



OFFICIAL SELECTION 2021
sundance
film festival

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Dear educators,

Thank you for attending the 44th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's virtual screening of *Marvelous and the Black Hole*. This year, our film selections for school screenings continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom.

We know that this year is likely one of the most challenging of your professional career, and we hope that this film and study guide can support the incredible work you're already doing. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text.

The discussion questions on the following page offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using one of the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece. Additionally, individual handouts for before, during, and after viewing are provided as stand-alone activities to be used individually or in sequence. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your in-class screening.

Thank you so much for your tireless work!

Sincerely,

The CFI Education Team



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the main events that occur in this film? What has changed between the start and the end?
2. Does this film feel real? Why or why not?
3. What are the primary emotions you felt during this film? What are some secondary emotions?
4. Consider the editing and the tempo of this film. Did things move quickly or slowly? Why?
5. What do you see in this film that reminds you of other stories from your life or other stories you know?
6. What are some background details you noticed in this film? How do these details provide information about the time or place in which this film was made?
7. Consider other films you've seen. What makes this film unique or important? What are some connections between this film and other films?
8. If you were to give this film another title, what would you title it?
9. Of the adults in Sammy's life, who do you think is the best role model? Why?
10. Why do you think Sammy decides to learn magic?
11. What do you think the director of this film is trying to say about the role of loss, grief, and trauma in our lives?

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. A key event in Sammy's life is the death of her mother, which occurs prior to the events in the film. In an essay, explore how the loss of her mother shapes Sammy's relationships with the other characters in the film.
2. In what ways is *Marvelous and the Black Hole* an example of a coming-of-age story? Describe the moments in the story that contribute the most to the overall meaning of the film.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

So You've Grown Attached

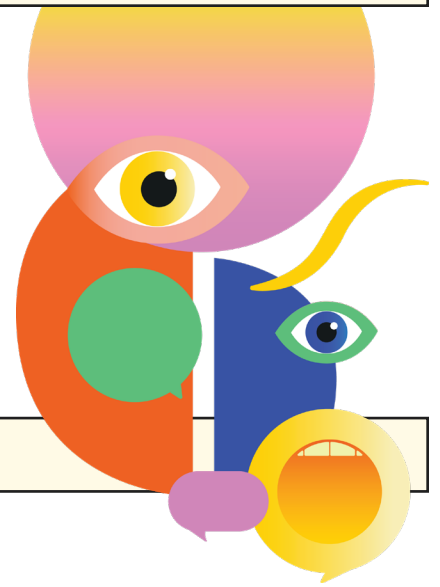
A short film written and directed by Kate Tsang

<https://vimeo.com/136112694>

Kate Tsang

The filmmaker's website, containing additional short films, credits, and biographical information

<http://www.katetsang.com/>



STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.6

Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.





CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

ABOUT CFI

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CFI Education programs.

Follow the Mill Valley Film Festival on social media

 @millvalleyfilmfest  @MillValleyFilmFestival
 @mvfilmfest  californiafilminstitute #MVFF44



ABOUT THE FILM

Toss a moody teen delinquent into a secret society of magicians, step into her perspective with clever dark humor and fun fantasy scenes, and blaze through an uplifting coming-of-age story that's both unique and universal. Kate Tsang's debut feature pairs the perfectly cast Miya Cech (*Always Be My Maybe*), as angry and rebellious 13-year-old Sammy, and Rhea Perlman (*Cheers*), as Margot the Marvelous, a children's party magician giving off grumpy-but-wise grandma vibes. Behind the snarl, cigarettes, and combat boots, Sammy shields a heart fractured by grief over her mother's death. After stumbling across Margot in a chance encounter, she tiptoes into an unlikely friendship that unlocks the healing they both need. Viewers will wrap their hearts around relatable Sammy, and her fragile, dysfunctional family, as she finds her way to peace by harnessing the special magic of forgiveness and love.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR: KATE TSANG

Kate Tsang is an artist, filmmaker, and Emmy-nominated writer creating imaginative, offbeat stories with heart. Kate's award-winning shorts have been watched by millions online and broadcasted nationally on PBS. Her most notable works are *So You've Grown Attached* and *Welcome to Doozy*. In addition, Kate has written on the hit shows *Adventure Time: Distant Lands* (HBO MAX) and *Steven Universe Future* (Cartoon Network). *Marvelous and the Black Hole* is Kate's debut feature film.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



My parents divorced when I was young and I was shuttled back and forth between their homes in Hong Kong and the US for years. Everything felt unstable and isolating. My parents buried their feelings and themselves in work. It felt especially strange when new significant others were introduced and I was supposed to accept things as is. During this time, I found comfort in coming-of-age and fantasy films. I was drawn to stories about characters caught in the in-between, like ghosts and monsters and, well, teenagers. John Waters's *Hairspray*, Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, and

Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* were a few of my favorites. They made real on the screen what I felt inside and made me feel less alone. They helped me believe that even though the world is full of terrible things, it still has pockets of joy and wonder. But as much as I appreciated these films, there was something missing. I never saw protagonists that looked or sounded like me, an Asian American girl. *Marvelous and the Black Hole* is my answer to this missing piece of the American film experience.

Marvelous and the Black Hole celebrates the unlikely friendship between two outsiders: an unruly Chinese American teenager and a surly magician who's old enough to be her grandmother. They come together during an especially fraught time in each other's lives and change it forever in unexpected and fantastic ways. The story is loosely based on my own childhood experiences with depression and loneliness. And, my attempts to find hope within a dark and confusing period. Much of Margot and Sammy's relationship was inspired by my relationship with my grandfather. He helped raise me after my parents' divorce. At night, he would tell stories to help me sleep. Stories that I would later realize were his own horrifying experiences with the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong that he transformed into wondrous and cathartic fairy tales. He taught me the power of channeling pain into something beautiful. In *Marvelous and The Black Hole*, Margot imparts the same lesson to young Sammy through the expressive art of sleight of hand magic.

Marvelous and the Black Hole is a joyful celebration of resilience. I made it for those who are grieving a loss, for Asian American women who rarely get to see themselves as the leads in films, and lastly, I made it for me. This is the film I wish I had growing up, and I hope it'll bring some joy during difficult times.

Questions to Consider:

1. What were Kate Tsang's primary goals when making this film?
2. What aspects of Kate Tsang's background or experiences remind you of stories from your own life or other stories you have heard?
3. Is it typical for a movie to be based largely on the filmmaker's own life and experiences? What other films have you seen that do this?

DURING VIEWING: RELATIONSHIP NOTECATCHER

Directions:

As you watch the film, pay attention to the various relationships that Sammy, the protagonist, has with other characters. For each character, take a few notes in each box to record your observations.



What is Sammy's relationship with this character like at the start of the film?
How has their relationship changed by the end?

How does this character challenge or encourage Sammy to grow?



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DURING VIEWING: RELATIONSHIP NOTECATCHER



LEO

What is Sammy's relationship with this character like at the start of the film?
How has their relationship changed by the end?

How does this character challenge or encourage Sammy to grow?



PATRICIA

What is Sammy's relationship with this character like at the start of the film?
How has their relationship changed by the end?

How does this character challenge or encourage Sammy to grow?



MARIANNE

What is Sammy's relationship with this character like at the start of the film?
How has their relationship changed by the end?

How does this character challenge or encourage Sammy to grow?

AFTER VIEWING: RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Directions:

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. Do you think that by the end of the film Sammy has grown a lot, a little, or not at all? Explain your answer using examples from the film.

2. Why do you think Sammy is drawn to learn to perform magic? What is it about magic that speaks to her personality and interests?

3. What parts of the story/character do you think might be based on writer/director Kate Tsang's specific cultural identity and experiences as a Chinese-American girl?

4. Throughout the film, animations, on-screen text, and fake archival footage are used. What is the purpose of these stylistic choices? Do you think they are effective?

5. If you read Kate Tsang's Director's Statement (see page 2), what were her goals with this film? Do you think she was successful in achieving these goals? Explain.

ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

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What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

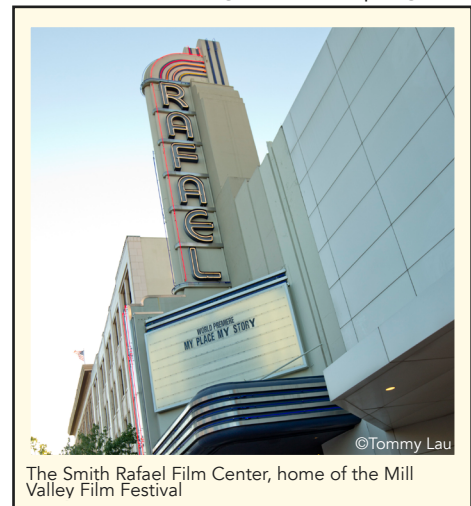
History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

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Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway (www.filmfreeway.com) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.