

What ‘Boxtrolls’ Teaches Us About Immigration Debate

The animated movie “The Boxtrolls” offers insight into the ongoing U.S. debates over immigration.

I watched the film, which is based on the novel, “Here Be Monsters,” by Allan Snow, some time ago with these immigration battles in mind.

I could not help but notice some similarities between the movie and the way in which some of the battles for the rights of minority groups in America in general – and the recent immigration wars in particular – play out.

I’ll try to tell the story without completely ruining the movie for those who haven’t watched it yet.

In the movie, the villain, Archibald Snatcher, feeds on a distorted narrative about small subterranean creatures called Boxtrolls.

Although Snatcher knows that Boxtrolls are peaceful and shy, he helps spread rumors that they kidnap, hurt and even kill young children because he wants to further his sociopolitical status by hunting and then killing the harmless creatures.

Snatcher strikes a deal with the mayor of Cheesebridge, Lord Portley-Rind, in which he will join the city’s membership council when he exterminates every single Boxtroll.

The Boxtrolls live underground and, because people are unduly afraid of them, they only come out at night to get mostly unwanted items they then use to make inventions.

Snatcher is able to catch most Boxtrolls but, in the end, the truth about the

Boxtrols comes to light and they live in harmony with the townspeople for the surprising benefit of all.

With the help of a human who fully identifies with them, the Boxtrols are able to come out of the shadows and the people of Cheesebridge find out that the Boxtrols bring a particular set of valuable skills to society.

The similarities between Boxtrols and minorities in America are striking because, historically, a number of minorities have clearly been victims of Boxtrolling in America.

By “Boxtrolling,” I mean the disposition to create or disseminate distorted narratives about minorities in order to exercise power over them or gain sociopolitical privileges.

And although this impulse is by no means a monopoly of white Anglo males, in American history it was white males who by far Boxtrolled others the most.

I say this not to exercise “reverse racism,” but only to acknowledge that Boxtrolling is more effectively manifested and forcefully exercised by those who control the vehicles of cultural output.

Historically, it seems clear that it was white males who have had the privilege of controlling the institutions that deployed the most powerful definitions of reality in America.

It must be also acknowledged, however, that without the support of sectors of the white establishment, some progress in the rights of minorities would not have been possible. Back to my analogy!

Although many minority groups can be correlated to the image of a Boxtroll, undocumented immigrants seem to fit the image more closely than any other group.

Boxtrols live in the shadows, are constant victims of distorted descriptions and

have their potential contributions to society curbed from widespread acknowledgement due to a popular imagination that has been captured by a narrative of condescending disdain.

Analogously, in contemporary America, images of undocumented immigrants as bank robbers, terrorists and even sex offenders are not hard to come by.

Some sectors of American society insist on fabricating a strong correlation between rising crime rates and the presence of undocumented immigrants, and yet a number of social scientists have demonstrated that, when first-generation immigrants move into communities, crime rates tend to drop.

Some sectors of American politics insist on claiming that granting legal status to millions of immigrants would hurt the economy, and yet a number of studies have argued the exact opposite.

Some argue that “amnesty” will be a danger to American low-wage workers, and yet a very compelling argument can be made that the American workers may benefit from the legalization of undocumented workers.

Obviously, there must be examples of violence, free-riding and other forms of negative behavior on the part of immigrants. They’re people, and people are complicated.

But the bulk of the narrative against immigration reform smells like Boxtrolling to me.

Hopefully, the end of the current immigration wars will be somewhat like that of the movie, where most were able to get along and appreciate their differences despite the challenges that difference brings.

But life is hardly as sweet and clean as in animated movies. In real life sometimes, perhaps most times, the villain wins. But it seems important to identify with and speak for those who are victims of Boxtrolling.

As Martin Niemöller, a man who also opposed an even more pernicious form of this impulse, said, “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

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