

Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts

Steven Holmes



Sechrist, Radford, creator. *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*. Netflix, 2020.

In season 3 of *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, the protagonists are joined by a band of singing mutant k-pop narwhals, a point which, in and of itself, highlights the show's particular blend of absurdist humor (the series also features singing lumberjack cats and tuxedo-wearing frogs), commitment to diverse representation, and expansion of the contours of what "post-apocalyptic media" can mean or entail. The series is set in a post-apocalyptic earth where "mutes," or mutated forms of conventional earth animals have either gained sentience and taken on human-like community structures, or become extremely large, forcing humanity to live in underground bunkers. When the series' protagonist Kipo's (Karen Fukuhara) bunker is attacked by a "Mega Monkey," she's separated from her father and the rest of her human community and has to learn to survive on a now foreign surface. Kipo befriends surface-dwellers Wolf (Sydney Mikayla), Benson (Coy Stewart), and the mutant insect Dave (Deon Cole) in her quest to reunite with her father. Along the way, she learns that she herself is a "mute," causing an identity crisis and forcing her to learn to control new jaguar-related powers. She in turn works to reconcile the human and "mute" communities.



The series, produced by DreamWorks Animated Television and animated by Studio Mir certainly feels in keeping with both, especially when compared to DreamWorks' contemporaneous *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020) and Studio Mir's earlier *The Legend of Korra* (2005-2008). The comparison to *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* seems particularly on point, given that both series focus on a young female protagonist navigating a set of powers she doesn't fully understand in the midst of a vibrantly-colored post-apocalyptic landscape. Both series also share voice talent (Karen Fukuhara voices Kipo and also Glimmer in *She-Ra*).

Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts is never the "first" in any of the areas where it could be considered breakthrough. It's not the first to take the post-apocalyptic setting of Earth as the venue for a light-hearted fantasy-like adventure—that would at least be *Adventure Time* (2007, 2010-2018). It's not the first series to use mutations as a foil for racism or other phobias—that would be *X-Men* (1992-1997 for the children's animated series, and the earlier incarnation in the comics). And it's not the first children's television series to have a character acknowledge they're gay through dialogue—that would be *6teen* (2004-2010). But, in being a polished, well-produced action series on Netflix, with all three seasons released in the midst of the first year of the shut-downs from the Covid-19 pandemic, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* offers a bold, fresh new

take that blends these various elements. It may end up being, if not a better-known, then at least fondly-remembered series that executed these elements well during a particularly rough year.

The main series arc focuses on the struggle to reconcile human and mute communities, a particular challenge given that the lead antagonist for the first two seasons, the mutated mandrill Scarlemagne (Dan Stevens), was experimented on as a child and seeks to enslave or annihilate the humans who once experimented on him. The most remarkable aspect of the series is perhaps the emphasis on series lead Kipo's efforts at peacemaking, which more often revolve around finding common ground and friendship among the various "mute" communities rather than achieving victory through physical violence. While the series arc at this point may risk seeming humdrum given the decades-long prevalence of the very similar premise of the X-Men franchise in animation, comics, and film, it nonetheless still serves as an effective vehicle for the characterization of Kipo and her friends.

The series was nominated for a GLAAD award for its handling of Benson, one of Kipo's friends who happens to acknowledge he's gay through dialogue. Unlike *6teen*, which broke that benchmark through a one-off character for a single episode, Benson is a lead supporting male role that remains significant through all three seasons. In later seasons, his crush becomes his boyfriend. But his queerness is never the subject of the main plot, and never feels like tokenism. It is, perhaps, refreshingly banal. He just is gay, and that's not even the most interesting element of his character (that would be his friendship with Dave, the mutant insect). The representation of Benson doesn't break any barriers that haven't been broken before, especially when compared to *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), but the lack of backlash that Kipo received for its depiction of Benson will hopefully signal to other studio executives that they can stop hand wringing so much about LGBTQ+ representation in children's animation, as there was in *Adventure Time* (where there were years of development before Cartoon Network would allow the queer relationship between Princess Bubblegum and Marceline to see any progress).

Between *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* and *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, there has been a significant departure from the years of "grimdark" that defined the idea of "post-apocalypse." After decades of *The Walking Dead* and the legacy of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), children's animation is showing that post-apocalyptic media can be colorful, fun, and upbeat.

Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts is relevant to scholars of children's media and LGBTQ+ studies as an exemplar of the transformation possible in the medium of animation after the decades of preceding transformational works. Although works like *Steven Universe* may be more groundbreaking, it's works like *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* that solidify transformations in the medium, and that exemplify the changing definition of "normal," both in terms of the directness with which characters' sexual identities are managed as well as in audience acceptance of those topics. The series weaves together a multiracial, multicultural constellation of intelligent beings that by the series' conclusion, with the exception of the antagonist of the third season, agree

to live and work together past their prejudices, and in this respect its utopianism and optimism serve as a sharp relief to many contemporary works of post-apocalyptic speculative fiction. *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* suggests that a movement away from “grimdark” can be accompanied with positive depictions of LGBTQ+ characters—and singing k-pop narwhals.

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