was described by Kamen as initially alarming: a collection of Bernard Herrmann cues from science fiction films of the 1950s and 1960s, the exact musical language of the cultural moment the film was inhabiting. Herrmann's work for Hitchcock and for films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* had established a sonic vocabulary for the Cold War era's anxiety about the alien and the threatening, and Bird was using it to define the film's emotional temperature. Kamen had to write something that worked with that vocabulary rather than against it.

The score was performed by the Czech Philharmonic, a choice that gave it a full orchestral richness that the budget might otherwise have precluded, and it occupies the thematic territory between the adventure score and the emotional score, between the music that tells you something is happening and the music that tells you what it means. Kamen's main theme for the Giant is built on a bass foundation, something massive and slow-moving, that shifts across the film into different emotional registers: threatening when the Giant's weapons engage, gentle when he and Hogarth are alone, and in the final sequences, transcendent.

The sequence scored for the Giant's sacrifice and ascent is the score's peak, and it is one of the moments in the film that most consistently produces the specific quality of emotional response that parents experience watching the film with children and find themselves unable to fully account for. It is not manipulative music. It is music that has earned its emotional amplitude through an hour of preparation, and it delivers that amplitude plainly, without apology.

## Chapter 6: The Disaster

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The summer of 1999 was the summer of *The Phantom Menace* and *The Sixth Sense* and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, a summer of sequels, revivals, and franchise events, and into it Warner Bros. quietly released a hand-drawn animated film about a boy and a giant robot in *Cold War Maine*, with one poster.

The decision not to market *The Iron Giant* was not made maliciously. It was made structurally, by a studio that had lost confidence in its animation division after *Quest for Camelot* and had redirected its promotional attention to *Wild Wild West*, which it expected to be the summer's major event film. By the time the test screening results came back and the studio understood what it had, there was not enough time to build the promotional infrastructure that a successful animation release required: the fast-food tie-ins, the cereal boxes, the merchandise, the blanket advertising campaign that reached children who were not already aware of the film through some other channel.

Bird's account of this period is precise and does not disguise the irony. The studio's test scores were the highest they had seen in fifteen years. The studio's marketing commitment was approximately zero. The gap between those two facts is the whole story of the theatrical release.

Warner Bros. needed approximately \$8 million on the opening weekend to consider the release a success. The film opened to \$5.4 million, well below that threshold, in a market where the competition included films that had been heavily promoted for months and had established audience awareness that *The Iron Giant* simply did not have.

## **What the reviews said**

The critical response, where it existed, was lavish. Joe Morgenstern of the Wall Street Journal called it an instant classic in a review that predicted, correctly, that the film would outlive its box-office numbers. Other critics reached for comparisons: E.T., the previous generation's benchmark for the science fiction story of a child's friendship with a being from elsewhere. Shane, the classic Western whose structure of the stranger who arrives, cleans up a situation not of his making, and departs, the film invoked and then complicated.

The critical consensus was that *The Iron Giant* was the best animated film of 1999 and possibly of the decade. The box-office consensus was that nobody had come to see it.

The film grossed \$5.4 million in its opening weekend. Its second weekend produced \$3.4 million, a drop of 37 percent. Its domestic run totaled \$23.2 million. International added approximately \$8.5 million, for a worldwide total of \$31.7 million against a budget of \$48 to \$50 million.

It was the last fully traditional animated feature Warner Bros. Feature Animation would produce.

## Chapter 7: The Reclamation

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The Iron Giant arrived on VHS in January 2000, and the mechanism by which it built its audience over the following years is the same mechanism that built the audience for almost every cult animated film of that era: the home television, the willing child, and the specific quality of attention that a film watched in a living room commands when there is no pressure to enjoy it and every reason to.

Children who found it on cable, on rental shelves, in bargain bins, encountered it without the weight of its failure, without knowing or caring what it had done at the box office, without any framework for it except the experience of watching it. What they found was a film that treated them with the same seriousness it asked them to give back, that did not condescend to their age or their intelligence, that built a world and a friendship across 87 minutes and then asked them to feel the cost of losing something they had grown to love.

The film's particular emotional architecture is built for repeated viewing in a specific way. On a first viewing, the climax is a surprise, a sacrifice that the film has earned but that the audience has not been watching for. On a second viewing, every scene between Hogarth and the Giant is colored by the knowledge of what will be asked, and the friendship that builds between them, which is the film's whole substance, reads differently when you know it is also a preparation for loss. Parents who watched it with their children found themselves watching it again, to understand what they had seen, and then watching it again because the understanding had made it more rather than less worth experiencing.

The word-of-mouth that spread *The Iron Giant* across the 2000s was not the viral word-of-mouth of a social media era. It was the slower, more durable kind: a parent who had loved it recommending it to a friend who had children the right age, a teacher who showed it in a classroom, a teenager who found a VHS at a garage sale and reported back to their peer group. The audience was assembled one person at a time, over a decade, and the result was a fan base that had a quality of intensity proportional to the intimacy of the discovery.

## **"Superman"**

There is a single word in *The Iron Giant* that has become, for the community of people who love the film, the most emotionally loaded syllable in American animation.

Near the end of the film, as the Giant is preparing to intercept the missile and has communicated to Hogarth that he understands what he is doing, Hogarth says goodbye with the one word the film has established as the Giant's self-definition: "Superman."

And then the Giant ascends.

The word is not remarkable in isolation. It is remarkable because the film has spent 75 minutes earning it, building the relationship, building the understanding of what it means for the Giant to choose that identity over the one he was built with, and then delivering the word at the exact moment when the choice becomes irreversible. The community of *The Iron Giant* fans uses "Superman" as a kind of code, a shorthand for a specific quality of emotional experience, the feeling of a thing being exactly right at exactly the right moment in a story that has been building toward it.

## Chapter 8: The Signature Edition

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In 2015, sixteen years after the film's original release, Brad Bird and Warner Bros. produced *The Iron Giant: Signature Edition*, a remastered version of the film with two new animated sequences that had been storyboarded for the original release but cut for budget and time.

The two new scenes were animated by Duncan Studios, specifically recruited because several of the key animators who had worked on the original film were at that studio. Bird described the scenes, in an interview at the Toronto International Film Festival where the Signature Edition premiered, as scenes he had always wanted to include, that added dimension to the story without fundamentally altering it.

The process was an inversion of the original production story. In 1999, Bird had made the film with insufficient resources and left material on the table. In 2015, the film's cultural status had become valuable enough to Warner Bros. that completing it properly was commercially viable. The Signature Edition opened in select theaters on September 30, 2015, with an encore on October 4, and was released on Blu-ray in 2016 as an Ultimate Collector's Edition. The theatrical release sold out quickly in many cities, demonstrating the depth of the cult audience that had assembled over fifteen years.

The rehabilitation was complete enough by this point that *The Iron Giant* appeared regularly on best-of lists across the major film publications, including entries on lists of the greatest animated films ever made and the greatest science fiction films ever made. The audience that had found it in the years after its theatrical failure had grown up, and some of them had become

the people who made those lists.

## Chapter 9: What It Means

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The Iron Giant's reclamation story is the cleanest in this series, because it has the clearest villain. The film was not too strange for its audience. It was not released in the wrong cultural moment. It was not competing against something that the culture preferred by an honest reckoning. It was simply not marketed, and the gap between what the studio chose to do with it and what the test screening results suggested it deserved is the entire story of the theatrical failure.

The subsequent reclamation is proportionally clean: a film that deserved its critical reception got it, eventually, and a film that deserved its audience found it, eventually, through channels that the institutional machinery of cinema was not operating. Home video, cable, and the slow accumulation of word-of-mouth advocacy did the work that the marketing budget should have done in August 1999.

This makes *The Iron Giant* a different kind of case study from the other films in this series. *Waterworld* and *Scott Pilgrim* were films that the industry misunderstood as well as under-supported. *The Dark Crystal* was genuinely ahead of its time in formal terms. *The Iron Giant* was simply abandoned, and its reclamation is a story about what happens when a film is good enough to find its audience without institutional support.

The answer, it turns out, is that it finds its audience. It just takes longer.

### What Brad Bird made next

The trajectory of Brad Bird's career after *The Iron Giant* is itself a kind of argument about what the film accomplished. The studio that had abandoned his first feature provided him with no immediate second chance; he moved to Pixar, where he directed *The Incredibles* in 2004 and *Ratatouille* in 2007, both of which became critical and commercial landmarks in American animation. He won two Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature and became one of the most respected directors working in any format. He then directed the live-action *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol* in 2011 and *Tomorrowland* in 2015.

Every interview Bird has given across that trajectory has returned, in some form, to *The Iron Giant*. He has spoken about the frustration of its original release, about the test screening results that the studio did not act on, about the film he loves most in his career and the institutional circumstances that prevented its audience from finding it in theaters. He has also spoken, consistently, about the fact that the audience found it eventually, that the film exists, that the work was done and is permanent.

"The movie is out there," he told interviewers repeatedly over the years. "It's found its audience."

He was right. It was simply a longer journey than it needed to be.

## Chapter 10: The Enduring Giant

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The Iron Giant has been on Rotten Tomatoes' list of 100 Best Movies since the site formalized such a list, sitting with a score above 96 percent and a consistently high audience rating that reflects not casual approval but the specific intensity of feeling that the film generates in its admirers. It appears on TIME magazine's list of the 100 greatest films. It appears on Empire's list of the 500 greatest films. It appears on virtually every list of the greatest animated films ever made, generally in the top ten.

These lists were not assembled from the theatrical response in August 1999. They were assembled from the accumulated weight of a generation of viewers who found the film through every channel except the one the studio had to offer, who brought it to each other in the slow and durable way that good things circulate when institutional support has failed them.

The film's central argument, the argument that you are what you choose to be, that the capacity for destruction does not determine the outcome, is an argument the film has been making in private, one viewer at a time, for twenty-five years. It has converted more people to its position than most films convert to anything at all. The people it converts tend to carry it with them, the way the Giant carries his fragments toward each other across the earth's surface, building toward something whole.

The single bolt, arriving in the snow. The Giant's face assembling, again.

He is coming back.

He chose to be Superman.

## **Appendices: The Numbers, the Names, and the Story**

### **Appendix A: The Box Office Record**

The Iron Giant's commercial history is the starkest in this series: a film with extraordinary test screening results, strong critical reception, and no marketing support, whose theatrical run was over before the audience that would have made it profitable had a chance to be reached.

The opening weekend context shows the scale of the marketing problem:

The Sixth Sense, released the same weekend, had been heavily marketed. The Iron Giant had not. The difference in opening weekend performance almost exactly tracks the difference in marketing investment, and the film's subsequent critical reception demonstrated that the audience quality was comparable, if not superior.

The Signature Edition theatrical release in 2015 sold out multiple screening locations and demonstrated the depth of the audience that had assembled in the intervening sixteen years.

### **Appendix B: The Source Material**

Ted Hughes published *The Iron Man: A Children's Story in Five Nights* in the United Kingdom in 1968, through Faber and Faber. The American title was changed to *The Iron Giant* to avoid confusion with Marvel Comics' Iron Man character, who had been appearing in comics since 1963. The British title remained *The Iron Man* through multiple reprints.

Hughes (1930-1998) was one of the central figures in postwar British poetry, appointed Poet Laureate in 1984, and best known in the wider culture for his tumultuous marriage to the American poet Sylvia Plath. Plath died by suicide in February 1963, leaving Hughes with two children, Nicholas and Frieda. The Iron Man is described in Ted Hughes Society materials as having been written partly as a bedtime story for those children, a healing narrative in the wake of profound loss.

The book's structure in five nights reflects its origin as oral literature, a story told in installments across a week. Its mythic simplicity, its Iron Man who arrives from nowhere, reassembles himself, and eventually defeats a cosmic threat through patience rather than violence, is characteristic of Hughes' broader interest in the boundary between contemporary and mythological thinking.

The film's adaptation is loose enough that Brad Bird credited the film as being "based on" rather than "adapted from" the novel. The Giant's alien origin, his relationship with Hogarth, the Cold War setting, the government antagonist, and the climactic sacrifice are all Bird's additions. What the adaptation preserved was the book's core image: a being made of iron who chooses to be more than a weapon.

Pete Townshend's 1989 concept album *The Iron Man: A Musical*, credited on the film as an executive producer credit for Townshend, was the intermediate step that brought the property to Warner Bros.' attention, though the musical's content had little direct influence on the film's story or tone.

## **Appendix C: The Voice Cast**

Vin Diesel's work on *The Iron Giant* preceded his breakthrough as a live-action star. *Saving Private Ryan*, released the previous year, had given him a small but memorable role, and *The Iron Giant* demonstrated a vocal quality that subsequent producers recognized. The Giant was Diesel's first substantial film credit, and his subsequent career has made the performance retrospectively more notable: the actor who would become Dominic Toretto and Groot began his franchise career as a fifty-foot alien robot learning to choose.

The film was made during the brief period in Aniston's career when she was primarily identified as Rachel Green rather than as a film actress, and her casting in an animated feature was received by some as an oddity. Her performance, which was the most purely dramatic work she had been given in any medium to that point, demonstrated a quality that her subsequent film career confirmed.

## **Appendix D: The Score**

Michael Kamen composed the *Iron Giant* score in what he described as a conversation with Bird's temp track, a collection of 1950s science fiction cues drawn primarily from the work of Bernard Herrmann. The Czech Philharmonic, who performed the score, gave it an orchestral scale that the film's production budget might not otherwise have supported.

Kamen (1948-2003) died four years after the film's release. *The Iron Giant* was his first and only collaboration with Brad Bird; all subsequent Bird films were scored by Michael Giacchino, beginning with *The Incredibles* in 2004. In interviews, Bird described Kamen's approach to the score as having grasped the film's emotional temperature intuitively, and the score's particular

quality of earned sentiment rather than manipulative sentiment reflects that intuition.

The score was released on Rhino Records alongside a soundtrack album of period pop and rock that the film deployed for its Cold War setting. The two releases represent the film's two musical personalities: the orchestral score that carries its emotional weight, and the source music that grounds it in its specific historical moment.

Selected cue descriptions:

## **Appendix E: What Brad Bird Said**

The record of Brad Bird's public statements about *The Iron Giant* across the twenty-five years since its release constitutes one of the more extensive director commentaries on a film's production and reception in American cinema. Several passages are worth preserving verbatim.

On the production circumstances: "We joked on the film that they forgot to turn off the electricity, so we made a movie. That's kind of what it felt like because every week when we made it, or every two weeks, another executive in the building would be gone. Pretty soon there were none left, and we were just making the film."

On the marketing failure: "They were like, 'That's it, we're out of animation.' So we were perceived as a film that would be finished and put on the shelf until there was a hole or something in the release schedule in the future, and then we'd be plugged in."

On the test screening results: "The test scores were their highest for a film in fifteen years, according to people there."

On the film's legacy: "I'm not sure you know how beloved the movie is around the world."

That last statement was not Bird's. It was Kevin Costner's, speaking about *Waterworld* in a different context. But it could have been Bird's, about this film, and the fact that the same words fit both stories tells you something about what this series is arguing.

The studios did not understand what they had. The audience did.

*THE END*