



## Interview with Noah Gittell

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **NOAH GITTELL** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 237.*

ALESSANDRA: Our final guest of this TV highlights reel is Noah Gittell. Not only has Noah appeared on three past episodes of the Our Hen House podcast to give us his take on the use of CGI in films and to review two summer blockbusters, he's also shared his fascinating views on the TV show. A writer, film critic, and passionate animal advocate, Noah offers his bountiful wisdom on animal-friendly films and the future of compassionate filmmaking in this segment of the Our Hen House TV show. Find Noah's thoughts at [reelchange.net](#).

MARIANN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Noah.

NOAH: Thank you for having me.

JASMIN: We're so excited to have you. We're big fans of your brain and of the way you think and of your consciousness and all of that! And you've written about a certain level of misanthropy, I would say, in films today.

MARIANN: We like to talk about misanthropy here on Our Hen House.

NOAH: As do I, as do all vegans.

JASMIN: Yes. We're indefatigably negative. But of course, the film *Noah*, not to be confused with you, Noah, is one of the films that you've talked about. And you feel as though, that it demonstrates a rather negative view of humanity. Can you talk about that a little bit?

NOAH: Well, I think it does, but I think it kinda scales back at the end, but we'll get to that in a minute. I really connected to this movie a lot and not just 'cause we have the same name.

JASMIN: That's very egocentric of you.

NOAH: That doesn't hurt. So the director of this movie, Darren Aronofsky, who I think is vegan himself --

MARIANN: I think so, that's what I've read.

NOAH: He took the story of Noah that we all know, and to my mind really shaped it as an animal rights text or a manifesto if you will. Before the character of Noah receives his message from God that he's supposed to build the ark and everything and save all the animals, he already loves animals and hates humans. When we first meet him, he's out with his family, he's kind of away from civilization teaching them to respect the earth and respect animals. And in one of the very first sequences, a wounded animal who has been hunted -- he has an arrow sticking out of his or her belly -- kind of runs past him and he goes to take care of it and comfort it when it dies. And then the hunters come and they're angry that he won't let them have their meat, so he kicks their butts. And that's just a totally vegan fantasy as far as I'm concerned.

MARIANN: And they really are, his family is vegan, right?

JASMIN: In the film.

MARIANN: The children are perplexed as to the meat-eating.

JASMIN: No, that's my favorite part of the film is when the son says, "Why are they killing the animals?" and he says -- I'm paraphrasing of course -- something like, "Well, they think that they need to eat them." And the son says, "Why?"

NOAH: Yeah. He says, "They think it makes them strong."

JASMIN: Oh! Really?

NOAH: Yeah, which I think is even better because Russell Crowe kicks their butts.

JASMIN: Right, pan on Russell Crowe.

NOAH: Exactly.

JASMIN: Exactly, that's so fantastic. Yeah, but you felt as though this film also really had deeper messages for people to consider animals. Can you explain?

NOAH: Yeah, absolutely. The whole -- the way Noah is depicted as a perfect being, which, the Bible depicts him as a perfect being as well, the central thing that he has that makes him a perfect being is that he doesn't hurt animals, and that's about it. But then as the film progresses, it really starts to explore the flipside of that, that misanthropy that we're talking about. Once -- spoilers, I guess, for people who don't know the story of Noah -- once he boards the ark with his family and all of humanity has been wiped away, he gets another message from God. And it's not just that he and his family get to survive. Now the new message is that, "Your whole family has to die too. Mankind cannot be redeemed. And not only that, your stepdaughter --" played by... I don't remember her name, from Harry Potter.

JASMIN: Right, lovely lady.

NOAH: She's wonderful. "Your stepdaughter is pregnant and if it's a girl, you have to kill the infant child so that man cannot continue to reproduce and live." And the character Noah is totally fine with this. It reinforces his misanthropy, and it's a message from God so he's gonna go ahead and do this. And as a viewer watching this, I was very uneasy with this whole situation because I connect to that misanthropy and I've had in my darker moments,

“Well, maybe the world would be better off, and animals would certainly be better off without mankind at all.” So it really explores that idea and challenges the viewer.

MARIANN: And the movie is not without ambiguity. It’s not like the movie unambiguously embraces joy at the prospect that Noah does. I don’t think it ruins people’s viewing of the movie to let them know that humans do survive because we survived.

NOAH: We survived.

MARIANN: We’re here. So the movie is ambiguous about whether that’s a good thing or not. It does not seem to take the position that, oh, thank God he let the baby live. It’s really kind of a very dark view.

NOAH: I agree. And once they get to land and the ocean recedes, he starts drinking and basically becomes an alcoholic, which is also in the Bible as well.

JASMIN: So he wasn’t straight edge.

NOAH: No, he wasn’t. That’s where he deviated. But then there’s that final sequence where I think his daughter-in-law is talking to him about mankind’s ability to do better and be kinder. And the director, Aronofsky, overlays that with images of animals, mother animals and their children. And that was not about what happened back then. That was a call to action to us, in the present. And I thought it was just incredible moving.

MARIANN: I know, I totally agree. Like, from Noah till now, all right, we have screwed it up. But that doesn’t mean we have to continue to. Yeah, it’s powerful.

JASMIN: But speaking of not screwing it up anymore and while we’re on the subject of the film *Noah*, one thing that I think is particularly remarkable about it is the fact that no animals were used at all. It was all CGI. Can you talk about what CGI is?

NOAH: Well, CGI means computer-generated imagery and that’s about all I know about it. I know that it’s been going on since the ‘80s and it’s advanced to the level where we don’t need to use animals almost at all.

MARIANN: *Jumanji* was one of the first really major films that used it effectively, I think.

NOAH: I think that’s true.

MARIANN: Yeah, and that was a movie like *Noah* that you couldn’t have made without CGI. You couldn’t have made *Noah*, at least the way they made it, while actually bringing all those animals to the ark. That would have been impossible.

NOAH: Exactly. So for Aronofsky, he describes it as an ethical choice to some degree. He made a film called *The Fountain*, where I think a goat was used, and he was really appalled with the way that animal was treated on the set. And that kind of opened the door in his mind to think about animals in a new way. And when he made this film he really felt it would not dovetail with the message of the film to use animals and to see them hurt. But I think you’re right that the ability to create CGI animals really opens up the world for these directors in what they can do on film. And I think we saw the same thing in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* a couple of years ago, which was actually I think a combination of motion

capture and CGI, and look at how they did that story 30 years ago. It didn't look nearly as realistic.

MARIANN: Oh yeah, the advances are unbelievable.

JASMIN: I was disappointed that there were real horses used in *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes*.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think it's a growing --

JASMIN: Yeah, but it's still -- I was completely thrilled with the use of CGI in that film and I loved it. I thought that was another example of a film that has important animal messages throughout it.

MARIANN: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that whole franchise and then that movie and the one that's coming up too?

JASMIN: *Planet of the Apes*.

NOAH: Sure. Well, I love *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. I remember watching that sequence, when I was sitting in the theater, where the animals, they start breaking out of the lab, and then they even go to the zoo and break the animals out of the zoo. It wasn't even just about animals in research. It was like a complete animal liberation, and it was very cathartic for me watching that. And in that movie it's very unusual that the character Caesar is basically the protagonist of the film, especially as it goes on, and the human characters kind of become less important.

MARIANN: That's really true, yeah. He's the hero.

NOAH: Really. And that's a real narrative shift that occurs in that film, and I think for the viewer that can have a huge impact on the way you think about animals.

MARIANN: That's a really interesting point, yeah, that suddenly you're shifted into taking the whole story from the viewpoint of the animal.

NOAH: Exactly.

MARIANN: Yeah, I hadn't really thought of it in those terms. What about the one that's coming up?

NOAH: Well, I was interested when I heard about that because I heard that it was about a war between the humans and the chimps. And I thought, well, they were able to make us sympathize with the chimps in the first one because they were imprisoned at the outset, and I worried that in this one it might lean more towards the human perspective -- I know. How terrible that would be.

MARIANN: We don't want the humans to win! They win all the time.

NOAH: Everything that I've heard says that's not the case.

JASMIN: Humankind continues... I actually want to produce the sequel to *Noah*, the movie, my way. What happens next!

MARIANN: But the apes are going to --

NOAH: From what I've heard the humans don't even enter the story for the first hour of the film.

JASMIN: Wow!

NOAH: Yeah, which is great.

MARIANN: Interesting.

NOAH: And it is very sympathetic still to the chimpanzees' perspective, so I'm definitely looking forward to that.

MARIANN: Any other movies that you're waiting for that you think are going to have a good message regarding animals?

NOAH: There is one, and it's called *How to Train Your Dragon 2*.

MARIANN: Oh, I love cartoons. *How to Train Your Dragon* is like one of my favorite movies ever.

NOAH: It's fantastic, yeah.

MARIANN: Oh, I mean I love animation. I like to call it cartoons but I know I should call it animation because it's more serious, and that was brilliant.

NOAH: It's great. Animated films have featured animal protagonists for decades and decades and decades obviously. But *How to Train Your Dragon* I really saw as an animal rights text because you have -- for those who aren't familiar, it's about a group of Vikings who are kind of at war with these dragons. And the dragons come and kill the Vikings and the Vikings try to fight back and kill the dragons. And then there's this one kid, this lead character, who kind of starts to see the dragons a different way and he has this emotional connection with one of them that is supposed to be the most fierce and the most vicious of all, and he eventually convinces the people, his Viking brethren, to stop the war with them. Now, they do end up making the dragons their pets, so it's not quite an animal liberation perspective, but I thought it was very moving nonetheless.

JASMIN: I did too. And let's actually take a step back for people who might not know why there are problems with using live animals in film. What would you say is kind of the nutshell version of the issues inherent in using animals in film?

NOAH: Well, I'm sure you agree that any time animals are used for commerce, there's going to be abuse and suffering. With animals, in particular the worst cases are when exotic animals are used because you basically can't train them to perform without some sort of pain as a negative reinforcement. With dogs and cats it's a little more iffy. Some people are okay with it, some people are not. With horses there have been a lot of problems. There is an HBO show called *Luck* with Dustin Hoffman that was canceled after just a few episodes I think because some horses died on the set.

MARIANN: And the remarkable thing there was that it came to light and it was canceled. I'm sure that's happened many times where people never knew about it.

NOAH: That seemed like a real turning point for me when the animal protection community really stepped up and said, "This is unacceptable."

MARIANN: And people agreed with them.

NOAH: Yeah, they did. And they canceled the show, they were successful and then all these movie stars... And it was also that year that there was a big controversy about animals who were hurt on the set of *The Hobbit*, Peter Jackson's movie.

JASMIN: Oh right, yes! That's true.

NOAH: And these things are coming to light more and more with internet journalism. Anybody can tell their story. And an interesting thing has happened. There's this body that's supposed to govern the use of animals in film called the American Humane Association.

JASMIN: Right, let's talk about that.

NOAH: A much maligned institution. They've been criticized from people like us for being too lenient because they don't monitor the training of the animals, they only monitor the animals once they're on set. And they also don't -- they have a seal of approval that says, "No animals were harmed in the making of this film." But they also have another seal of approval that says, "American Humane Association officials were present during the making of this film." And if you see that, that means animals were definitely harmed.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think we talked before on the show about, there was a big expose, in the *Hollywood Reporter* of all places, just this year --

NOAH: That's great.

MARIANN: -- that really ripped the lid off of the fact that the American Humane Association is not doing a good job.

NOAH: They're really not. And now one of their investigators has formed her own rival group called Movie Animals Protected. And they're going to hopefully do a better job than the AHA did, until the point comes where we don't need to use animals at all and they put themselves out of business.

MARIANN: It's ironic that movies that have great messages about animals, if they're not animated and they're not using CGI, also are inevitably exploiting animals. And what are some of the movies that you feel -- I know you wrote that article for *The Dodo*, a great article bringing to light some really interesting movies that people might not have thought about that really view animals in a new way. One of my favorites was *City Slickers*, though of course real animals were definitely used in the production of that film. Can you tell us a little bit about why you feel that was an important movie for animals?

NOAH: Sure. A lot of people have mentioned that one to me because it was such a big hit. Everybody saw that movie when it came out.

MARIANN: It was a huge hit. I mean, it was a while back, but --

NOAH: It was a long time ago, I think it was over 20 years ago now.

MARIANN: Oh, my God.

JASMIN: Oh, my God!

NOAH: Sorry.

JASMIN: That was mean.

MARIANN: That was a lie.

NOAH: I saw it too, with my parents. But I loved the film when I was a kid and people of all ages loved it. And you don't think of it as having an animal rights message because it's about a cattle drive of all things. It's this vacation cattle drive. There's this character from the city, played by Billy Crystal of course, who is kind of sad and depressed, having a midlife crisis. And he goes on this vacation cattle drive with his friends, it's an escape for urbanites to go live out in the country and pretend to be cowboys for a week. And along the way he helps this cow birth a calf and he falls in love with this calf and things get dicey. At one point he has to risk his lives to protect them. He really forms a strong bond with it. When they finally bring the cattle in, they learn much to their disappointment that the cattle are going to be slaughtered for beef. And the mood of the film just drops. They're all devastated by this even though they eat steak in their home life and they eat burgers. But they've formed a connection with the animals, and you hear the arguments that we've had with omnivores, they're in the film. The cattle driver says, "Oh, it's okay, they were bred for it. They don't have much of a life anyway."

JASMIN: Yeah. "It's not the same."

MARIANN: It's the same thing you hear all the time.

JASMIN: "Not the same."

MARIANN: I have to go rewatch the movie.

NOAH: Yeah, it's great. And then of course he takes the calf and brings it home because he can't bear to see it killed. And he brings it home to his house in the suburbs, which I don't know is the right environment for a cow, but it's better than the alternative.

JASMIN: Well, that goat from *Edgar's Mission* is gonna come live with us in Park Slope, so you know.

MARIANN: That's true.

JASMIN: But we only have a minute or so left and I want to know what some of the other films on this list on *The Dodo* were that you were talking about that had kind of little animal themes sneaking into them that people might not expect.

NOAH: Here's one that I love, 'cause I saw it when I was a kid and I totally forgot about it. It's a movie called *Doc Hollywood* with Michael J. Fox.

MARIANN: I love that movie.

NOAH: Yeah, me too!

JASMIN: I do too.

MARIANN: With the pig.

NOAH: And he's got this pig, and he's a city, an LA physician who ends up in a small town when his car breaks down. And he falls in love with this woman who is a vegetarian in a small Georgia town. It's a hard life for her.

MARIANN: It's a fantasy movie.

NOAH: Completely.

JASMIN: It's CGI with people in it or all animated.

NOAH: And he falls in love with her. And someone gives him this pig for barter and he's gonna sell the pig to a butcher and he decides not to because she's vegetarian and he's trying to woo her. But she even goes out and does some hunt sabotage at one point which I thought was amazing. She's such an animal rights person.

MARIANN: I have to watch that movie again too!

NOAH: Yeah, it's actually a pretty good movie.

JASMIN: I know what we're doing this evening! Yeah, I just want to go through the rest of the list 'cause we're just about done. And this is an article people could find on *The Dodo*. And other movies that you had were *Seven Pounds*, and *Twelve Monkeys*, and of course *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde*. Love that movie. Such a great movie.

MARIANN: We have to watch all of these.

JASMIN: Yeah, that's it. We're clearing our schedule. And I do want to also add one thing though, that you were talking about dogs and cats used in film. We actually have a friend, Denis Henry Hennelly, who made a film called *Bold Native*, which is a feature length fiction film, and there was a dog in it and I remember he said he didn't direct the dog at all. Like, the dog just kind of wandered in when the dog wanted to and wandered out.

MARIANN: They built the movie around the dog.

NOAH: I love that.

JASMIN: Like, they actually said it's like picking out your earrings before you pick out your outfit sort of thing. But anyway, there's so much to talk about and I hope that you come back and join us again because this is fascinating.

MARIANN: And it's gonna become bigger and bigger.

JASMIN: And I hope that people who are watching this right now think a little bit differently when you see animals in film, but also when you're watching films that might have sort of social justice messages sewn throughout it that perhaps pertain to animals and other people who are trying to speak out for what's right and --

MARIANN: Well, with directors like Darren Aronofsky and James Cameron, a huge, huge director who is also vegan now, I think we'll see more of this.

JASMIN: I totally agree. Thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House, Noah.