

WHAT'S UP

A musical, magical tale about family members' different gifts

LINDA YEW shares her reflections on Disney's latest movie Encanto. Everyone is unique, but we can blend together in harmony, she says.



The Madrigal family in the movie Encanto.
[Photo: WALT DISNEY ANIMATION STUDIOS]

Would you like to belong to a family where every one of its members possesses a magical power? Everyone... except you? Welcome to the Madrigal family, a multi-generational family living in an enchanted house within the mountain regions of Colombia. In this family, every child is bestowed with a magical ability on his fifth birthday. Every child, except Mirabel.

As we dive into the story, we meet Mirabel's amazing family. Her sister Isabela is endowed with grace and beauty; even plants and flowers bloom at the swish of her long, silky hair. Another sister, Luisa, is gifted with extraordinary strength. Powerful like Hercules, she carries stacks of donkeys and moves churches for the townsfolk. Mirabel's mother can heal any ailment with her cooking and her cousin can control the weather. Another relative shape-shifts, while yet another communicates with animals.

Proud as she is of her family, Mirabel cannot help but feel like an outcast. She describes herself:

*"Always walking alone
Always wanting for more
Like I'm still at that door
Longing to shine like all of you shine."*

Inner struggles

We can identify with Mirabel's feelings of "not belonging" and of being "unworthy" when measured against others' incredible talents, achievements, and lifestyles. Humble Mirabel is totally relatable. Yet our plucky heroine holds no resentment. She declares, "Gift or no gift, I'm just as special as the rest of my family." To which another character quips, "Maybe your gift is being in denial." Despite her inner struggles, she remains positive, **exuberant**, and cheerful, constantly finding ways to help and contribute.

Are the lives of the gifted characters as happy and easy as they seem? Mirabel has mixed feelings of admiration and envy towards her picture-perfect sister, Isabela. When she overcomes these difficult feelings to approach her sister with a hug, something shifts in their relationship. A new compassion grows between the sisters. Thus begins the healing process in their family.

Together, they discover Isabela is producing pretty flowers to please others, instead of the prickly, creepy, and carnivorous plants she really likes. She almost marries a man she doesn't love but whom others consider a good match. She is living to please others and maintain her picture-perfect image, without fulfilling what she truly wants (fair warning in today's Instagram-hungry world).

Mirabel also discovers her formidable sister, Luisa, beginning to lose her supernatural strength, and along with it, her self-worth. Luisa confesses,
*"I move mountains, I move churches
 And I glow 'cause I know what my worth is
 ... But... Under the surface
 I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service..."*

She starts to buckle from the weight of everybody's expectation that she remain invincible, performing with "no cracks, no breaks, no mistakes". She describes this weight as:

*"Pressure like a grip, grip, grip and it
 won't let go,
 Pressure like a tick, tick, tick 'till it's
 ready to blow."*

We feel for them and begin to wonder if life really is a bed of roses for these gifted ones.



Mirabel feels like an outcast.

[Photo: WALT DISNEY ANIMATION STUDIOS]

Everyone belongs

Apart from Mirabel, there is another character who feels like an outcast. Uncle Bruno, whom “nobody talks about”, is **estranged** from his family. Even though he has a magical gift, it is deemed more of a curse than a blessing. Hence, poor Bruno hides away, and it takes brave Mirabel to bring him back.

In *Encanto*, there is no visible villain to fight. The biggest villains are the characters’ own fears, insecurities, misjudgments of self and others, and so on. But, overcoming them together as a family makes the whole journey easier.

Music and rhythm, being an inseparable part of Colombian culture, is indispensable in bringing *Encanto* to life. Even the family name “Madrigal” means “a form of song, for several voices, usually unaccompanied by musical instruments”. Indeed, this is what family is like — not a stage of outstanding solo singers backed by impressive orchestras, but a chorus of different voices, each with its own unique part to sing, yet blending in harmony to make music. That’s what family is about. And that’s magic.

VOCAB BUILDER

exuberant (say “ek-**ziu**-be-rent”; adjective) = cheerful and energetic.

estranged (say “es-**strayn**-j’d”; adjective) = alienated, no longer close.

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