

# Fish stories

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

Tim Burton's **Big Fish** begins with a sentimental premise: an 11th-hour reconciliation between a dying father and his estranged son. Will Bloom (Billy Crudup) has never forgiven his dad, Edward (Albert Finney), for withholding the truth about himself all these years, rendering his past in the form of whoppers that enthralled Will as a child but infuriated him when he grew up and realized they were fantasies.

Will links Edward's stories with his frequent absences, and regards them as indications of his general inaccessibility as a father, and possibly as evidence that he was living another life apart from Will and his mother, Sandra (Jessica Lange). Will is a storyteller himself, a novelist, and John August's screenplay (adapted from Daniel Wallace's novel) gives him sufficient romantic imagination to marry a beautiful French photojournalist (Marion Cotillard) who finds Edward charming. Yet when Will insists on learning the unvarnished truth from his ailing dad, he seems to have the soul of an office clerk. What he discovers, of course, is that he's got Edward all wrong.

The set-up may be conventional, but Burton and August use it as a frame for a series of tall tales, each wilder and funnier than the one before. It turns out that Edward (played as a young man by Ewan McGregor) is a fabulist who constructs extravagant metaphors for the phases of his life. Childhood, when he first glimpses life's mysteries, is embodied in an adventure he embarks on with his buddies: they confront a witch (Helena Bonham Carter) whose glass eye predicts the death of anyone with the nerve to stare her in the face. (This sequence contains inevitable echoes of the great episode in Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* in which little Margaret O'Brien is initiated into the rituals of Halloween.)

Edward proves his manhood by saving his town from a hungry giant (Matthew McGrory), who becomes his first traveling companion. His quest for excitement leads him through dangerous woods to an idyllic village called Spectre, where people tend to get lost, their shoes strung up on a clothesline so they can't wander away—but he

manages to escape. He courts the girl of his dreams (Alison Lohman, sad-eyed but entranced, looking like a figure in a pre-Raphaelite painting, plays Sandra as a young woman) in a field of daffodils, her favorite flower. He earns her love by hard toil at a circus whose owner (Danny DeVito) has promised him one piece of information about her for each month he works. And he has to tame his boss, an essentially kind-hearted man whose loneliness has curdled his spirit; in Edward's story, he's cursed—a werewolf.

These stories all involve magical transformations, and Burton and cinematographer Philippe Rousselot lend each a distinctive visual magic. The movie is a wondrous outpouring of images that are gorgeous and hilarious in equal measure: a circus cat on a trapeze; a ramshackle, leaning house that is restored to its original shape with a push from Karl the Giant; Korean nightclub performers (in Edward's secret-mission war story) who are Siamese twins. Then there's the big fish of the title, an unattainable beast that, at different times, represents love, happiness and Edward himself.

The other magic in *Big Fish* is the way Burton's tall tales add up emotionally. The frame may seem flimsy and conventional, but by the end it's taken on the fantastic shape of Edward's imagination, his sweetness and his enormous heart.

Burton couldn't pull off this enchantment without Finney and McGregor, whose performances—vaudevillian yet poetic—are a perfect match. And it was an inspiration to cast Jessica Lange opposite Finney. It's a relatively small role, but she may never have seemed more desirable on screen, and their scenes together give the lie to Will's complaint that his father had more pressing sexual interests than Sandra. (Helena Bonham Carter shows up in a second role as the woman Edward supported financially but never loved.) When Lange, fully clothed, steps into Finney's bath, her smile radiant with devotion and erotic mischief, marriage looks like a pretty good proposition.

Edward entrusts Will with the task of crafting a fitting ending for his life; this last story is about how we usher those we love into death, and how we deal with their loss. This solemn responsibility brings out qualities in Will he didn't know he had (though it comes too late to save Crudup's performance). And his fabrication brings back all the marvelous characters in Edward's stories for a splendiferous finale. The movie concludes with a shot of the "big fish" leaping into the mist, perhaps the most beautiful image of all.