

# Tears Instead of Laughter

An Interview with Stop-Motion Animator Adam Elliot

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*Memoir of a Snail* (2024) is Australian stop-motion animator Adam Elliot's seventh film, importantly bringing him nearer to the conclusion of his 9-part Trilogy of Trilogies (three short shorts, three long shorts, and three features). The story revolves around lonely social misfit Grace Puddle, voiced by Sarah Snook, an ardent collector of ornamental snails, like her mother who died during childbirth. When their paraplegic and alcoholic father Percy (Dominique Pinon) dies, Grace is separated from her twin brother Gilbert (Kodi Smit-McPhee and Mason Litsos), who likes to impress with his fire-breathing skills. From a young age, Grace's life is filled with painful and traumatic experiences. As a teenager, Grace strikes up an important friendship with the idiosyncratic and elderly Pinky (Jacki Weaver), who, despite her age, has lost none of the zest for life. Neither friendship nor marriage spares Grace from life's difficult twists and turns, but amid the tragedy are an abundance of comedic and witty moments that shape a singular life.

Elliot's previous films include the three short shorts, *Uncle* (1996), *Cousin* (1998), *Brother* (1999), the two longer shorts, *Harvie Krumpet* (2003) and *Ernie Biscuit* (2015), and his first feature, *Mary and Max* (2009). From *Uncle* through to *Memoir of a Snail*, Elliot has established himself as an idiosyncratic

world-builder. Grace Puddle is the latest addition of a cast of lonely and eccentric characters, blighted by bad luck, or dark and quirky experiences that place them in Elliot's unique and singular universe

*Memoir of a Snail* premiered at the 2024 Annecy International Animation Film Festival. Connecting over Zoom for a virtual interview, Elliot explained that the film was only completed three weeks prior, and he was still in the process of trying to either learn or remember why he'd made it. He semi-jokes, "It was so long ago when we started, and now it's finished, I've got to articulate why I did it and what it means."

During his conversation with *MSJ*, Elliot discussed intertwining reality and fiction, the role the audience play in filling in the gaps, and preferring to make his audience cry instead of laugh.

**PR:** What compelled you to believe in this film and decide to tell this story at this particular point in time?

**AE:** When I was in film school, I had this pretentious plan of making a trilogy of trilogies because I loved the number three, and I love the number nine for all sorts of stupid reasons. So, I wanted to make three short shorts, three long shorts, and



Fig. 1 | Director Adam Elliot. IFC Films, 2024.

three features. I thought that's a nice little neat package. It was a bit of a joke, but it has become true because I'm up to number seven now.[...] So, I've only got two to go and then I can die.

Stop-motion is a slow and therefore expensive art form, and the truth is, I've probably only got two left in me. This one took eight years, and I hope the next one doesn't take that long.

I never had a strong idea of what the film was going to be. Instead, I tend to start with the details and work backwards. So, I don't start with a three-act structure or a strong idea of what the conclusion or inciting incident will be. I just start creating characters and attach quirks and add idiosyncrasies to them. Then, by the fourth or fifth draft, the three-act structure, themes, and messages start to magically appear.

My father died eight years ago, and he was certainly a collector/hoarder. He didn't see himself as a hoarder and, similarly, with my mother, they both had a lot of stuff, like a lot of people's parents do at that age. I started to think about why human beings collect things. Why do we collect things that are unnecessary, and why do we attach sentimental value to certain objects? So, I started to read a lot of books on hoarding and dug deeper into the psychology. I discovered many extreme hoarders have suffered a lot of loss, and more often than not, the loss of a child or a sibling, and collecting is a coping mechanism and form of self-preservation.

At the same time, I always wanted to make a film about a friend of mine who was born with a severe cleft palate and had eleven operations as a child. She was horribly teased and

bullied and yet, as an adult, became this flamboyant extravert. I was fascinated by how she transformed and learned to cope and turn disfiguration into a positive. So, the two ideas slowly started to come together and evolve, and I'd always had a fascination with twins and when they're separated, how devastating that can be. This then became intertwined, and then I've some elderly friends that are eccentric, and they became the inspiration for Pinky. [...] But it all came together slowly.

**PR:** One of the striking things about *Memoir of a Snail* is that Grace's life is defined by sorrow, pain, and struggle, and yet, there's the presence of humour and joy. It reminds me of the gallows humour people will adopt as a type of coping mechanism.

**AE:** I always love the quote, "Without the dark, the light has no meaning." In some ways, the gags in the film are more about that relief and the release of tension from all the darkness. But even for people whose lives are extremely bleak, there's always something that can bring a smile or a bit of joy, and vice versa, because even the happiest people are not always happy—there are times when they feel lonely and melancholic.

Ultimately, I'm trying to create characters that are empathetic and people can identify with. It is tough doing that with plasticine—getting people to suspend their disbelief and believe these blobs of clay are real people. That's a real challenge, but in some ways, stop-motion is the perfect medium for that, because you have to suspend your disbelief right from the get-go. You have to trust and believe that they're real.

I often say we're more like magicians than we are filmmakers. It's all trickery, smoke and mirrors, and illusion. Sometimes



Fig. 1 | Director Adam Elliot poses with Grace Pudel. IFC Films, 2024.

I can't even watch my films because I can only see the plasticine, and so, I can't be objective. As long as there's a reaction of some sort, even if the audience [members] are just laughing, then that's fine, but if I can get them to cry, I feel like I've achieved something. It's a sick ambition to have [laughs] but I prefer tears to laughter.

**PR:** When you say you prefer tears to laughter, are you attentive to specific themes or are you focused on crafting a story driven by emotion?

**AE:** By the second or third draft, the theme of cages started to arise. I thought that had been done to death in the cinema but then I kept thinking about the symbolism of Grace as a snail—she was almost retracting into her shell and her bedroom becomes a self-imposed prison. She learns that the worst cages are the ones that we create for ourselves. Then there's Gilbert, who is constantly breaking out of his cage, metaphorically, and he's setting the animals free—the birds from their cages, the pigs from the pen, and the budgies from the aviary. So, I was trying to develop that contrast between the siblings.

There was a deliberate theme, but I don't know whether it resonates much with the audience or is obvious. It is the emotion that people seem to be responding to, particularly Pinky's death and then the relief and reward for Grace, who has been dragged through the mud. Originally, I didn't have Gilbert coming back, but I thought, 'No, Grace needs a reward for the trauma and perpetual bad luck.'

[...] Someone in the audience gasped when Gilbert came back. You could hear them breathing a sigh of relief because it's pretty punishing what I did to Grace. I push the envelope too

far, but I think it balances out by the end. Only a few people have guessed that Gilbert would come back. Instead, most people are surprised, which surprises me because we put in little clues here and there that he was coming back.

My own father was an acrobatic clown and entertainer who made people laugh and cry, and if you just try to do those two things, then you're halfway there.

**PR:** Thematically, *Memoir of a Snail* is an exploration of loneliness, resilience, and self-preservation. Grace, like the other characters, is an aspirational figure that leads me to consider how you take themes and imbue them with a strong emotional core.

**AE:** Sure, and the other thing, too, is I was very conscious of Grace's character arc. Film school and all the scriptwriting books talk about having a strong transformation for your protagonist. I feel Grace certainly shows bravery towards the end, but she is quite a passive person. She's bombarded with bad luck, and she's like a sponge for all this trauma. I think she does transform, but it's not a massive transformation. The de-hoarding, the de-cluttering is certainly helpful and cleansing, but really, the true hero of the film is probably Sylvia the Snail if you think about it, because she's the one that directs Grace to the potatoes, although, whether Sylvia is a sentient being who knows where the potatoes are or it's just a happy accident. And Pinky is sort of the sage who helps Grace.

Hoarding is Grace's subconscious way of coping, and the film is also about loss. Grace loses her brother, her mother, her father, and she loses Pinky. It's unrelenting, and yet she manages to survive and by going to film school she is putting herself first finally and, to some degree, being proactive.

**PR:** On the subject of transformation, the audience's response is influenced by the emotional baggage they bring to a film. *Memoir of a Snail* is an example of how a film is influenced by the audience's changing life experiences, which creates the contradiction of cinema being permanent and impermanent.

**AE:** Oh absolutely, and all of my characters don't have legs—it's like *The Muppets*. If only the camera could pull back, and you could see all the chaos around the sets. There are lights, pencils, and rigs, and so on. I find the audience fills in the gaps, and this is the beauty of animation 'full stop.' We're not putting in every single detail of the characters or their environments. The audience fill in the gaps and create those details that don't exist, and I think they see themselves in the characters and project extra emotions onto the characters.

We showed the film to some fifteen-year-old kids a few days ago here in Annecy and by the end I could see the young girls were emotional wrecks. So, I felt like I'd done my job [laughs]. But the boys were very stoic. There were no tears or signs of tears on their faces, yet the more senior audience are much more open. It's going to be interesting to see, not just how it resonates with ages and gender, but with different nationalities. I'm keen to see how Americans respond—not just because we burnt down a church [laughs]. I hope it's universal and I always try to create universal characters.

[F]or some of the people that have come up to me after screenings, you can see that it has been a visceral experience, and that it has shaken them in some way. I met somebody who has gone through gay conversion therapy, and they found it very triggering. When you're dealing with adult subject matter and challenging subject matter, you have to remind yourself that it can be triggering for people and not always push buttons in a positive way.

I love the word verisimilitude. A film can be a moment of deep truth or deep understanding, and I think all filmmakers aspire to that. That's what I want when I go to the cinema. I want to come out not just feeling nourished and entertained but somehow transformed. I always joke that we're not saving people's lives, but the thing about filmmaking is, unlike painting and sculpting, we can reach so many more people so quickly, and you can have an impact. You have to remember that, and you have a degree of responsibility to show content and tell stories that are ultimately uplifting and nourishing.

I'm often told that my films are bleak, depressing, or dark. That's not my intention. My intention is to end the film with an uplifting moment. Yes, people die, but people die in real life, and so why shouldn't they die in animation? I had this question the other day, "Why do you have sex in your films?" I just said, "Well, why not?" Just because there are no sex scenes in *Wallace and Gromit* (1989-2024, Creator, Nick Park).

**PR:** Isabelle Huppert, head juror at the 2024 Venice Film Festival, has expressed concerns about the future of cinema, owing to its current "very weak" condition. In the past year, there have been discussions about how cinema is no longer the dominant art form. Is it as bleak as some suggest?

**AE:** I struggle with all of this because I love the format and the feature length. I love it as an hour and a half of your life. So, you don't want to waste the audience's time, and we have a lot of screen time competition now with series, video games, and all these other stimulating forms of entertainment.

We went to this Netflix party last night, and I was talking to someone about how I find Netflix completely dull. Every now and again you come across something interesting, but it's just this massive pool of content. We're all drowning in content, and we're all looking for something that connects and gives us meaning. I feel starved, and maybe that's because I've watched too many films. I'm fifty-two now, and I'm also a member of the Academy, and so every year I watch hundreds of films—maybe you become desensitised. But every now and again, there's something that really hits you. For me, *Triangle of Sadness* (2022, Dir. Ruben Östlund) was a wonderful film. It was so strange, but all Ruben Östlund's films are wonderful. So, that struck me, and then I was in tears by the end of *Close* (2022, Dir. Lukas Dhont).

It feels like it's one in a hundred films, and why is that with all the tools at our disposal? We have access to any film we want as reference and guidance. We can look at any [Martin] Scorsese film we want, and analyze what he did right, and what did wrong, and yet there are so few films that have an impact. I find that curious, and so, all I'm trying to do with my films is have an impact and push people's buttons, and not just because I want a reaction. I want them to think about what they're seeing. I certainly want them to laugh and be entertained, but I want them to experience something deeper than that. I want some resonance, and it's nice when you see people come out of the cinema disturbed and not just bored, but you can't please everybody.

We're drowning in content, and I wonder where we will be in ten years' time. Then, of course, we have AI on the horizon and there's a discussion here at the festival about it. I think I'm okay as a stop-motion animator because it's clear what I do is handmade. Maybe as a scriptwriter, I should be more worried, but it's a peculiar time. Here at Annecy there are 16,000 fanatics and when I first started coming here thirty years ago there were only 4,000. So, animation is alive and well, but I'm not quite sure whether storytelling is, because I find a lot of animation is just colour and movement. ■