



My Life as a Zucchini (Ma Vie de Courgette)

Following his alcoholic mother's sudden death, nine-year-old Icare, who goes by the nickname Zucchini, is sent to live in a foster home filled with other orphans his age. The kids in this home all have pasts shaded with tragedy including suicide, abuse, and drugs. At first, Zucchini struggles to find his place in this new environment, but with the help of his newfound friends he learns to trust and love while searching for a new family of his own. Arguably, this French-language film cuts closer to the reality of the foster home experience than live-action melodramas like *Annie* or *Matilda* ever did.



Recommended for ages 13+

Themes: family; identity; parenting challenges; community; diversity; grief/loss; teamwork

Director(s): Claude Barras | **66 min** | **Drama** | **2016** | **Country:** Switzerland | **Language:** French w/English subtitles

SET THE STAGE | THOUGHT-STARTERS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Having primarily worked in short films, *My Life as a Zucchini* is one of director Claude Barras's first feature films. In its two-year-long production, Barras and a crew of 50 other craftsmen built 60 individual sets and 54 puppets as well as three different outfits for each puppet. Unlike live-action film, stop-motion animation is created by taking still images of a scene and editing them together so they appear to move. This means each "movement" by one of the puppets has to be carefully framed and photographed to create a sense of continual movement.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Foster Care:** A system in which a child has been placed into a ward, group home, or private home of a state-certified caregiver.
- **Stop-Motion Animation:** A type of animation that is captured one frame at a time, with physical objects that are moved between frames. In *My Life as a Zucchini*, each character is a puppet that the filmmaker moves to create a sense of movement.
- **Shot:** A single uninterrupted section of footage. Shots can be described by how close or far they are from the subject, or by the perspective it shows the audience.
- **Cinematography:** The art and technique of making motion pictures. This includes how the film uses light, shadow, color, movement and composition within the frame.

For more film terms, refer to the PCFF Film Glossary (pcfri.org/FilmHub).

TALK ABOUT IT | DISCUSSION

- Think about other movies you've seen or books you've read about orphans' experiences. How did this film differ? How does the film try to break stereotypes or change your perspective (e.g. Raymond the police officer)?
- As the children become more comfortable with each other, they begin to develop familial-like bonds despite not being blood-related. Are there any groups outside of your family that you have a special bond with? What is that bond? Is it different from your relationship with your family? If so, how?
- At one point in the film, Zucchini gives Camille the boat made from his mother's old beer can. What did this gift symbolize?
- What do you think the film's message is? How is that message conveyed?
- At the beginning of the film, the children living in the foster home are defined by their parents' past abuses toward them. Do you think this is how they are characterized by the end of the film? Why or why not?
- How would you describe the relationships the children remember having with their parents versus what the relationship may have actually been like?



Clues
and
Cues

Pay attention while watching

- Think about how relationships are created and strengthened between the characters over the course of the film. Are there any relationships that are like a family's?
- Consider how the film's animation style is fitting for the film's story. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to tell the story through this particular style?

GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



For Activity Reel details, downloadable storyboard template and more, visit the the Film Hub website: www.pcffri.org/FilmHub

• Writing Prompt

Materials: Paper, Pens, Pencils

While we learn about the past traumas of the other children in the foster home, the film is told from Zucchini's perspective. How might the film have been different had it been told through the perspective of another child in the home? Pick one of the other characters and narrate a key scene in the film from their point of view. What changes would have to be made? How might those changes affect viewer's perception of another character?

• Make a Memory Kite

Materials: Paper, String, Popsicle sticks, Glue, Markers

Memory Kite

When Zucchini arrives at the foster home, he brings only two possessions: a kite made in memory of his father and his mother's beer can. Using materials you have at home, make or design a kite to remember a family member, friend, or pet who is no longer with you. What types of images would you put on the kite? How do they relate to that person (or pet's) life?

Movie Poster Kite

Make a kite inspired by a scene, object, or theme from the film that you found memorable. What made certain scenes or imagery stand out to you? Think about how your kite could act as a poster advertising the film for those who have not seen it. What might they think the film is about based on your kite?

BEYOND THE FILM | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Select from the following resources to complement the film and inspire further discussion or programming.

BOOKS

• The Great Gilly Hopkins

by Katherine Paterson

Twelve-year-old Gilly Hopkins hates all the foster families she is placed with, resulting in her reputation as an unmanageable child. All of that begins to change when she is placed with her latest family, The Trotters.

• The Thief Lord

by Cornelia Funke

Prosper and Bo are two orphans who run away from their cruel aunt and uncle. They then meet the "Thief Lord" who leads a ring of orphans who dabble in petty crimes.

• Pictures of Hollis Woods

by Patricia Reilly Giff

A twelve-year-old orphan has been placed in the home of an elderly artist who needs her. Hollis remembers the only other time she was happy in a foster home.

• Matilda

by Roald Dahl

Matilda is often treated poorly or neglected by her parents, but uses her unusual gift of telekinesis and intellect to exact her revenge on them and her mean school teacher, Miss Trunchbull.

FILMS

• At Eye Level (Auf Augenhöhe) (2016)

Since the death of his mother, ten-year-old Michi has lived in an orphanage. Michi's expectations soar when he comes across evidence in his belongings that might tell him where to find his father.

• (Short film): Papa Cloudy series (2012-2015)

Dir. Akiko McQuerrey: A series of stop-motion animated films Papa Cloudy and his adventures - from mending a broken heart to leading the orchestra!

• Annie (1982)

Set during the Great Depression, Annie is subjected to a "hard knock life" living in an orphanage in New York City. Her luck begins to change once she is taken in by America's richest man, Oliver Warbucks.

• Matilda (1996)

Film adaptation of Roald Dahl's classic book. While Matilda is not an orphan, she frequently suffers abuse and neglect from her parents, leading her to discover her own magical powers.

•  Indicates PCFF festival selection

RELATED INTERNET LINKS

• IndieWire article, 'My Life as a Zucchini':

Creating A Truffaut-Like Stop-Motion Coming of Age Movie:

www.indiewire.com/2016/11/my-life-as-a-zucchini-stop-motion-coming-of-age-movie-1201747183

• Interview with director Claude Barras on the making of My Life as a Zucchini:

deadline.com/2016/11/my-life-as-a-zucchini-claude-barras-max-karli-switzerland-animation-oscars-interview-1201845708/

• Video showing the process behind a stop motion shoot:

vimeo.com/67537975

• PCFF Stop-motion Workshop Films:

providencechildrensfilmfestival.org/workshops/

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

• NPR Article on the History of a Rhode Island State Orphanage

<http://ripr.org/post/state-orphanage-remembered>