

## International live-action movies for kids

I got obsessed with showing my elementary-school aged kids non-animated international movies so they could get a sense of what life is like, what things look like, and what people look like in other countries while still having fun. Below is a list of the movies we have seen so far, loosely organized by continent. If you have a suggestion you don't see on the list please send me an email to let me know. A few animated films have slipped in, but that was not my original goal. My descriptions are quite short but almost all of these movies have trailers you can view online, so you may want to do that to get a better sense before showing your kids. We get our movies through Netflix so this list is biased towards what one can find through that service.

### **The Americas**

- Landfill Harmonic – Paraguayan documentary about slum children who play music on instruments made of trash. My husband is Paraguayan so I'm biased, but it's a goodie.
- Atlético San Pancho – Mexican movie about a rural kids' soccer team made good. There's nothing too original or exciting about it, but it doesn't have bad words or sex and the kids enjoyed rooting for the underdog team to win.
- Casi Casi – Puerto Rican movie about middle schoolers. I actually didn't see this one since my husband saw it with the kids without me, but he thought it was inappropriate with too many bad words and a bad takeaway message about throwing a student council election.
- Alamar – Mexican semi-documentary about a boy spending time with his father in a small fishing idyll. Nothing much happens but it is beautiful and we were mesmerized.
- Under the Same Moon (La Misma Luna) – Mexican movie about a boy in Mexico whose mom is in the United States and he decides to try to cross the border illegally to find her and has many adventures on the way. My kids found it really moving and beautiful. There wasn't any sex and there was very little violence, but there were some sad moments. It gave them more empathy for immigrants and had some funny moments too.
- Instructions Not Included (No Se Aceptan Devoluciones) – Mexican dramedy about a playboy to whom an ex-lover leaves a baby. Themes repeated from Three Men and a Baby. I had to fast forward through the first five minutes showing what a playboy he is by a series of totally unnecessary overly sexy sex scenes. The end was also unexpectedly and surprisingly sad. My daughter was left sobbing, and I had mistakenly promised her a comedy. While it is a bit formulaic, we were cracking up at quite a few parts, and we all had fun watching it.
- Giant Little Ones – Canada. This one is a little mature and probably better for older teens. There's a lot of drinking and kissing (and more). Two male friends get drunk one night and end up in bed together – how do they handle the aftermath from this event. Touching exploration of teen sexuality and friendship.

## **Middle East**

- Live and Become – Israel. A surprise favorite among the whole family. Very moving and thought-provoking. About a young non-Jewish Ethiopian boy whose mom sends him to Israel making him pretend to be Jewish. The movie follows his life growing up in a world of contradictions.
- Dancing in Jaffa – Israel and Palestine. Documentary about getting Palestinian and Israeli children to ballroom dance together, a bit disturbing. I understand the point of getting the two groups to interact, but ballroom dancing with all its physical touching between boys and girls seems like looking for trouble. Why not try soccer first?
- Children of Heaven – Iran. Maybe not the most exciting, and a bit sexist, but sweet. A young boy loses his little sister's only pair of shoes and tries to make up for his big mistake.
- Wadjda - Saudi Arabia. Girl not allowed to ride a bike. Some might find it too troubling, I have mixed feelings. It was impressive.
- Sand Storm - Israeli Bedouin. About a mother and daughter's attempts to rebel against an extremely sexist system in which they have little power. This one and the one before it (Wadjda) show the most extreme sexism of the films on the list, but they are so touching and beautiful I think it was worth it.

## **Asia**

- Taare Zameen Par, Like Stars on Earth – India. A bit cheesy but the kids liked it and it's a feel good movie. A dyslexic boy who is unloved at home gets sent to a boarding school where he finds an inspiring teacher.
- Chak De India – India. Like an Indian Bend it Like Beckham. But, it probably shows more sexism in society and shows more intra-country (within India) conflicts than Bend it Like Beckham. It had more cussing than I prefer, and was a bit cheesy, but still fun and happy.
- Dangal – India. Similar to the above (Chak De India) but for girls wrestling rather than soccer. If I had to pick one, I'd pick the former. But we enjoyed both.
- Mary Kom – India. Based on the true story of Indian World Champion boxer Mary Kom. My daughter was especially inspired by the amazingly supportive husband. This might be my third favorite of the three Indian female sport movies listed here. We still enjoyed it though, and if you are looking for more after watching the two above, this one is a nice next step.
- Lion - India and Australia. A young poor Indian boy gets lost and separated from his family, faces many risks, and gets adopted by a wonderful Australian family. As an adult he searches for his biological family. There's a kind of boring drawn-out middle part of

the movie where he does all the searching, which also includes a few pointless kissing/sex scenes, and the second half is not as good as the first overall. It was still quite moving.

- 3 Idiots – India. My kids enjoyed it a lot. It taught about learning and studying for the love and joy of it rather than for getting good grades and a good job, and loving people for their good characteristics rather than their money. It is an ode to stepping out of the rat race and searching instead for happiness. But, that makes it sound very serious, when instead it is super silly and funny. The downside was a few more suicides than I felt totally comfortable with in showing my kids.
- Pahuna – Nepal/India. A rather predictable sappy story of three kids who get (temporarily) separated from their parents when they flee Nepal for India. Looks at how they fend for themselves. My kids found it more exciting than I did. It is interesting to see footage of this part of the world, and see a tried and true kids' movie theme in a different setting.
- Eagle Huntress – Mongolia. Yet again more sexism, this time for girls hunting with eagles. This was not our favorite, but we still learned a lot about an area and activity we knew little about.
- Cave of the Yellow Dog – Mongolia. Slow! I'm not sure anything actually happens in this movie.
- The Story of Weeping Camel – Mongolia. Another very slow movie. Semi-documentary about a camel who gives birth and ignores her baby, and how the family who owns the camel tries to convince the mother to care for her baby.
- King of Masks – China. Yet again more sexism, this time for girls working with Chinese masks. It was sweet enough though.
- He Named Me Malala – British/Pakistani. Documentary about Malala which was more inspiring and interesting than I had expected.
- The Rocket – Laos. A poor bad-luck boy tries to help his family by winning a rocket competition. It has an unnecessary and quite graphic scene of the boy's birth at the very beginning, which led to more questions from my kids than I cared to answer. But after that it was both moving and funny. Plus, it's pretty unusual to see a film focused on Laos.
- My Life as Mc Dull – Hong Kong. This is actually mostly an animated film, but sometimes the background shows real shots of Hong Kong. A caveat that this one is not available on Netflix. A friend sent it to me after reading this list and she very aptly described it as a "bitter-sweet, funny-profound miniature of common people's life in HK." It may have been a bit too profound and a bit too depressing for my kids, but it was a very different experience and a very different view of Hong Kong.
- How to Steal a Dog – Korea. A young girl and her mom and brother are homeless, living in a van. She hatches a plan to steal a wealthy woman's dog to get enough money to buy a house. This movie has some laughs and some tears. The girl repents stealing the dog and tells the truth in the end, leaving a good message for kids. It was an educational portrayal of homelessness from a child's perspective, but also included a chase scene which cracked my son up.
- All the Studio Ghibli movies which are Japanese animated films which snuck on here. The ones we have seen so far include Ponyo, My Neighbor Totoro, Howl's Moving Castle, Castle in the Sky, When Marnie was There, and Spirited Away. They are all super

creative and different and intriguing. Not as formulaic as Disney/Pixar movies. That said, they don't necessarily feel very foreign. We also saw *The Castle of Cagliostro* but that was our least favorite.

## **Africa**

- *Queen of Katwe* – Uganda. Shows that poor African females can be amazing at chess. It contained a bit more sexiness than I prefer, but I'm a prude. It had fun music and was great for humanizing Africa for the kids.
- *The Power of One* - South Africa. This one was a bit violent and maybe I shouldn't have shown it but it has a nice lesson about risking one's life and fighting for equality of whites and blacks in a non-US setting.
- *Beat the Drum* - South Africa. Focuses on the orphans caused by AIDS. A boy from a rural area becomes an orphan and moves to the slums in the city to become a street kid. Although my kids understand how AIDS works generally, there were some potentially disturbing but ambiguous sexual references (a rape and a prostitute) that luckily went over their head. My kids really identified with the boy Musa and his experiences and it was very humanizing and moving.
- *My Octopus Teacher* – South Africa. Moving documentary about a man befriending an octopus. Part nature documentary, and part testament to human's ability to focus and obsess over one thing.
- *Burial of Kojo* – Ghana. A young girl and her family move to the big city at the behest of her uncle, and strife between the uncle and father leads to drama and her father being placed in mortal danger. The girl attempts to save the father. While it was fascinating for my kids (and I) to see Ghana, the movie itself felt quite slow to us, and we somehow felt a bit removed from it or not always engaged.

## **Europe**

- *Secret of Roan Inish* – Ireland. Beautiful dream like story-telling about an island of mythical selkies and their interactions with regular island-folk.
- *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* – Ireland. On the one hand it felt a bit too babyish for my kids, but on the other hand it had some surprisingly intense fight scenes (Western style with fake punches etc). Darby captures the king of the leprechauns and wants to make some wishes. Has some fun Irish music, but not my favorite. It was fun to see a very young Sean Connery.
- *The Three Lives of Thomasina* – Scotland. Sweet movie about a little girl who adores her cat, which falls ill and is euthanized by her vet of a father. The cat comes back to life, but it is difficult for the cat and girl to find each other to be reunited. You might not want to show it to a child who experienced a pet or relative die, since they may wonder why their loved one didn't come back to life like Thomasina did. This is another one that my kids

liked more than I did. It is sweet and endearing, with no bad words, and beautiful views of the Scottish Highlands.

- The Letter for the King – United Kingdom. A fun adventure series set in a magical ancient time about young teenagers who must save a kingdom. Lot of horse-back riding and battles (no graphic violence). Very enjoyable.
- The Red Balloon – France. Classic French kids' movie, but I must not be artsy enough, it was too much for me. And the other half of the DVD when you get it on Netflix is White Mane which was even worse.
- The African Doctor – France. A Congolese man studies to become a doctor in France and wants to stay there so he accepts a post in (very!) rural France and brings his wife and kids to a place where nobody has met a black person before. Based on a true story. It has some cute and funny moments, and it addresses racism against blacks in a way my kids found to be moving and powerful without being violent or too strong for youngsters.
- Sarah's Key – France. I'm not sure this one really belongs on a list of movies for kids, it may be too adult. And, since it may actually be an American movie rather than a French movie, it may not belong on an international movies list. It intertwines two stories, one involving the Holocaust in France with death and separation (and the complications of France's role in WWII), the other in the modern era which was more subtle so references to abortion still kind of went over my kids heads. It was intense. As I think it was my kids' first real Holocaust movie (probably should have started with Life is Beautiful, not sure why I didn't) they were amazed and shocked and liked it better than I did. It is extremely haunting and well-acted, despite a few contrived parts of the plot.
- War of the Buttons (2011 version) – France. Boys from two different villages start their own war (of the buttons) while the adults engage in World War II. I tend to not like movies with that much violence (there's some child violence reminiscent of Lord of the Flies). And, you might need to explain to your kids France's position in World War II which can get complicated. It was thoughtful, and shows how easily wars can start, and how meaningless they are.
- The Class – France. Classroom experiences of a white middle school teacher in a poor diverse neighborhood. He kind of muddles through and we were never quite sure if we should think of him as a "good guy" or a "bad guy." (Definitely not like Stand and Deliver with an inspirational teacher in a rough setting.) Maybe that's good since life is like that? It was rather slow. Based on a true story.
- Mother of Mine - Finnish/Swedish. About a Finnish boy sent to Sweden during WWII to be kept safe and be taken care of by a different family. I basically cried the entire time, and my 9-year old daughter cried a lot too. Very moving, led to my son having some fears of being separated, but also brought about thought-provoking conversations. This is one of our favorites on the list.
- Pippi movies - Swedish. These seem like cheating, but they're fun.
- Zipi y Zape y El Club de La Canica and sequel Zipi y Zape y la Isla del Capitan – Spain. Like a Spanish wanna-be Goonies but not anywhere close to being as good, but the kids liked it. Probably more fun and less preachy than my usual choices.
- The Italian - Russian (despite the title). About a Russian orphan who is supposed to get adopted by Italians, but runs off to find his biological mother instead. This had way more inappropriateness than I was hoping for (a teenage orphan working as a prostitute – though I don't think my kids picked up on that; the orphanage owner having sex with the

orphanage driver – fast forwarded through that part; and more). And, I think anybody who had experiences with adoption probably wouldn't like the ending. I don't think I'd recommend this one.

- Goal! The Dream Begins - British. A skilled soccer player who is a poor Mexican illegal immigrant to the US is seen by a British scout and gets recruited to Liverpool. He faces adversity along the way to the predictably happy ending. Nothing deep but fun enough.
- Chariots of Fire – British. I remember liking it as a youth much more than I liked it when re-watching with my kids recently. Based on a true story. A British Jewish and a Christian compete in track and field in the Olympics in the 1920s. It felt slow, and I had trouble telling the actors apart.
- Azur and Asmar: The Prince's Quest - France and North Africa. A cartoon that snuck in there. A bit cheesy and formulaic but had nice lessons for young kids.

## **Oceania**

- Whale Rider - New Zealand. Another film about girls overcoming. This time girls can't be leaders and learn the traditions of the ancestors.
- Hunt for the Wilderpeople - New Zealand. A boy and his foster father get chased through the wilderness by the police. It had a few more bad words and fat kid jokes than I like, but it was actually quite hilarious and a lot of fun.
- Her Majesty - New Zealand. A girl in New Zealand is obsessed with the queen and wants the queen to visit her small town, but then befriends an old Maori woman and feels torn between the British and the Maori versions of history. My kids liked this one more than I did. The girl was a great actress, but the others were much more fake and it felt forced to me.
- Oddball and the Penguins - Australia. An odd farmer and his odd dog save tiny penguins, based on a true story. I found it a bit slow and predictable but it was very kid friendly and the kids didn't find it as slow as I did. A benefit is you don't need subtitles and it is appropriate for littler kids than most movies on this list.
- Rabbit-Proof Fence – Australia. Three aboriginal girls get taken from their families by the authorities to live in a settlement far from home. The movie covers their attempt to escape by foot. Overall we appreciated this movie a lot, though it deals with some emotional topics. It is based on a true story.

## **International**

- La Gran Final - Mongolia, Brazil, and the Sahara. It's not memorable, it just shows that everyone loves the World Cup, and shows how different people do it in different countries.
- On the Way to School - Kenya, India, Argentina, Morocco. Similar to the previous one. This movie shows how people get to school in different countries. A bit slow and boring, but eye-opening.

Still on our to-watch list: Kirikou and the Sorceress, Viva Cuba, Billy Elliot, Ernest and Celestine, Please Vote for Me, Offside, The Secret of Kells, Opal Dream, Bolek & Lolek, Mountain Miracle: An Unexpected Friendship, Big Fish & Begonia, Into the West, The Way Home, Bend it Like Beckham, Trash, The Lion Woman, Dhanak, Bhaag Milkha Bhaag, Babies, I Wish, Halkaa, Mi Amigo Alexis, We are Young We are Strong, The Letter for the King, Alice Upside Down, Skellig, Girlhood, Land of Mine, (and not on Netflix: Lamb from Ethiopia, Hindi Medium, Tesoros). [If you have more to recommend, feel free to email me and let me know!]

Studio Ghibli –Kiki’s Delivery Service, Princess Mononoke, The Wind Rises, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind, The Secret World of Arrietty.

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