

The Whale (2022 film)

The Whale is a 2022 American drama film directed by Darren Aronofsky and written by Samuel D. Hunter, based on his 2012 play of the same name. The film stars Brendan Fraser, Sadie Sink, Hong Chau, Ty Simpkins, and Samantha Morton. The plot follows a reclusive, morbidly obese instructor of the English language who tries to restore his relationship with his teenage daughter, whom he had abandoned eight years earlier. The film was shot from March 8 to April 7, 2021, in Newburgh, New York.

The Whale premiered at the 79th Venice International Film Festival on September 4, 2022. It had a limited theatrical release in the US on December 9, before a wide release on December 21 by A24, grossing \$57.6 million against a budget of \$3 million. The film received a polarized response; though critics lauded the acting, particularly Fraser, Chau and Sink, the film's portrayal of obesity-related struggles drew criticism. For his performance, Fraser won the Academy Award, Critics' Choice Award and SAG Award for Best Actor, Chau was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, and the film won the Academy Award for Best Makeup and Hairstyling.

Plot

Charlie, a recluse living with morbid obesity, teaches online English writing courses to college students, but keeps his webcam off, ashamed of his physical appearance. His nurse and only friend, Liz, enables him by bringing him food, while contradictorily urging him to visit a hospital for congestive heart failure treatment, but Charlie insists he cannot afford medical care. Charlie is also visited by Thomas, a missionary for the New Life Church who wants to save him. He orders pizza almost every night through an established routine with delivery driver Dan, who leaves the pizza outside on his porch and collects cash payment from the mailbox with the two never interacting face-to-face.

Charlie hopes to reconnect with his estranged teenage daughter Ellie, whom he abandoned eight years ago when leaving his wife Mary to be with his lover Alan. He reveals that he has been saving money for years and offers Ellie the entire

The Whale



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>Darren Aronofsky</u>
Written by	<u>Samuel D. Hunter</u>
Based on	<u>The Whale</u> by <u>Samuel D. Hunter</u>
Produced by	<u>Jeremy Dawson</u> <u>Ari Handel</u> <u>Darren Aronofsky</u>
Starring	<u>Brendan Fraser</u> <u>Sadie Sink</u> <u>Hong Chau</u> <u>Ty Simpkins</u> <u>Samantha Morton</u>
Cinematography	<u>Matthew Libatique</u>
Edited by	<u>Andrew Weisblum</u>
Music by	<u>Rob Simonsen</u>
Production company	<u>Protozoa Pictures</u>
Distributed by	<u>A24</u>

\$120,000 in his bank account if she spends time with him without her mother's knowledge. Ellie agrees on the condition that he completes all her homework for her, though he also requests that she writes in a notebook he gives her.

As Charlie's health worsens, Liz brings him a wheelchair so he can remain mobile. Thomas' visits disgruntled Liz, who chastises him. She reveals she is the adopted daughter of New Life's head pastor and that Alan was her brother; his religious guilt drove him to suicide, leading a grief-stricken Charlie to start uncontrollably binge-eating. Despite Liz's objections, Thomas still believes his mission is to help Charlie.

Release dates	September 4, 2022 (Venice) December 9, 2022 (United States)
Running time	117 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$3 million ^[2]
Box office	\$57.6 million ^[3] ^[4]

One day, Ellie places crushed Ambien into Charlie's food, knocking him out. Thomas arrives, and the two smoke marijuana, whereupon Thomas confesses to stealing his youth group's money and running away from home because he felt dissatisfied. Ellie secretly records their conversation.

Out of concern, Liz takes Mary to visit. When Liz learns about the amount Charlie has saved for Ellie, she storms out, furious over being lied to about why he avoided medical treatment. Mary and Charlie argue over his decision to leave his family for Alan. Charlie admits he hopes Ellie will prove he did "one thing right with his life". Later that night, while delivering pizza, Dan sees Charlie for the first time and leaves, horrified. As a result, Charlie has a severe binge-eating episode and sends a profanity-laden email to his students, telling them to disregard the classwork and just write back "something honest".

Thomas visits Charlie one last time to inform him that he is moving back home after Ellie sent his confession to his former youth group and family, who have forgiven him and implored him to return. He attempts to preach to Charlie, but Charlie chastises him when he attributes Alan's death to his sexual orientation.

During his next class, Charlie tells his students he is being fired after the email he sent, and reads some of their submissions. To reciprocate their honesty, he switches on his webcam for the first time, and the students have mixed reactions. Charlie calmly proclaims that academics do not matter, but the honest things his students wrote do, before abruptly ending the class by tossing his laptop against the fridge, destroying it.

Liz returns and comforts Charlie as his health rapidly declines. Ellie arrives to furiously confront him over an essay he agreed to rewrite for her; Charlie had instead replaced it with an essay about Moby-Dick she wrote in eighth grade, as he considers it the most honest essay he has ever read. Ellie initially rebukes him as he attempts to reconcile one final time, though she reads the paper aloud at Charlie's insistence.

Charlie stands up and begins to walk toward her without assistance which he had tried but failed to do during her first visit. As she finishes reading, they smile at each other and Charlie begins to float as he is engulfed in a bright white light.

Cast

- Brendan Fraser as Charlie, a morbidly obese and reclusive English instructor
- Sadie Sink as Ellie, Charlie's estranged biological daughter
 - Jacey Sink as young Ellie

- Hong Chau as Liz, a nurse who is Charlie's only friend
- Ty Simpkins as Thomas, a Christian missionary
- Samantha Morton as Mary, Charlie's ex-wife and Ellie's estranged mother
- Sathya Sridharan as Dan, a pizza delivery man from a restaurant Charlie frequently orders from

Production

Writing and casting

Darren Aronofsky has said that he tried to get the film, an adaptation to Samuel D. Hunter's 2012 play *The Whale*, made for over a decade, but could not do it because he struggled to find the right actor to portray Charlie. After seeing portions of Brendan Fraser's performance in a trailer for *Journey to the End of the Night* (2006), he decided that Fraser could be a good choice.^[5]

The original play was set in 2009. However, the setting was updated to 2016 in the movie. This was because Hunter wanted to show the events as being before a major "seismic change", and since doing so would make it clear that the play's events were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.^[6] Within the film, the television shows the unfolding of the 2016 Republican Party presidential primaries.^[7] In the original play, Thomas, an Evangelical Christian missionary, is instead a Mormon missionary.^[6] The Liz character, in the original play and in the screenplay, did not have her ethnic background or race specified. The actress chosen to portray Liz, Hong Chau, is of Asian heritage. The final screenplay specifies that Liz was adopted as a way of accommodating Chau's casting; this was not in the initial revisions of the screenplay.^[8] Chau argued that Liz should have an unkempt look and should be tattooed, aspects that were incorporated into the character.^[9]

On January 11, 2021, it was announced that A24 had obtained global distribution rights to *The Whale*, directed by Aronofsky and starring Fraser.^{[10][11][12]} Chau, Sadie Sink and Samantha Morton joined the cast in February, followed by Ty Simpkins in March.^{[13][14]} Sathya Sridharan joined the cast at an unknown date.^[15]

At one point, the film was set to star James Corden with Tom Ford directing, but Ford left due to creative differences. George Clooney also briefly considered directing the film, but ultimately declined.^[16]

Filming

Principal photography ran from March 8 to April 7, 2021, in Newburgh, New York. It was shot in 4:3 aspect ratio. Post-production began later in April.^{[17][18]}

For the role, Fraser spent four hours each day being fitted with prosthetics that weighed up to 300 pounds (136 kg). He also consulted with the Obesity Action Coalition and worked with a dance instructor for months before filming began in order to determine how his character would move with the excess weight.^[19]

Hunter stated that it is up to the viewer to interpret whether Charlie actually walks in the ending scene and Fraser argued that Charlie is finally "liberated".^[20] Sink stated that her character is emotionally traumatized and that Charlie is able to look through a façade that Ellie puts up as a barrier between herself and her

father.^[21]

Release

The Whale had its world premiere at the 79th Venice International Film Festival on September 4, 2022, where it received a six-minute standing ovation.^{[22][23]} It made its North American premiere at the 2022 Toronto International Film Festival on September 11, 2022.^[24] It had a limited theatrical release in the United States on December 9, 2022, then expanded to wide release on December 21.^[25]

The film was released on VOD platforms on February 21, 2023, and was released on Blu-ray and DVD on March 14, 2023.^{[26][27][28][29]}



The cast, director, and writer holding a press conference during the 2022 Venice Film Festival

Reception

Box office

The Whale grossed \$17.4 million in the United States and Canada, and \$39.5 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$57.6 million.^{[3][4]}

After several weeks in limited release, the film grossed \$1 million in its third weekend (expanding from six theaters to 603) and a total of \$1.6 million over the four-day Christmas frame, then \$1.4 million in its fourth weekend.^{[30][31]} It then expanded to 1,500 venues on the sixth week of its theatrical run and passed \$11 million domestically, somewhat breaking the perceived ongoing trend that the general public was losing interest in prestige films in a moviegoing environment altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. These results were attributed to the praise and awards buzz for Fraser's performance.^[32]

Critical response



The performances of Brendan Fraser & Hong Chau garnered critical acclaim, earning them Academy Award nominations for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actress respectively, with Fraser winning his category.

Review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes reported an approval rating of 64%, based on 342 reviews, with an average rating of 6.6/10. The site's critics consensus reads, "Held together by a killer Brendan Fraser, *The Whale* sings a song of empathy that will leave most viewers blubbering."^[33] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 60 out of 100, based on 57 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[34] According to MovieWeb, the film polarized critics and audiences.^[35]

The Whale received positive feedback at the Toronto International Film Festival, with particular praise for Fraser's, Chau's and Sink's performances.^[36] When the film had a limited theatrical release, Variety reported that the reviews "have been polarizing, with others [than *Variety*'s review] criticizing the film's portrayal of fat people".^[37] Glenn Kenny of RogerEbert.com praised Aronofsky's direction and Fraser's performance, writing that the "story is one of different levels of heartbreak and human misunderstanding" and "Aronofsky and Fraser have taken substantive risks, in the name of an insistent empathy."^[38] Robbie Collin of The Telegraph gave it a perfect five stars, writing: "Fraser seals his comeback in a sensational film of rare compassion."^[39]

Richard Roeper of the Chicago Sun-Times described the film as an "empathetic, haunting, beautiful, heartbreakingly moving story of a broken man".^[40] He named it best film of the year and deemed Fraser's performance as his career's best.^[41] Variety chief film critic Owen Gleiberman also praised Fraser, calling him "sly, subtler, more haunting than he has ever been".^[42] Matthew Creith of Out Front wrote: "The highlight of *The Whale* comes from an outstanding turn from Hong Chau, who gives a memorable performance in a vital role that balances Charlie's outlandish behavior."^[43] Hannah Strong of Little White Lies praised Fraser and the "strong ensemble," highlighting Sink's "tricky role" in which she "captures the anger and sadness that comes from parental abandonment", and stating that while Aronofsky "isn't a particularly empathetic filmmaker" and *The Whale* is not without flaws, the film "reflects tenderly on shame, guilt, and the human impulse to care and be cared for".^[44]

Richard Lawson of Vanity Fair wrote that the film is "meant to be a poignant consideration of guilt, sexuality, religion, remorse" but "we really only know that because the movie shouts it at us". He also criticized Fraser's performance as "lost".^[45] Mark Hanson of Slant Magazine felt that Aronofsky reins in his "typically ostentatious style", but that "considering how Libatique's camera leeringly treats Charlie as an unsightly object of pity throughout, it's difficult to deny the film's fatphobia, though its mawkishness is no less oppressive".^[46] Katie Rife of Polygon wrote: "If you look at *The Whale* as a fable, its moral is that it's the responsibility of the abused to love and forgive their abusers. The movie thinks it's saying 'You don't understand; he's fat because he's suffering.' But it ends up saying 'You don't understand; we have to be cruel to fat people because we are suffering.' Aronofsky and Hunter's biblical metaphor aside, fat people didn't volunteer to serve as repositories for society's rage and contempt."^[47] Mark Kermode gave the film a negative review.^[48]

The film has received criticism for its portrayal of the main character. Time magazine stated: "Some of the film's critics believe it perpetuates tired tropes of fat people as suffering, chronically depressed and binge eating."^[49] On the podcast *Don't Let This Flop*, Rolling Stone writer EJ Dickson said the film was criticized for its use of a prosthetic suit instead of casting a fat actor, with accusations that it "stigmatizes and mocks fat people".^[50] On NPR's culture section, Jaclyn Diaz reported that this criticism extends to detractors calling the film's premise "inherently dehumanizing".^[51]

Writing for The New York Times, Roxane Gay expressed her opinion that the film's empathy was only superficial and that the depiction of Charlie reinforced anti-fat stereotypes and preconceptions. She wrote that although Aronofsky said he wanted to give an empathetic portrayal she "was bewildered because an

empathetic portrayal isn't at all what was conveyed onscreen. As I looked around the audience, I was struck by the fact that there were only four or so fat people in the audience and none on the stage."^[52]

Director Darren Aronofsky defended the film, saying the criticisms "make no sense". Aronofsky further said that "actors have been using makeup since the beginning of acting—that's one of their tools. And the lengths we went to portray the realism of the makeup has never been done before", adding that "people with obesity are generally written as bad guys or as punch lines, we wanted to create a fully worked-out

character who has bad parts about him and good parts about him". He said of fat people that "they get judged everywhere they go on the planet, by most people. This film shows that, like everyone, we are all human".^[53]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
AACTA International Awards	February 24, 2023	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	^[54]
AARP Movies for Grownups Awards	January 28, 2023	Best Actor		Won	^[55]
Academy Awards	March 12, 2023	Best Actor		Won	^[56]
		Best Supporting Actress	Hong Chau	Nominated	
		Best Makeup and Hairstyling	Adrien Morot, Judy Chin, and Annemarie Bradley	Won	
Alliance of Women Film Journalists	January 5, 2023	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	^[57]
		Best Actress in a Supporting Role	Hong Chau	Nominated	
		Best Screenplay – Adapted	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
		Best Woman's Breakthrough Performance	Sadie Sink	Nominated	
Artios Awards	March 9, 2023	Studio or Independent – Drama	Lindsay Graham, Bret Howe, and Mary Vernieu	Nominated	^[58]
Austin Film Critics Association	January 10, 2023	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	^[59]
		Best Adapted Screenplay	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	^[60]
British Academy Film Awards	February 19, 2023	Best Actor in a Leading Role	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	^[61]
		Best Actress in a Supporting Role	Hong Chau	Nominated	
		Best Adapted Screenplay	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
		Best Make Up & Hair	Adrien Morot, Judy Chin, and Annemarie Bradley	Nominated	
Capri Hollywood International Film Festival	December 26, 2022 – January 2, 2023	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Won	^[62]
Chicago Film Critics Association	December 14, 2022	Best Actor		Nominated	^[63]
		Best Supporting Actress	Hong Chau	Nominated	
Cinema for Peace	2023	Most Valuable Film of	Darren Aronofsky	Nominated	^[64]

<u>Awards</u>		the Year			
<u>Critics' Choice Awards</u>	<u>January 15, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Won	[65]
		<u>Best Young Actor/Actress</u>	Sadie Sink	Nominated	
		<u>Best Adapted Screenplay</u>	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
		<u>Best Hair and Makeup</u>	<i>The Whale</i>	Nominated	
<u>Dallas–Fort Worth Film Critics Association</u>	<u>December 19, 2022</u>	<u>Best Picture</u>		7th place	[66]
		<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Runner-up	
		<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	Hong Chau	Runner-up	
<u>Denver Film Festival</u>	<u>November 2–13, 2023</u>	Rare Pearl Award	<u>Darren Aronofsky</u>	Won	[67]
<u>Dorian Awards</u>	<u>February 23, 2023</u>	Film Performance of the Year	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[68]
		Supporting Film Performance of the Year	Hong Chau	Nominated	
<u>Florida Film Critics Circle</u>	<u>December 22, 2022</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Runner-up ^[a]	[69]
<u>Georgia Film Critics Association</u>	<u>January 13, 2023</u>	Best Actor		Runner-up	[70]
<u>Golden Globe Awards</u>	<u>January 10, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor in a Motion Picture – Drama</u>		Nominated	[71]
<u>Golden Trailer Awards</u>	<u>June 29, 2023</u>	Best Drama	"People" (Woollen & Associates)	Nominated	[72] [73]
		Best Independent Trailer		Nominated	
		Best Independent TV Spot	"Acclaim" (GrandSon)	Nominated	
<u>Gotham Independent Film Awards</u>	<u>November 28, 2022</u>	<u>Outstanding Lead Performance</u>	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[74]
		<u>Outstanding Supporting Performance</u>	Hong Chau	Nominated	
<u>Hollywood Critics Association Awards</u>	<u>February 24, 2023</u>	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Won	[75]
		Best Supporting Actress	Hong Chau	Nominated	
		Best Adapted Screenplay	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
<u>Hollywood Critics Association Creative Arts Awards</u>	<u>February 24, 2023</u>	Best Makeup and Hairstyling	Adrien Morot, Judy Chin, and Annemarie Bradley	Won	[76]
<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	<u>November 16, 2022</u>	<u>Best Original Score in an Independent Film</u>	<u>Rob Simonsen</u>	Nominated	[77]
<u>Houston Film Critics Society</u>	<u>February 18, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[78]
<u>Kansas City Film Critics Circle</u>	<u>January 22, 2023</u>	Best Lead Actor		Runner-up	[79]
<u>London Critics Circle Film Awards</u>	<u>February 5, 2023</u>	<u>Actor of the Year</u>		Nominated	[80]

		<u>Supporting Actress of the Year</u>	Hong Chau	Nominated	
<u>Make-Up Artists and Hair Stylists Guild</u>	<u>February 11, 2023</u>	<u>Best Special Make-Up Effects</u>	Adrien Morot, Kathy Tse, and Chris Gallaher	Won	[81]
<u>Mill Valley Film Festival</u>	<u>October 6–16, 2022</u>	Audience Favorite – US Cinema	<i>The Whale</i>	Won	[82]
<u>Montclair Film Festival</u>	<u>October 21–30, 2022</u>	Junior Jury Prize		Won	[83]
<u>New York Film Critics Online</u>	<u>December 11, 2022</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	Hong Chau	Won	[84]
<u>Online Film Critics Society</u>	<u>January 23, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[85]
<u>Palm Springs International Film Festival</u>	<u>January 5–16, 2023</u>	Spotlight Award		Won	[86] [87]
<u>Producers Guild of America Awards</u>	<u>February 25, 2023</u>	<u>Outstanding Producer of Theatrical Motion Pictures</u>	Jeremy Dawson, Ari Handel, and Darren Aronofsky	Nominated	[88]
<u>San Diego Film Critics Society</u>	<u>January 6, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[89]
		<u>Best Adapted Screenplay</u>	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
<u>San Francisco Bay Area Film Critics Circle</u>	<u>January 9, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[90]
		<u>Best Adapted Screenplay</u>	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
<u>Santa Barbara International Film Festival</u>	<u>February 8–18, 2023</u> ^[91]	American Riviera Award	Brendan Fraser	Won	[92]
<u>Satellite Awards</u>	<u>March 3, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor in a Motion Picture – Drama</u>		Won	[93]
		<u>Best Adapted Screenplay</u>	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
<u>Screen Actors Guild Awards</u>	<u>February 26, 2023</u>	<u>Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Leading Role</u>	Brendan Fraser	Won	[94]
		<u>Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role</u>	Hong Chau	Nominated	
<u>Seattle Film Critics Society</u>	<u>January 17, 2023</u>	Best Actor in a Leading Role	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[95]
<u>Society of Composers & Lyricists Awards</u>	<u>February 15, 2023</u>	Outstanding Original Score for an Independent Film	Rob Simonsen	Nominated	[96] [97]
<u>St. Louis Film Critics Association</u>	<u>December 18, 2022</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Brendan Fraser	Won	[98]
<u>Toronto Film Critics Association</u>	<u>January 8, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>		Runner-up	[99]
<u>Toronto International</u>	<u>September 8–</u>	<u>Tribute Actor Award</u>		Won	[100]

Film Festival	18, 2022				
<u>Tromsø International Film Festival</u>	January 16–22, 2023	Aurora Award		Nominated	[101] [102]
<u>Venice Film Festival</u>	August 31 – September 10, 2022	10th Interfilm Award for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue	Darren Aronofsky	Won	[103] [104] [105] [106] [107]
		Leoncino d'Oro Award		Won	
		Premio CinemaSarà Award		Won	
		Sorriso Diverso Venezia Award for Best Foreign Film		Won	
		Golden Lion		Nominated	
		Queer Lion		Nominated	
<u>Washington D.C. Area Film Critics Association</u>	December 12, 2022	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Nominated	[108]
		Best Adapted Screenplay	Samuel D. Hunter	Nominated	
		Best Youth Performance	Sadie Sink	Nominated	
<u>Women Film Critics Circle</u>	December 19, 2022	Best Actor	Brendan Fraser	Won	[109]

Notes

a. Tied with Park Hae-il for *Decision to Leave*

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