

# “Isle of Dogs”

By Helen Lutz

During my senior year of college I earned the opportunity to take a one-on-one tutorial course with the professor of my choice to finish my degree in Political Science. Knowing I was going to be married shortly after graduation and move to Tokyo, my choice of topics was Japan and my choice of professors was my mentor, Dr. Sterling Fuller, the department head. Dr. Fuller’s passion was governmental systems throughout the world. Together and with the help of the Japanese Embassy, we spent my final semester dissecting the government, the people, the places, the culture and everything we could possibly find that was Japanese.



One of the memories from my time spent in Japan is their love for cats. One could hardly walk into a Japanese home or business without seeing a figurine of a Japanese cat with one paw raised of makeineko or the ‘beckoning cat,’ which is believed to bring blessings and good fortune. Since around 500 A.D. the cats of Japan have proved their worth and at one time even being housed in cat pagodas and owned by only the very wealthy. All this being said, so what about the dogs?

Director Wes Anderson brings a new stop-motion animated feature to theaters with the movie “Isle of Dogs.” With cats as the species of choice what should be done with dogs when dog flu runs rampant through the dog population? Well, all the trash (and I mean there is a lot of trash generated when you stop to consider Japan has about one third the population of the United States and it’s all crammed into a land mass about the size of California, and not all habitable at that) is disposed of on an island off the coast suitably named Trash Island. So, since the dogs are sick, Mayor Kobayashi (voiced by Kunichi Nomura) deems Trash Island as a good place to exile all the dogs there as well. Of course he is a cat lover.

We meet several pooches who are best buddies on the island, Chief (voiced by Bryan Cranston), Rex (voiced by Edward Norton), King (voiced by Bob Balaban), Boss (voiced by Bill Murray) and finally Duke (voiced by Jeff Goldblum). They scrounge out a meager survival hoping that a bag of really tasty, maggot filled food might be dropped off in the trash. This rag tag team will fight any and all comers who might invite themselves to their party.

The dogs are surprised when a small airplane buzzes the island and crash lands on the beach. The pilot of the craft is none other than the nephew and ward of the mayor, little Atari (voiced by Koyu Rankin). Before dog flu Atari’s guardian and best friend was a dog named Spots who happened to be the first dog deported to the island. Atari is on a mission to find his missing puppy and the band of misfit dogs end up helping him along on his adventure.

But what about the dog flu? Even if Atari finds Spots, could he ever convince the mayor to let him return to the city? Probably not, since the mayor is a cat person and is hiding the fact that scientists have discovered a cure for the dog flu – there’s skullduggery afoot. It’s time to euthanize all the nuisance dogs with poison gas – what a jerk.

Parts of the story are told in Japanese with subtitles; however the dogs all speak English. It’s unfortunate that Anderson didn’t use a few more subtitles to keep his audiences engaged. The only reason I was able to follow along was that I was able to catch the gist of much of the Japanese story line, others in the audience – not so lucky. The animation is intriguing and different than most movies which give the dogs additional character, but captivation with the story escaped me. On a scale of one to four Hart Beats I give “Isle of Dogs” ... TWO HARTS. It’s a heart-warming story, but not one you’ll want to see time and again; little ones will probably get fidgety.