

Memoir of a Snail [15]

2024 Australia 95 mins

UK released **14 February 2025**

Director **Adam Elliot**

Screenplay **Adam Elliot**

Cinematography **Gerald Thompson**

Music **Elena Kats-Chernin**

Cast **Sarah Snook** (Grace Pudel); **Kodi Smit-McPhee**

(Gilbert Pudel); **Eric Bana** (James); **Magda**

Szubanski (Ruth); **Dominique Pinon** (Percy Pudel);

Tony Armstrong (Ken); **Paul Capsis** (Ian & Narelle);

Nick Cave (Bill Clarke); **Jacki Weaver** (Pinky)

On paper, the second feature-length stop-motion animation from Oscar-winning director Adam Elliot (*Mary And Max*) seems unremittingly bleak, a tragi-comedy with the emphasis firmly on the tragi side of things. But Elliot is a master of the art of gallows humour, and this appealing ‘clayography’ (the term coined by the director for his distinctive stop motion biographical stories) is as hilarious as it is heart-wrenching – frequently within the same scene.

There are few consolations to Grace’s (Sarah Snook) drab existence in Canberra; her friendship with an eccentric elderly woman called Pinky (Jacki Weaver), her vast collection of snail-themed tat, and the hope that she will be reunited with her twin brother Gilbert (Kodi Smit-McPhee). But this story, as narrated by Grace to her favourite pet snail Sylvia (named after Sylvia Plath), is not entirely without joy. There are treasured moments of happiness, memories that Grace hoards along with her suffocating clutter of snail memorabilia and revisits when the loneliness grows too heavy to bear. Key among these is a visit to a funfair with her brother and their paraplegic, wheel-chair bound father. The three ride a rickety roller coaster and, for a moment, they are weightless, the sadnesses of mother’s death, father’s accident, bullying at school are all temporarily lifted.

But the levity is brief. The father succumbs to his sleep apnoea; the twins are placed into foster care, separately and in different states. Grace finds herself in suburban Canberra with a well-meaning but clueless childless couple, Ian and Narelle (both voiced by Paul Capsis). And while Gerald draws the shorter of two very short straws – he is placed with a family of apple farmers who are members of a bizarre and punitive religious cult – it is Grace whose spirit is slowly broken by her lonely existence.

To fill the emptiness, she hoards but, as her depression digs in, Grace's compulsion morphs into kleptomania. An abortive, doomed relationship with a bad sort (Ken, voiced by Tony Armstrong) doesn't help matters. But Grace's friendship with Pinky is a lifeline. Pinky's role in the film is equally significant – thanks to Weaver's deliciously droll voice work, Pinky brings a buoyant comedy that parts the clouds on this dryly morose story.

Although the picture is rather narration-heavy at times, Elliot is a visual storyteller first and foremost. He harnesses texture – there's a whole lifetime of adventures etched into the wrinkles on Pinky's face – and uses colour expressively. The palette is predominantly composed of unpromising slurry browns and defeated, sullen-looking greys. Even the reds, a hue that normally delivers a jolt of energy and optimism, have a disconsolate, rusted quality. Equally as powerful is the film's timeless and tender score, by Australian classical composer Elena Kats-Chernin. The lovely, ornate musical motifs bring a quiet dignity to this tale of a woman who refuses to be defeated by misfortune.

Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*, 10 June 2024 (abridged)

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