

Fish story

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

The latest animated feature from Pixar, *Finding Nemo*, has all the trademarks of its imprint, which produced *A Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and the *Toy Story* movies. The writing is witty, with a parodic, hipster's tone; the casting of the voices is ingenious; the visual design is zippy and inventive. You get the impression that the creators--directors Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich and writers Bob Peterson and David Reynolds--had the time of their lives, cracking themselves up in the studio.

Finding Nemo is about an adventurous young clownfish, just beginning school and eager to be out of the control of his possessive single dad. He gets scooped up by an amateur fisherman and lands in a tank in an office in Sydney, Australia. The fisherman is a dentist who intends young Nemo for his niece, a murderously irresponsible little girl whose mouthful of hardware is an ominous tribute to her uncle's profession.

The story, which Stanton worked up, intercuts the tale of Nemo (voiced by Alexander Gould)--he's befriended by the other fish in the tank, who combine forces to help him return to the ocean--with that of his father, Marlin (Albert Brooks), who is searching the world for his son with the aid of an affable companion named Dory (Ellen DeGeneres), a sweet-natured blue fish with a short-term memory problem.

The Pixar animators draw on a psychedelic palette. Marlin and Dory make their way across a crazy-quilt ocean inhabited by (to list the cleverest ideas in the script) a school of fish that goes in for visual impersonations, a pack of surfer-dude turtles (Stanton himself voices the leader, Crush), and a trio of 12-step-program sharks who've sworn off fish and are struggling to stay on the wagon. The writing is consistently funny, and the voicing maintains the standard set by previous Pixar casts.

Brooks, who long ago parlayed anxiety into a comic style, and the loopy DeGeneres, whose rhythms are so unpredictable that she sounds as if she improvised her lines, are an inspired pairing. And with his pinched voice accompanying Marlin's pained clown face (it's a running gag in the picture that though every sea creature Marlin encounters expects a clownfish to be uproarious, in truth he knows exactly one joke and is hopeless at recounting it), Brooks is considerably more entertaining here than in the extravagantly furbished but misbegotten current remake of *The In-Laws*. The classy vocal ensemble also includes Willem Dafoe as Gill, Nemo's croak-voiced, wised-up fish-tank mentor; Barry Humphries as Bruce the recovering shark; and Allison Janney as Peach the starfish, whose elastic, gingerbread-man form is typically half-pressed against the bowl, scouting danger.

The highlight of the Pixar output has been *Toy Story 2*, an unexpectedly moving reflection on the evanescent quality of childhood. (The toys were at the mercy of the inescapable tendency of their owners to grow out of them.) In the subsequent *Monsters, Inc.*, you could feel the Disney mind-set taking over, infusing the narrative and even the characters with sentimentality. The same tendency is unfortunately apparent in *Finding Nemo*. The film attributes Marlin's neurotic fussing over his son to his loss of a mate and her 400 or so other eggs to a shark, who invades the family's peaceful suburban coral in the first few minutes of the film. Marlin has to learn to give his son a little freedom, while his inexhaustible efforts to locate Nemo turn Marlin, in Nemo's eyes, from an embarrassment into a swashbuckling hero.

The *Toy Story* films and *A Bug's Life* didn't have to sell family values; the way the stories were spun, they simply assumed the importance of family and community. And there's something phony and self-serving about selling the idea of family to the families who will come out in droves to visit Disneyland and Disney World, and to buy tickets to this movie.