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The Secret of Kells

Through a Forest of Darkness and Light

JAMES T. SPARTZ

The secret in *The Secret of Kells* is elusive. Is it the boy? The book? Illumination? The forest? A fairy? Perhaps all of these: The story of a boy, a book, and its illumination brought forth by a fairy-led darkness-to-light forest sojourn. The secret remains, it seems, revealed for each viewer in light of their own experience traveling through the sacred groves, following the will-o'-the-wisp, to find that fears and their triumph come at a cost and are essential to one's own becoming.

The Secret of Kells, a 2009 Oscar-nominated animated film directed by Thom Moore, is set in medieval Ireland. It follows the travails of a twelve-year-old boy monk, Brendan, and his coming of age as a master illuminator. This enchanting film contains the seeds of identity for a nation, the artistry of an age, and the power of resilience through the struggles of one generation becoming the next. As Brendan becomes a man, transformation, artistic becoming, and the ageless power of story reveal the darkness and the light through legends that, in truth, "(re) connected Europe to its own past by way of scribal Ireland" (Cahill 1995, 183).

Rooted in actual history, *The Secret of Kells* is a composite sketch of events that took place from about the seventh to the ninth century in Ireland. During this time, Viking raiders repeatedly plundered Iona, Lindisfarne, and other island monasteries around Scotland, Ireland, and northern England. In 830 AD the monks of Iona fled the Norse longboats in a return to Kells carrying but a few relics, including "the most beautifully written book in existence" (Joyce [1913] 1968, 546): the

Book of Kells. An ornate version of the four gospels, this masterpiece was originally the work of Iona's founder, Columcille (later Romanized as St. Columba), a lover of books and the "most accomplished poet of his day" (Cahill 1995, 186).

With these events as a backdrop, alluded to in the opening sequence, *The Secret of Kells* begins with twelve-year-old Brendan on a goose chase, unwittingly in search of experience and meaning. The boy monk finds light through the ever-growing walls of Kells, a fortresslike monastery in what is now County Meath, forty miles northwest of Dublin. Brendan strives in this prison of insular learning to know all he can, given the limits of Abbot Cellach, his uncle and only relative, who seeks to shut out "pagan nonsense" and imminent invading forces. But Brendan sees the light, and it is leafy and green. Filled with birdsong and beauty, the forest beyond Kells represents freedom, the full spectrum of nature, and connection to an otherness beyond.

The forest is an understated yet crucial feature in *The Secret of Kells*. It acts as a locus for Brendan's emerging connection between past and present, self and other. For some monks of medieval Ireland, nature was not a menacing unknown. These monks "looked on creation with the enchantment of children emerging from a dark room" (Cruise O'Brien and Cruise O'Brien 1972, 32). It is in this context, with the forest as facilitator, where we first see Brendan directly encounter the light and the shadows. The light, a fairy and spirit guide named Aisling, takes the form of a younger-sister-like frenemy, daring Brendan to great heights in his search for berries to make ink for the monks' illumination work. Aisling affords Brendan his first glimpse of the wider world beyond Kells from atop a mighty oak—the most venerated of the many sacred trees in medieval Ireland (Anderson 2014, 142). Though she is immortal, Aisling also faces limitations. Brendan finds his way to the Dark One's cave, home of the pagan serpent Crom Cruach. Here, Aisling cannot go. The would-be warrior Brendan must do battle with his own fears in a dream-state world of ancient symbols and mystical power to retrieve the crystal eye of Crom—the tool that allows Brendan to achieve illumination. In capturing the eye, Brendan is able to create the celebrated Chi-Rho page for the Book of Kells.

Art in ancient Ireland reached a high point between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Pagan symbols, including zigzags, waves, spirals, and lozenges, were combined in Celtic art with Scandinavian and Eastern

influences. P. W. Joyce, in a two-volume social history of Ireland first published in 1913, suggests that some interlaced knots and weaving designs came to Ireland by way of Byzantium. Artistic monks, copyists and illuminators, combined these ancient influences to create “new and intricate forms of marvelous beauty and symmetry” (Joyce [1913] 1968, 551). These illustrations and illuminations often included the faces of dragons, serpents, and other animals with tails, ears, or tongues often stretched out and “woven till they became merged and lost in the general design” (Joyce [1913] 1968, 545). The monks of Ireland’s Golden Age welcomed and integrated external influences, evidenced in the film by monks of various cultural backgrounds, and reconciled such otherness with existing pieties (Cruise O’Brien and Cruise O’Brien 1972, 27) to formulate what are now thought of as the native arts of Europe’s Celtic fringe.

There is artistic license taken by the filmmakers of *The Secret of Kells*, of course. It is not meant to be an accurate portrayal of historical events but an engaging story where the forest plays a subtle but significant role in Brendan’s overcoming of adversity, search for meaning, and eventual escape from the ruin of plunder. One form of resilience can be thought of as a mode of moving through change, not wholly affected yet not entirely immune, and coming through it as wiser, stronger, and more aware. Brendan’s growing resilience is made possible by what he finds in the forest and stands in direct contrast to his uncle, Abbot Cellach, who is steadfast in the center of his own creation—the monastic fortress of Kells—seeking command and control of the external world rather than growing and changing with it. The abbot builds walls and erects towers through the labor of his people. He strategizes and plots in preparation for imminent attack. His loyalty is to the villagers taking refuge within the walls; and as such, his determination to shut out external influences is admirable in that regard. Brendan, in contrast, complements the stalwart protector, representing adaptation in the face of impending change. Brendan takes refuge in the scriptorium, at the periphery of the larger territory of Kells. Slowly he emerges, as the oak from the acorn, through his escape and subsequent life journey.

Warrior monks of ancient Ireland “lived in a time and place that saw no separation between ‘man’ and ‘nature,’ but not a complete union either” (Anderson 2014, 141). Brendan is distinct from his controlling uncle, striving to exist in touch with the wider world, led by the call of spirit and open to change yet willing to do battle in explora-

tion of the unknown—as he would later, the film implies, as St. Brendan the Navigator.

Darkness and light suffuse modern life with trade-offs in shades of gray. Ancient life was no different. Banal coincidence becomes sublime revelation as the wide way of everyday action arises in nonlinear and ancient dreams where the sufferings of solitude lead to connection with others and, ultimately, the self. We see Brendan's transformation really begin after his mentor, Brother Aidan, arrives at Kells having escaped by sea from Iona, an island monastery off the west coast of Scotland. Brother Aidan, dressed in flowing white, is a master illuminator and spiritual heir to Columcille, the greatest Irish figure after Patrick himself (Cahill 1995, 169). Aidan was the sole protector of the Book of Iona.

“To gaze upon the book is to gaze upon heaven itself,” says one of the monks of Kells. Brother Aidan is aging; and within the elite confines of the scriptorium, he seeks the next copyist and illuminator to act as caretaker. It is Aidan who first urges Brendan to go to the forest, and it is the forest to which they flee when the Norse invade Kells. The only trees in the agrarian and increasingly congested Kells fortress are those that surround the scriptorium. Like druids worshipping in the sacred groves, the trees shelter the scriptorium, which offers a center of literacy and illumination. Through the powers of paper and ink, books such as those at Kells held nearly talismanic power. As the film shows, these ritual objects were generally off-limits to anyone but their creators and protectors—the religious elite.

As the Norse invade, Brendan and Aidan flee to the forest, almost lose the book, and journey together laughing, learning, and living with the sole (soul?) purpose of completing this magnum opus. We watch the waves of the Irish Sea wash away Aidan's final steps and Brendan continue alone, now a man, to share his history and future with fellow believers. Reconciling with his uncle, whom Brendan finds on his deathbed in the tower of Kells, the master illuminator pardons the abbot's darkest regrets and adds light through the sharing of his life's work, the Book of Kells.

The ancient allure of *The Secret of Kells* bears repeated viewing. The enchantment is multifold if viewed with a young child nearby. My daughter and I have watched this film many times, always finding something new in the intricate weavings of art, music, dialogue, and story. I am not a historian, an expert on Ireland, or an animated film aficiona-

do. I'm not even Irish American. One does not need to be any of those things to appreciate this simple story and its vast subtexts. Rooted in layered senses of time and place, this film transcends the particulars of one boy's journey through the portal of nature and spirit in a way that is enjoyable for families the world over. Books, and the power of stories they contain, shed light across history and culture—the light of people in place transformed through circumstance and overcome by outside forces yet persevering through the resilience of art, language, myth, and the reality of dreams. Such dreams don't have to come true to simply be true. This is the secret of *The Secret of Kells*, perhaps, a willingness to believe in the connections to nature beyond the walls we construct in vain attempts to separate ourselves from the wilds beyond. It is a reminder to go to the forest, listen to the wind, do battle with the darkness, enter into the light, and, in time, become who you are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James T. Spartz is an assistant professor of environmental communication at Unity College in Maine. His research and teaching interests include the role of place in environmental communications, media effects on public opinion of sustainability issues, public perceptions of land use change, and discourses of transition in the twenty-first century. Spartz earned a PhD through the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Prior to graduate school, he was—sometimes simultaneously—a freelance writer, baker, hardware sales associate, and performing songwriter.

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