

THELMA'S PERFECT BIRTHDAY



CURRICULUM GUIDE
GRADES: 3-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Instructor Resources

A Letter to Educators	ii
Discussion Questions	iii
Interpretive Essay Prompts	iv
About CAFILM	v
Standards	vi

Student Handouts

About the Film	1
Contextual Information	2
Viewing Activities	4
Extension Activities	12
About Film Festivals	10



Dear educators,

Thank you for attending the 47th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's screening of *Thelma's Perfect Birthday*. We are excited to return in our 2024 fall season with a combination of both in-person screenings for local schools and online screenings for those of you joining us from afar.

As media educators, we support film as the literature of the twenty-first century. This powerful medium sits in a critical part of human culture, at the intersection of art, industry, technology, and politics. It is a universal language that lets us tell stories about our collective hopes and fears and gives us the opportunity to make sense of the world around us and the people in it. This year, our film selections for school screenings continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with the film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text both orally and in writing.

The discussion prompts have been crafted to offer students the opportunity to grapple with questions of ethics and social justice through representations of culture in film. They offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue by addressing the film industry in general and this film in particular. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece, or consider the film review format as an alternative. Additionally, student handouts for a variety of thinking routines are provided for before, during, and after viewing the film with a particular emphasis on social-emotional learning. Extension activities offer further creative opportunities for students to consider the cultural impact of the film as both an art form and a political platform. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your screening experience.

Thank you so much for your tireless work! Enjoy the film!

Sincerely,
The CAFILM Education Team

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Thelma's Perfect Birthday* is a film that does not just entertain its viewers, it also contains life lessons and universal themes that resonate with many different people. What about the film most resonated with you?
2. What was the most powerful part of the story? What was the main idea or central message of the film?
3. How did the film make you feel? What emotions did you experience while viewing *Thelma's Perfect Birthday*?
4. What moments, characters, or ideas were especially memorable or impactful? How or why?
5. What experiences from your own life did the film make you think about?
6. What lessons did you learn about the importance and the power of friendship and family from watching the film?
7. What lessons did you learn about cultural traditions and how they vary across lands and people?
8. What lessons does Thelma learn about being a penguin and embracing her way of life in the Land of Ice? How do these lessons have a greater cultural impact and universal value?
9. Film has the platform and power to address larger social and cultural issues. What message does the film convey about machines and technology?
10. What message does the film convey about climate change?
11. What does the film teach us about finding the courage to become the hero of your own story?
12. How does the unique animation style take the viewer on an adventure into a fantastical world and support the storytelling?



DISCUSSION NOTECATCHER

Directions:

Use this notecatcher to record what you take away from discussing the questions above.

IDEAS I HEARD DURING DISCUSSION

MIND-POP IDEAS

Ideas that came to my mind during discussion.

ONE IMPORTANT THING I LEARNED DURING DISCUSSION

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. *Thelma's Perfect Birthday* is a film that does not just entertain its viewers, it also contains valuable life lessons. Write an essay that shows what you learned from watching this film and how you learned it. Be sure to use specific details and examples from the film to support your writing.
2. At the beginning of the film, Thelma feels like she doesn't quite fit into the penguin way of life in the Land of Ice, so she ventures away from home into the Great Forest. Along the way she learns how cultural traditions vary across lands and people and finally learns what it means to be a proper penguin. She returns home ready to embrace and celebrate her culture on her terms. Write an essay that shows how coming of age may include questioning one's own cultural values and beliefs, but that the journey along leads to self-discovery and cultural understanding, and is an important part of growing up.
3. *Thelma's Perfect Birthday* includes social and cultural commentary on machines, technology, and climate change. Write an essay that shows how film can be an effective platform for addressing larger, universal issues that resonate on a deeper level with viewers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bags of Love

https://www.bagsoflove.com/blog/how-different-cultures-celebrate-birthdays/?srsltid=Afm-BOooLJlVxYW-bSHzliUNYl4Th0pZ9icPupQOjn7A8SEJPm_bSVVap

Celebrating Birthdays: How do Different Cultures Celebrate?

National Film Center of Latvia

<https://www.filmas.lv/en/animation-in-latvia/>

Latvian Animation

The Hero's Journey

<https://www.timeforkids.com/g56/the-heros-journey-g5/?rl=en-820>

Time for Kids: How can you start imagining your life as a hero's journey? Here, experts share some strategies.

ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

Follow the California Film Institute on social media



@cafilm



@californiafilminstitute



@cafilminstitute



californiafilminstitute

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards ELA-Literacy

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g. how setting shapes the characters or plot).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.





ABOUT THE FILM

Thelma is a penguin who lives in the Land of Ice. She's four years old and she'll turn five in five days—or at least she hopes she will. Will her birthday ever come? And what if she's not there when the Birthday arrives—will she be forever stuck at age four? But Thelma is an adventurer and a mischief-maker, too. With her parents distracted by their computer screens, she sneaks away to find her friends Wilhelm the flying cat and Sofija the dancing mouse in the Great Forest, far from home. She hopes to meet the Birthday in person, with her magical candles in hand. Director Reinis Kalnaellis's stunning watercolor palette and captivating animation bring to life a universal story of self-acceptance, friendship, courage, and the true meaning of growing up. An ageless story, perfect for all ages.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

REINIS KALNAELLIS

Reinis Kalnaellis is a Latvian film director, producer, and editor born on April 9, 1986, in Riga, Latvia. He has made significant contributions to the field of animation and filmmaking. Kalnaellis studied filmmaking, social sciences, and media at Tallinn University, where he obtained his Bachelor's degree. He further honed his skills at the FAMU film school in Prague, studying cinematography and collaborating with renowned tutors such as Pavel Jech, Marek Jicha, and Miroslav Ondříček.

Kalnaellis gained early experience in the film industry at the studio "Rija Films." His directorial debut in animation came with *When Apples Roll* (2009), which was showcased at over 100 film festivals worldwide and received several awards, including Best Animation for Children and Special Jury Distinction. He continued to build his reputation with films like *The Golden Horse* (2014) and *Dziedosais Hugo un viņa neticamie piedzīvojumi* (2017).

In addition to his work in animation, Kalnaellis has been actively involved in various aspects of film production and distribution, continuously seeking innovative ways to finance independent filmmaking and develop cross-media projects. He also served as the chairman of the Latvian Filmmakers Union from 2013, contributing to the growth and development of the Latvian film industry.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

CREATIVE AND VISUAL SOLUTIONS

Creative solution

The story of Thelma's perfect Birthday takes place in various locations simultaneously, like for instance in the Latvian forests, Fog Land, inside of a Seashell and Gaiziņkalns (highest mountain in Latvia). The emphasis has been put on both, the characters themselves, as well as the portrayal of the magical nature. Therefore, alongside with the characters we will be playing with the four elements found in nature: earth, water, air and fire.

The rhythm of the film is slow paced; however, it does not lack dynamics. Great emphasis has been put on portraying each characters' movements and gestures, which has given them individuality, highlighting their characteristics and finally giving an extra dimension to the story. Also, great attention has been given to details which add visual depth to the story and allows us to understand and learn more about the environment. Details such as photographs on the walls, forest animals in the trees, and specific locations shown on the map, which despite being in the background will not go unnoticed.

The main values that this film is promoting are: courage, tolerance, trust, persistence, care and support.

Visual solution

The film Thelma's Perfect Birthday is created in 3D technique but the output is in 2D because we want to keep the colors in pastels. The characters in this film are very colorful and are a wide range of the most unusual creatures from the forest and the sea world, which all live happily together in this eco-friendly environment. They are visually warm and pure, almost naïve. It is a fairytale for adults and their children, which are able to value the slightly odd and magical events in this story.

We are deliberately using visually naïve elements and expressions, since we want to give the environment and the characters in the film seemingly childish and bright qualities. This is why the artistic solution of the film is not subject to space or perspective, nor other generally accepted regularities.

Like in children's drawings, animation can also be very different and unexpected, the Earth can be totally different from what we are taught in school. This is a wonderful, unusual, sometimes strange, but absolutely friendly world. This is also reflected in the film's seemingly simple visual solutions used in developing characters, by drawing with pencil on paper, which today has become very rare and a highly valued quality. Therefore, the lack of perfection in the drawings gives unique and sincere qualities, and is understandable to all generations.

The color transitions are soft and flowing, creating the effect of airiness and fragility, which give a poetic and romantic mood to the film.

BEFORE VIEWING

SEE, THINK, WONDER

Directions:

Before watching this animated feature film, take a look at some images from the film. Make some observations and thoughtful interpretations about what you see, what you think, and what you are wondering about before viewing.



SEE What observations can you make by looking at these images?	
THINK What thoughtful interpretations can you make by looking at these images?	
WONDER What are you curious about?	

BEFORE VIEWING

JOURNAL RESPONSE

Directions:

The act of writing helps us think about a topic. The film you are about to watch is a story of friendship, adventure, bravery, and heroism. Write about a time in your life when you were brave, adventurous, or heroic.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DURING VIEWING

STORY MAP

How to Use this Thinking Routine:

A story map is a diagram that will help you think about the characters, setting, and events in a narrative. This will help you identify the themes in a film, or the lessons learned. While watching *Thelma's Perfect Birthday*, fill out the chart below..

CHARACTERS

Who are the characters in the story?
What is their relationship to each other?

SETTING

Where does the story take place?
List all the places the characters go on their journey.

BEGINNING

What is the problem at the beginning of the story?

MIDDLE

What are the challenges the characters face during the story?

END

How is the problem solved at the end of the story?

THEMES

Themes are not just a lesson for the characters in the story. Themes are meant to apply to real life.
What do you learn from watching this film?

DURING VIEWING

LIFE LESSONS

How to Use this Thinking Routine:

Besides being entertaining, *Thelma's Perfect Birthday* offers viewers some valuable life lessons. Filmmakers use this engaging medium to entertain us with stories that impart values and wisdom that we can connect to our own life, or the world right now.

1. As you are viewing, identify some valuable life lessons you can take away from this story.
2. Use specific details and examples from the film to show how the film taught you this lesson.
3. Reflect on how each lesson you identify connects to your own life and the value it might have in the world right now.

Life Lesson What did you learn?	Details and Examples from the film that show how you learned this lesson.
Lesson One:	
How does this lesson connect to your own life? This could be something from your past, the present, or something you're thinking about for your future.	

Life Lesson What did you learn?	Details and Examples from the film that show how you learned this lesson.
Lesson Two:	
How does this lesson connect to your own life? This could be something from your past, the present, or something you're thinking about for your future.	

DURING VIEWING

LIFE LESSONS

<p>Life Lesson What did you learn?</p>	<p>Details and Examples from the film that show how you learned this lesson.</p>
<p>Lesson Three:</p>	
<p>How does this lesson connect to your own life? This could be something from your past, the present, or something you're thinking about for your future.</p>	



AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Directions:

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. What is the Land of Ice like? What promises are made and what dreams are fulfilled everyday?

2. Why is Thelma unhappy in the Land of Ice? What tradition is not recognized in the Land of Ice that causes her to leave?

3. Why does Thelma want to travel to the Great Forest?

4. How does Thelma get out of the Land of Ice? What steps must she take to get started on her journey? What obstacles does she overcome?

5. What unique experiences does Thelma have along the way from the Land of Ice to the Great Forest?

AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

6. What is the backstory of Thelma's relationship to Cat Vilhelm and Mouse Sophia?

7. What do Vilhelm and Sophia have to do to help Thelma return to the Land of Ice? What stops do they make and who do they encounter along the way?

8. What happens when Thelma returns to the Land of Ice? What does she do to celebrate?



AFTER VIEWING

SEE, THINK, ME, WE

How to Use this Thinking Routine:

Thelma's Perfect Birthday is a story of friendship, adventure, bravery, and heroism. Use this graphic organizer to dig a little deeper into what the film means and connect it to the bigger picture.

SEE

What did you notice while you were watching the film? What observations did you make?

THINK

What thoughts do you have about the film?

ME

What connections can you make between you and the story in the film?

WE

How is the film connected to bigger stories about the world and our place in it?

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero's Think Routine Toolbox:

<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

RESEARCH PROJECT & YOUTH JOURNALISM

Directions:

The Hero's Journey is a common storyline in books and movies. *Thelma's Perfect Birthday* is a classic Hero's Journey. Think about how Thelma courageously ventured out of the Land of Ice and into the world, faced multiple challenges, and learned something along the way before returning home. Use the outline below to trace Thelma's journey as the hero of her own story.

Answer the following questions to map Thelma's heroic journey.


1. ORDINARY WORLD What is Thelma's world like at the beginning of the story?	→	2. Call to Adventure What happens to prompt Thelma to take a step into the adventure?
↑		↓
12. Return with the Elixir What knowledge or wisdom does Thelma bring back with her?		3. Refusal of the Call Does Thelma refuse to go? If so, why?
↑		↓
11. Resurrection of the Hero What is the final test for Thelma?		4. Meeting with the Mentor Who helps Thelma gain wisdom?
↑		↓
10. The Road Back How does Thelma attempt to return to his normal life?		5. Crossing the First Threshold Where does Thelma cross the point of no return in the story?
↑		↓
9. Reward What does Thelma receive as a reward?		6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies How do the other characters affect Thelma?
↑		↓
8. Ordeal What happens when the story reaches a life-or-death part?	←	7. Approach Does Thelma try and fail? How so? What does she do when she fails?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

FILM REVIEW

Directions:

A film review is a report that provides information about a film, expresses an opinion, and summarizes the main parts of the story. Use the template below to review and rate the film.

Title:	Director:
Main Characters:	
Setting:	
Summary of the Story:	
Central Theme or Lesson Learned:	
What I liked:	
What I disliked:	
My Favorite Part:	
Movie Rating: Color in the Appropriate Number of Stars 	
Who would you recommend this movie to and why?	

ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

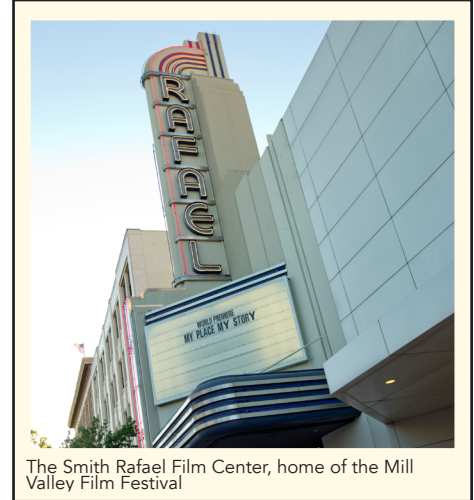
History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films.. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway (www.filmfreeway.com) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.