

LAND BEFORE TIME

[1988]

by

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This lush and visually beautiful animated film is for any child, boy or girl, especially those fascinated with dinosaurs. It is about a family of plant-eating dinosaurs: Baby (the central character), mother, grandmother and grandfather. Changes in climate are causing food supplies to dwindle so the family is in the midst of a western migration. During these troubling times, a single male is born to a brontosaurus family. His egg is subjected to all sorts of dangers before “Littlefoot” is born. Young Littlefoot, a “long-neck,” meets young Cera (Sarah), a “three-horn.” He is unceremoniously informed by father three-horn that various species of dinosaurs do not commingle. Separately, the various dinosaur families continue toward a mythical western paradise – The Great Valley – which Littlefoot’s mother has never seen, but as she says, some things you know in your heart. Suddenly an earthquake strikes, Littlefoot’s mother dies, and he is separated from his grandparents. He is thus forced to continue the journey on his own. Several other young dinosaurs, also separated from their parents, join him to make their way west. A “long-tooth” carnivore attacks the band, but they outwit him. Later, in a group effort, they kill him to assure their own safety. On the journey they learn that only by overcoming their individual prejudices and distrusts, only by working together, can they reach their goals. On reaching the Great Valley they find not only plentiful food, but are also reunited with their families.

Even before the titles begin we are promised that Littlefoot's journey is a psychological one: we are underwater (a common symbol of the unconscious) and the patterns of the bubbles form spirals (the inner journey – think of the beginning of Dorothy’s journey down the Yellow Brick Road in *The Wizard of Oz*). A few moments later we see a DNA double helix made of rising bubbles (evolution and progress). Through the water we follow a small amphibian (symbolic of the bridge between the unconscious water and the conscious land). Yet this is one of the few animated films for children that manages to place a fairy tale in what is essentially a brutally realistic portrayal of contemporary life. As the amphibian eats some other life-form, he himself is soon attacked and only barely manages to escape. Clearly, the world of this film is not only one of progress and evolution, of learning and understanding, but also one of violence and survival, a world of predator and prey.

One of the great difficulties with many animated films is that the animal characters are obvious metaphors for humans and human behavior. The feeling of anthropocentricity – the best way to act is the human way – is very strong in this film. The mother brontosaurus, for instance, has a soothing, calm, motherly voice, one which could never be raised in anger. While the older dinosaurs are drawn with reasonable accuracy, the children

are drawn “cute,” that is, with large eyes and eye lashes, expressive mouths, etc. This film indeed celebrates the natural world as a source of information regarding moral and ethical action. Yet because everything is given human aspects and values, there is a danger of simultaneously reducing nature to a world where the child's ego becomes the center of the universe.

With only the mother and grandparents present, the representation of the family may be quite realistic for many of today's children. Males in general are portrayed negatively. Littlefoot's father is never mentioned, and while this may indeed be realistic, it does diminish the male role in the family. Moreover, the dinosaur that attacks and tries to eat the children is obviously male. Racial prejudice is placed in a male's mouth. Additionally, adults in general don't fare too well in this film. Because the adults reach the Great Valley before the lost children, we can only assume they made little effort to find them, abandoned them, and went on to the Great Valley to save their own asses. To me, this model of family structure is quite disturbing.

The emotional center of the film is the mother's death. The scene begs for comparison with Walt Disney's 1941 *Bambi*. When Bambi's mother dies, Bambi mourns for a few moments, father appears and takes him away. Life goes on. Bambi has few memories of his mother, perhaps because he's too busy following in father's footsteps: becoming the male leader of his community. Littlefoot's experience is quite different. He mourns for what seems a very long time. He becomes depressed and refuses to eat or move. His mother's memory and even her voice haunt him throughout most of the film. In the modern world, Littlefoot's experience may be more realistic: there is no father-figure, neither to rescue him from his grief nor for him to fixate upon as a role model. Perhaps, also, children in 1941 were far more isolated from death than today. In World War II separation was often a prelude for death. Young children frequently never knew the fathers who died in some far-off land. Today, however, children's experiences of death are much more immediate and explicit: if not on television news then all too often directly with friends or acquaintances.

Littlefoot, like the classical mythical hero, undergoes a difficult birth and youth. With mythical heroes like Oedipus, Achilles, or Jesus, their destiny is to become leaders. The film, however, shows Littlefoot only as the leader of his rag-tag band of lost children. In mythology, a road of trials is necessary for the hero's maturation. And often with stories with deep psychological resonances, each confrontation reveals some aspect of the hero that he needs to know in order to grow. *Land Before Time* is quite weak in this respect: the individual adventures along the way reveal platitudes and cliches rather than real psychological growth. Littlefoot's maturation and psychological growth are little more than what we would expect during the actual physical time required for the journey.

Another mythological aspect is the direction of their journey – toward the west. In European and Asian mythologies the western horizon, probably because it is where the sun sets, is associated with the gates to the underworld or even death itself. However, in America this myth has been altered radically. In almost all of our stories of the Western Frontier the wilderness is a place of renewal. Typically, the old and tired hero comes from

the East (or Europe), and after a time in the Western paradise he is renewed, sheds the old, restricting skin of his origins, and becomes young again. In this film the dinosaurs seek a Western Paradise where life will be renewed. In addition, Littlefoot's journey to the Great Valley is a way of both dealing with his mother's death and completing her mission for her. He gains a new maturity and a deeper understanding of others. In this aspect, *Land Before Time* is another reworking of the James Fennimore Cooper *Leatherstocking* tales.

Within the wandering band, the only obviously female figure is named Cera (for triceratops), the young "three-horn." However, the name we hear is "Sarah," the only character with an easily identifiable human name. "Sarah" in Hebrew means princess – and she certainly acts very much like a stereotyped Jewish Princess: bitchy, constantly whining and complaining, unwilling to cooperate, unable to admit her own weaknesses, and convinced of her own social superiority. Because of her headstrong pride, she leads some of the youngsters astray and almost causes their death. What in other circumstances could be portrayed as a woman's personal strength and conviction is here presented as folly. She is rescued by the male dinosaurs and thereby publicly humiliated. In the end she learns to cooperate with the male-led plans that eventually lead to success. This is definitely not a film with strong female role models.

Many contemporary films contain "in-group" references to other films that may be familiar to the audience and *The Land Before Time* is no exception. For example, during Littlefoot's birth, his egg rolls down through some branches toward the camera. In Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [1981] a similar sequence is seen in the film's introduction where a large egg-shaped boulder threatens the hero, Indiana Jones. Spielberg, by the way, is one of this film's producers.

On the surface, the film condemns racial prejudice, here transformed into various species of dinosaurs not living together, as a block to achieving goals. The prejudice is put into the mouths of the parents, specifically the father "three-horn," the only prominent male figure in the film. The various young dinosaurs must work together to save their lives and achieve the Great Valley. On the way they become friends. Note that racial prejudice is conquered, not for altruistic, moral, or philosophical reasons, but for sheer necessity of multiplying their physical strength. The film implies that the children's new-found friendship will continue into the future, and they will change the thinking of the old-fashioned adults. However, considering the influence and power parents have on the still-forming lives of their children, we must entertain doubts. The parents are never confronted by the children's discovery of racial equality. Even more disturbing is the film's definition of integration: all the vegetarians living together in paradise. What about the carnivores? Don't they have any rights? According to this film it is OK for like-minded people to live together, but those who don't think like us should be excluded. Integration has been transformed into ghetto life.

The Land Before Time. Directed by Don Bluth. Story by Judy Freudberg and Tony Geiss. Screenplay by Stu Kreiger. Music by James Horner. Executive Producers are George Lucas, Stephen Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, & Frank Marshall. Available on MCA Home Video, 1988.