

Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio review, a superbly strange stop-motion animation

Death and fascism may not seem ideal subjects for a life-affirming fantasy animation for grownup children of all ages. Yet Mexican maestro Guillermo del Toro, whose 2017 masterpiece *The Shape of Water* won the Oscar for best picture, brings his monstrous cinematic skills to bear on Carlo Collodi's timeless fable with miraculous results, turning it into a Mussolini-era parable about a "lethal form of control and paternity". Using the tactility of stop-motion animation to lend splintery weight (both physical and emotional) to the story.

Along with co-writer Patrick McHale (Matthew Robbins gets a "screen story" credit), Del Toro resituates Collodi's source in the between-the-war years of the 20th century. Carpenter Geppetto (voiced by David Bradley) has lost his beloved son, Carlo, in the Great War. One night, drunk on grief, he cuts down the tree by Carlo's grave and builds a ramshackle puppet (Gris Grimly's illustrations provide structural inspiration) to replace his lost child. When a blue spirit breathes life into the puppet, Geppetto is initially terrified of the whirling dervish unleashed in his home. But the pair soon settle down, with Pinocchio (Gregory Mann) helping Geppetto repair the huge crucified Christ that hangs like a tortured marionette in the church where congregants shriek about demonic puppets. "Everybody likes him," says Pinocchio, pointing up at what looks like a prop from Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971). "He's made of wood too. Why do they like him and not me?"

Yes, Pinocchio is bequeathed a conscience in the form of a talking cricket, a character who (let us not forget) Pinocchio killed with a hammer early on in Collodi's original. But Ewan McGregor's narrator Sebastian J Cricket is no pious stooge; nor is the Fairy with the Turquoise Hair (whom Collodi also declares dead) a beneficent bestower of "real boy" human status. Instead, she is a multi-eyed Wood Sprite (Tilda Swinton) with one foot in the grave, whose underworld alter ego tells Pinocchio that the only path to life is (guess what?) death – the very thing that gives life value.

While it's tempting to compare this version of Pinocchio with Matteo Garrone's 2019 labour of love, there's a closer bond with Steven Spielberg's still underrated 2001 sci-fi fantasy *AI: Artificial Intelligence*. Like Spielberg, Del Toro is fascinated by the Frankenstein elements of a story in which monsters are not what they seem, and the attainment of "humanity" is portrayed as a flawed venture that must be solved through narrative poetry rather than physical transformation. Both directors also embrace the surreal visual spectacle of a story that sends its characters into the belly of the beast via grotesquely gaping jaws, with Del Toro also cheekily tipping his hat towards Spielberg's most explosive creature feature.

Yet ultimately, it's the film's sheer strangeness – that peculiarly magical, lapsed-Catholic sensibility that runs throughout all of Del Toro's most personal works – that makes this sing and fly.