

It's a Hollywood blockbuster animation that is set to become one of the most successful and beloved family films ever made. And unlike much of Disney's past output, writes MICHELLE LAW, this film brings positive, progressive messages about gender and difference into the hearts and minds of children everywhere.

# SISTERS DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES

*Frozen* and the Evolution  
of the Disney Heroine





Since its US release in November 2013, Disney's latest animated offering, *Frozen* (Chris Buck & Jennifer Lee), has met with critical acclaim and extraordinary box-office success. It won this year's Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature Film and Best Original Song (for 'Let It Go'), and despite being released less than six months ago, it has already grossed over US\$1 billion worldwide, making it the highest-earning Disney-animated film of all time. At the time of printing, the film's soundtrack has also spent eleven non-consecutive weeks at number one on the US Billboard charts, the most held by a soundtrack since *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997). Following the success of *Frozen* – and *Tangled* (Nathan Greno & Byron Howard, 2010), Disney's adaptation of the Rapunzel story – many are anticipating the dawn of the second Disney animation golden age. The first was what has come to be known as the Disney Renaissance, the period from the late 1980s to the late 1990s when iconic animated films such as *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1989) and *Aladdin* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1992) – films that adopted the structure and style of Broadway musicals – saved the company from financial ruin. Similarly, the *Frozen* phenomenon will only continue growing and inevitably secure a reputation as one of this generation's defining feature animations for children.

Among other factors, the success of *Frozen* could arguably be attributed to its progressive portrayal of female characters and their significant life relationships. The film also adopts a modern approach to storytelling that turns the structure and outcome of the traditional fairytale on its head. With castles, princes and princesses to play with and a story centred on the attainment of true love, *Frozen* succeeds in simultaneously adhering to and challenging conventional fairytale themes, characters and gender roles. But can a fairytale ever be truly progressive in its portrayal of heroines if those heroines are princesses? Are princesses and heroines mutually exclusive concepts? And what are the messages that *Frozen* highlights about gender, love, self-discovery and acceptance?

The film kicks off by introducing us to Elsa (Idina Menzel) and Anna (Kristen Bell), two sisters and princesses who share a close friendship and bond. Elsa, the older of the two, is gifted with a magic ability that enables her to freeze objects and conjure ice and snow. It's a talent that proves entertaining until a near-fatal incident in which Elsa accidentally strikes Anna with ice. In order to be healed, Anna's memories of Elsa's powers are wiped from her mind. But Elsa, guided by her own mammoth guilt and the instructions of her parents, agrees to be locked away for most of her adolescence to protect those she loves, particularly the adoring and naive Anna. Both sisters spend their formative years isolated and lonely: Elsa, a physical and emotional prisoner in her own private nightmare, and Anna, stalking the empty chambers of the castle, desperate for human company and conversation.

When Elsa enters puberty, she becomes more fearful of herself and the wellbeing of those she may come in contact with because her powers have intensified; upon experiencing strong emotion, her physical environment freezes and becomes almost uninhabitable, a reflection of her inner turmoil. So when the girls' parents die tragically at sea, Elsa's powers become uncontrollable. She withdraws further into herself despite Anna's attempts at reconciliation, and

the sisters' relationship becomes unsalvageable. It's on Coronation Day, when Elsa comes of age and becomes queen, that two instances change the course of the sisters' lives and relationship.

Anna meets and immediately becomes engaged to her 'true love', Hans (Santino Fontana), a charming and understanding prince from a neighbouring kingdom who offers Anna the love and companionship that she never received from her sister. And Elsa, despite her best attempts, loses control over her emotions, revealing her magic powers to the entire kingdom. She flees to the mountains, effectively liberating herself but also banishing herself from her home, and inadvertently plunges the kingdom into a harsh and unrelenting winter. It becomes Anna's mission – and the mission of several sidekicks she encounters along the way, including Kristoff the ice salesman (Jonathan Groff), Olaf the anthropomorphic snowman (Josh Gad) and Sven the reindeer – to retrieve Elsa so they can make amends to end the deadly winter and, more significantly, repair the sisters' broken relationship.

(Jodi Benson in *The Little Mermaid*), we see that they all share key commonalities. They each fulfil and reinforce the idea that princesses are beautiful, flawless, feminine, romantic and very naive individuals. And despite being the protagonists and driving forces in each of their stories, they are ultimately victims who must be rescued by their valiant prince and his act of 'true love'. In short, the 'heroines' are not necessarily the heroes of their own stories. They are saved, and there's a kiss, a wedding and a life lived happily ever after. However, over time the Disney princess began evolving with Jasmine (Linda Larkin in *Aladdin*) and Belle (Paige O'Hara in *Beauty and the Beast*, Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 1991), who are both headstrong female characters who refuse to marry (at first) and choose to love someone based on their character rather than their looks or wealth (and in Belle's case, we see a princess with book smarts for the first time). Further along the trajectory we meet Pocahontas (Irene Bedard in *Pocahontas*, Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg, 1995) and Mulan (Ming-Na Wen in *Mulan*, Tony Bancroft

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### THE TRADITIONAL DISNEY PRINCESS

If we examine the pantheon of iconic Disney princesses of the past century, including Snow White (Adriana Caselotti in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, William Cottrell et al., 1937), Aurora (Mary Costa in *Sleeping Beauty*, Clyde Geronimi, 1959), Cinderella (Ilene Woods in *Cinderella*, Clyde Geronimi et al., 1950) and Ariel

& Barry Cook, 1998), female protagonists who are self-sufficient and clever, and harbour aspirations greater than just romantic love. However, Pocahontas and Mulan are rarely regarded or marketed as Disney princesses, if at all. They are popular characters, but they are not princess material (at least in the Disney canon), in part due to their proactive natures and warrior narratives. And, superficially speaking, in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* there are no conventional princes or castles to be seen.





## ELSA AND ANNA: MODERN WOMEN AND GENDER POLITICS IN *FROZEN*

The Bechdel test is a set of criteria introduced by graphic novelist Alison Bechdel that states that a work of fiction, particularly film, must have at least two female characters, that these female characters must talk to each other, and that their conversation(s) must be about something other than a man or men. *Frozen*, then, a film centred on the familial bond between two sisters, passes the Bechdel test with flying colours – something that can largely be attributed to the influence of screenwriter and co-director Jennifer Lee, the first ever female director of a feature-length Disney animation. Certainly, the most striking and refreshing thing about Elsa and Anna is that they are three-dimensional, complex women who grow and mature as the film progresses. They are princesses, but they are also human, and therefore possess real and relatable flaws. Elsa is cold, proud and stubborn, and Anna is goofy and socially awkward. They are also, by the film's denouement, both active, strong and

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fearless – characteristics typical of male heroes or princes. But this doesn't detract from their appeal; the fact that they possess 'masculine' characteristics while retaining their femininity is arguably what leads to their success, and sends a strong message to audiences about what being a hero means.

The film also provides a broader commentary on gender roles and women's rights. Elsa is literally locked away and forced to hide herself and her gift from the world, highlighting that a woman with power is often perceived as threatening. There is also a subtle nod towards Elsa's burgeoning sexuality and womanhood when she chooses to embrace her new identity as the snow queen, complete with a self-directed makeover and a more confident, sassy gait. And when Elsa chooses to accept and embrace her true self, we see the gradual shift in the townspeople's responses to her: from fear, intimidation and scorn, to respect, admiration and love. Gender roles are flipped in numerous instances: Anna chooses to punch Hans herself; Kristoff becomes emotional at the sight of Elsa's ice castle; Elsa rules the kingdom successfully as queen; Anna is fearless and chooses to pursue Elsa herself; and Elsa transforms into a powerful woman who builds her own magnificent castle instead of being whisked away to one. These are all positive messages about women who are in control of their own fates and are proactive in their own journeys.

## BE YOURSELF: CHAMPIONING THE MARGINALISED OUTSIDER

Despite *Frozen* being a princess film, it explores universal themes relevant to both boys and girls, particularly identity and the stigma of being different. (On a demographic note, Disney has gone to great lengths to ensure young male viewers aren't deterred by *Frozen*, which accounts for why much of the marketing centres on Olaf, an asexual character, and why, like *Tangled*, which was first titled 'Rapunzel', the title offers little clue to there being female protagonists.) Elsa is constantly being punished by others and herself for her point of difference and the fact that she is 'abnormal'. She conceals her powers, which are in fact quite beautiful and special, because hiding them is preferable to being ostracised. It's only when she embraces her true self and lets go of people's judgements

ABOVE: Anna, Olaf, Kristoff and Sven NEXT SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Anna and Kristoff scale the ice; Elsa's ice castle; Anna and Hans; Oaken the innkeeper; the Duke of Weselton

that she develops into a confident and happy person. 'Let It Go' is itself an anthem about forgetting the past and moving towards a freer life, and Elsa's coming of age reinforces the narrative of the outsider triumphing over adversity.

## GOOD VERSUS EVIL

During pre-production, Disney struggled to portray Elsa as anything but villainous and vindictive.<sup>2</sup> She was evil for no reason and this lent little depth to the story or the characters' journey. The beauty of the final rendering of Elsa is that she is an inherently good person whose life circumstances have led her to act out in harmful ways. Like all of us, she has something to lose, and unintentionally hurts people in an attempt to protect herself. In this way, the film promotes sympathy and forgiveness by showing that being 'good' or 'evil' isn't necessarily black and white, and instances of evil can

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be triggered by mistreatment and misunderstanding. The film-makers drive this point home during the trolls' song, 'Fixer Upper': 'People make bad choices if they're mad or scared or stressed / Throw a little love their way and you'll bring out their best / True love brings out the best.' Even the truly villainous characters, such as the Duke of Weselton (Alan Tudyk) and Prince Hans, have reasons behind their misdoings, and when they are thwarted, we pity them and understand what led to their misguided pursuit of power.

## CHALLENGING THE CONCEPT OF TRUE LOVE

*Frozen* is the first Disney princess film that doesn't revolve around the pursuit or attainment of romantic love and marriage. Certainly, those elements are referenced in Hans and Anna's engagement and the presence of Kristoff as another romantic interest, but romance is challenged, often quite overtly, in two ways. Firstly, the film repeatedly questions the notion of 'love at first sight'. This is a trope commonly employed in Disney princess films: Ariel spies Eric (Christopher Daniel Barnes) on a ship and becomes smitten; Snow White is resurrected by a stranger's kiss; and Cinderella falls head over heels for her prince after a waltz, not a conversation. Conversely, when Anna and Hans become engaged on the day they meet, Elsa refuses to give them her blessing. Later, Kristoff mocks Anna about her speedy engagement, grilling her about how she could commit herself to someone she knows nothing about. Anna's idealism quite self-reflexively mirrors the romanticism of the Disney princesses of the past, whereas Elsa and Kristoff represent the modern voices of reason.

*Frozen* also champions platonic love (such as Olaf's friendship with Anna) and familial relationships. At the film's climax, Anna, who is literally freezing to death after Elsa accidentally strikes ice







into her chest, searches for an act of true love that will thaw her frozen heart. It is surprising and profoundly moving when Anna realises that the act of true love must come from herself. When faced with an impossible decision (kiss Kristoff and save herself, or protect Elsa from being slain by Hans), Anna makes two telling decisions: she chooses her sister over a man, and then she makes the selfless decision to sacrifice herself so that Elsa may live. Ultimately, it's Anna's act of love that resurrects her and saves the day. There is still a 'happily ever after', but it's not prescriptive. By showing that romantic love is not the only or the most valid kind of love, *Frozen* encourages audiences to appreciate and search for instances of true love that already exist in their own lives. (The fact that Anna and Kristoff end up together by the film's conclusion, almost as a side note, reinforces this idea that you can have romantic love but also that it's not the most important kind.)

*Frozen* strikes a difficult balance in adhering to the conventions of the Disney-princess genre while also subverting them in subtle ways. By drawing audiences in with familiar tropes and characters, we are lulled into a false sense of expectation, but are ultimately surprised by the outcome – the most obvious example of this being Anna's sacrifice. We jump to the inevitable conclusion that true love's kiss will save Anna, and then it does not. Yes, there is a 'happily ever after'. Yes, it is a princess movie. Yes, it's about love. But it is not restrictive about what love is and what being a princess means. There is a greater focus on women's relationships and journeys and how girls can save the day – Anna, through her sacrifice, and Elsa, by being herself. For once, we are presented with princesses that don't need rescuing, proving what women have always known but is rarely depicted in princess and children's films: that girls can be the heroines of their own stories.



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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Brooks Barnes, 'Boys Don't Run Away from These Princesses', *The New York Times*, 1 December 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/movies/frozen-disneys-new-fairy-tale-is-no-2-at-box-office.html>>, accessed 5 March 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Rob Lowman, 'Unfreezing *Frozen*: The Making of the Newest Fairy Tale in 3D by Disney', *Los Angeles Daily News*, 19 November 2013, <<http://www.dailynews.com/arts-and-entertainment/20131119/unfreezing-frozen-the-making-of-the-newest-fairy-tale-in-3d-by-disney>>, accessed 6 March 2014.

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