***Song of the Sea* Discussion Questions/readings**

1. Before we start the film, briefly write about your own experience with myth and folklore. Have you been introduced to classic fairy tales (Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.), Greek mythology, Native American stories, or any other kind of non-realistic stories through books or films? Note: Disney counts, but be thorough. Did you encounter Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid, or just the Disney one?
2. Would you say any stories or characters from them affected your sense of the world and/or of your own identity? Did they help shape your values? Were there any that were important to your family?

**Some Comments on *Song of the Sea***

Below are brief passages from professional reviews, plus a non-professional (but really interesting) blogger. We will use these to start our discussion on the film. Note as you’re reading the combination of description, evaluation, background information, and analysis. I tried to leave out the plot summary parts.

**From the *LA Times* Kenneth Turran**

“As its title indicates, one of the messages of this emotional film is the power of song to change worlds. [. . . .] Filmmaker Moore has also chosen to have his key talent do double duty, voicing both creatures from the spirit universe and people from everyday reality. (Gleeson, for instance, is the Great Seanachai as well as Conor, while Flanagan does both Macha and Granny.)

That choice underlines the connections between worlds, the sense that there can be wonder in ordinary lives, that Ireland's folklore takes for granted. It's a beautiful message, and one that's delivered with heart and graceful visual splendor.”

**From the Telegraph (British paper) by Robbie Collin**

“The films of Tomm Moore are like a trove of gemstones in the hill behind your house. Finding them is instantly life-improving, but the thrill of discovery comes with the comforting sense that they’ve been with you forever. [. . . .]

It was a startlingly well-realised debut, but its riffs on traditional Irish art and myth – every frame looked like a page from an illuminated manuscript – gave it a slightly touristic feel, as if you were watching an unusually beautiful holiday advert.

That sense is entirely absent from Moore’s second film, Song of the Sea, which finds him and Cartoon Saloon operating at the level of their very best contemporaries: magicians of the moving line like Sylvain Chomet, Marjane Satrapi, Mamoru Hosoda, and the masters of Japan's Studio Ghibli.

The film is every bit as rooted in Celtic lore as its predecessor, but it branches and blooms into something less straightforwardly linked to a particular time and culture. The colours, forms and emotions are individually familiar, but they’re combined in ways that aren’t quite like anything you’ve seen before. If it hadn’t been bagsied by Disney in 1940, the perfect word for it would be fantasia. [. . . .]

The story it tells is the kind that grows up with you: one that makes perfect, shimmering sense to a four-year-old, yet somehow gets richer with every year that passes.

**From the Roger Ebert site by Simon Abrams**

"Song of the Sea" is, in that sense a quiet film, but its serenity doesn't completely make up for its formulaic narrative. This is especially disappointing since Moore and screenwriter [Will Collins](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/will-collins) try to avoid several clichés, like when Ben ([David Rawle](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/david-rawle)) confronts Macha ([Fionnula Flanagan](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/fionnula-flanagan)),  an antagonistic Celtic goddess, and doesn't try to beat her up, but rather to reason with her. Unfortunately, too much "Song of the Sea" feels like it was borrowed from other fairy tales, making Moore's sophomore feature a warmed-over tale told with infectious flair. [. . . .]

It was clearly made by people who aspire to make smarter, and more fulfilling children's' films, stuff that will stay with viewers, and leave them better for it. In that sense, "Song of the Sea" is exactly the kind of animated movie I wish was made more often.

**From Variety by Peter Debruge**

Whereas American toons tend to be driven predominantly by plot and character, Moore’s work delivers on various other levels, asking formula-fed animation auds to open their minds to a more poetic experience. That said, the pic’s emotional core isn’t so different from that of a studio-made heart-tugger like “Brave.” Here, the story is centered on a lost mother figure — a half-human, half-seal creature known as a “Selkie” — who disappears into the waves one night, leaving her husband and two children with many unanswered questions.

Considering the circuitous path big brother Ben (David Rawle) and his silent little sister, Saoirse, take in trying to unravel the family mystery, Moore and screenwriting collaborator Will Collins seem to be rejecting the simplified Joseph Campbell template upon which so many Western toons are modeled. The idea isn’t to shoehorn local legend into a comfortable Disney formula, but rather, to find the appropriate animated style through which to communicate his culturally specific narrative traditions. The digressions make the experience unique, while cute if somewhat simplistic-looking characters — including a massive sheepdog named Cu (Gaelic for “dog”) — ensure easy identification for young auds.

“Song of the Sea” is differentiated not only by its rich visual design — grayer and more subdued than “The Secret of Kells,” yet still a marvel to behold — but also by its ethereal musical dimension, another collaboration between composer Bruno Coulais and Irish folk band Kila. Their songs and score feature seldom-heard instruments, Gaellic lyrics and verse inspired by no less an Irish figure than William Butler Yeats (specifically “The Stolen Child,” in which fairies try to lure a child into the waters). One clue to the importance of music here is the fact that although Saoirse doesn’t speak, by playing her shell flute, this curious child participates in an older, proto-linguistic tradition. [. . . .]

Nearly all the adult voices (including a soft-spoken Brendan Gleeson) do double duty as both real and mythical characters — a nice touch in a tale designed to suggest that we’re slowly losing our ability to recognize the magic that surrounds us at all times. The pic’s poignant idea of a happy ending is one most would consider tragic, but then that’s just one more way Moore makes this song his own.

From Noisewar Internetalien (a blogger)

I’ll show that SotS [*Song of the Sea*] flavors well-known tropes with directed, intentional nuance that makes it more of a continuation of the worldview posited in *The Secret of Kells* (Moore’s first film). You could almost consider SotS to be a chronological sequel, diving deeper into the schism between spirit and human worlds that began in TSoK [*The Secret of Kells]*. Both reflect the Irish psyche that is the product of a transformation from the island’s Celtic paganism to its inevitable assimilation of Christianity. Where TSoK indulges in the intrigue of that transition, SotS grounds it in a modern story of loss, and offers folkloric lessons as an answer. [. . . .]

Like many pagan cultures, Celtic culture was one of oral tradition that took the form of storytelling (Brónach’s tales) and song (Brónach’s shell). What many people do not realize is that while Christian scholars are accused of appropriating pagan culture into Christian traditions like Xmas and Easter, we’d know nothing of pagan tradition if not for these same scholars. Almost all we know about the pagans today comes from the dutiful recordings of the monks, albeit through Christian eyes.

That was also the “secret” in The Secret of Kells… pagan or Christian, deep learnings from both have become embedded and intertwined throughout the long tradition of knowledge transference so long as they pass through the hands of brave men. These stories, quite simply, are tools we use to preserve our secrets for the ages, gifted forward. This is why folklore, now more than ever, must be cherished and spread.

Song of the Sea, while a gentle, beautiful, and deeply empathic film, is a call-to-arms for bringing wonder back into our waking lives. Its message is timely and urgent

Finally, I’ll end with director Tomm Moore’s own story (from an interview with Cartoon Brew) about his real life inspiration for Song of the Sea, and of the impact that losing folklore was having on the world:

“On holiday with my son, in the west of Ireland. We were sketching on the beach; it was pretty horrible. When we asked why there were so many dead seals on the beach, our landlady said local fisherman were killing them out of frustration with falling fishery stocks. She said it wouldn’t have happened years ago, when there was a belief system that deemed seals sacred because they were the souls of people lost at sea, or actual selkies. That started me thinking that folklore and superstitions serve functions beyond entertainment, or quaint stories for tourists. They bind people to the landscape, and that is being lost.”