

Tom, Thanks for Toy Story 2

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TOY STORY 2 (1999)

Directed by John Lasseter & Ash Brannon

Written by a lot of people

Starring Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Wayne Knight & Tom Hanks as Woody the Cowboy

For no clear reason, as I watched Toy Story 2 for the umpteenth time, my attention was drawn to the trunk we use as an end table in our living room. This rugged cube with iron buckles and leather trim has been in my life for as long as I can remember, and is so fundamental to me, it's only every two to five years that it occurs to me there are items inside. But there I was, nostalgically watching a movie *about* nostalgia, and so I decided to crack the old girl open. Of course, there were no great surprises within, only simple memories: some picture books, a plush football, a canvas bag of tattered Lego manuals, and the crown jewel - my 1995 Empire Strikes Back MGA handheld video game, which not only still works, it's still powered *on*. It's just been blinking away in the darkness, beneath a lamp and hundreds of coffees and glasses of wine, for god knows how long. I paused the movie, and I played a game.... and I still got it, baby.

Even once we've moved beyond the era of daily play, it tends to live on within us. That's why rebooting TV shows, and the release of retro Nintendo consoles, and the unlocking of the Disney vault are such cash cows: we're itching to spend the money we've earned as adults on things that will make us feel like kids, and that's what makes Toy Story 2 such a smart if cynical progression in the analysis of what childhood playtime means. This is a consumer-focused movie which profiles anyone who might buy in to the notion of sentimental and pop cultural worth.

Some time has passed since we left our TS heroes, and the power dynamic of Andy's room has settled to an easy harmony. Woody still remains in active plaything rotation, until a small rip forms on his arm, forcing Andy to leave him home from Cowboy Camp (just as with Buzz in the first film, the broken arm represents the character's mortality). In Andy's absence, Woody is discovered by a zealous yard sale visitor who, after several rejected offers to buy the sheriff, outright steals him. The thief is the local owner of Al's Toy Barn, who's amassed a giant collection of merchandise from an old TV series called Woody's Roundup, and our cowboy friend is the *pièce de résistance*. Here, a dilemma arises; should Woody return to Andy, where he and playtime have an expiration date, or should he go with the rest of the Roundup gang to a museum where both he and childish wonder will last forever? There *is* good reason to believe Woody would be cherished abroad. Al is heard telling an airline customer service representative that his affects are worth more than the rep makes in a year. I did some digging and found that, currently American Airlines (for instance) pays its reservation clerks \$15.02 hourly, versus a \$7.25 national minimum wage - a variance of 207%. Assuming the metric was the same in relation to 1999's NMW of \$5.15, and assuming Al's scene partner works 40 hrs/week and 49 weeks/year, the value of Woody, Jessie, Prospector, and Bullseye, as a set, must exceed twenty thousand dollars. We're also shown Woody's image on the cover of both Life and Time magazines, and he's on a yo-yo. Just how famous is this cowboy? 007 famous? Batman famous? Dare I say, Mickey famous? Here's the million dollar question: is fictional Woody more iconic than Woody in real life? ... Impossible.

This film deftly identifies that things are replaceable but feelings are not, and where the two collide is among broad cultural institutions we share. They use references to Star Wars, Jurassic Park, and (most inside) Forrest Gump to ignite the very sentimentality that makes the rare eponymous doll from Woody's Roundup a believable catalyst for plot. Also, a huge portion of the movie revolves around a store and its owner; it's about capitalism. But these commercial entities mean so much more to innocent hearts than the money they generate, and when Al cautions the airline employee about the Roundup gang's value, he's correct, not because of the intrinsic worth of his collection, but because a child's playtime is invaluable, and Woody in particular is priceless to Andy. Ironically, down the road, capitalism will betray Al when Amazon closes those Barn doors.

Jessie the Yodelin' Cowgirl serves the same metaphor, but from a perspective of hindsight. We learn she used to be owned by a girl named Emily, who's since grown up and moved on. This sequence is exposed through just one of many perfect compositions Randy Newman contributed to the series. As Jessie sings "When Somebody Loved Me," two miracles happen: (1) Joan Cusack's voice becomes Sarah McLachlan's, and (2) she and Woody's

adversarial relationship evolves to an understanding, and Woody is moved to show her that having been abandoned by love doesn't mean she can't be loved again.

This isn't the last time a Toy Story movie will deal in existentialism and impermanence. These themes are essential for conveying that playtime is precious because it can't last forever. On the other hand, my Empire Strikes Back game is still blinking away while I write this, as it has been all this time in our forgotten trunk, astoundingly nursing the same twenty-five year-old double-A's. I admit, the AI in me checked Ebay to see what it's going for these days. About five bucks - not even worth as much as that single moment of rediscovery. Honestly, that was worth more than you make in a year.

Thx!

PS. At the end, Buzz asks Woody how he feels about the promise of Andy one day outgrowing them. Woody sweetly comments that "It'll be fun while it lasts," adding that when it all ends, he'll have old Buzz Lightyear to keep him company, (and I can't stress this enough) *to infinity and beyond*. This. Will. Matter Later.