The True Rescuers: *Big Miracle, Dolphin Tale,* and *Buck*

*Big Miracle* [Motion picture]. United States/United Kingdom: Universal Pictures.

*Dolphin Tale* [Motion picture]. United States: Alcon Entertainment.
   Smith, C. M. (Director). (2011).

*Buck* [Documentary]. United States: Cedar Creek Productions.

Introduction

When humans rescue an animal, who is truly saved? This question lies at the core of the films *Big Miracle, Dolphin Tale,* and *Buck,* which enact human rescues of whales, dolphin, and horses respectively. But these are only the most obvious and explicit rescues, for when humans reach out to nonhumans, mutual healing ensues. These are moving tales of the human spirit overcoming adversity, but it is the presence of nonhumans that enables the humans to accept help from rivals and enemies, shed self-doubt, or transcend a childhood of abuse.

These films also share several other significant elements. For example, all three claim a connection to truth: *Big Miracle* and *Dolphin Tale* are both fictions based on true stories, while *Buck* is a documentary profiling Buck

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Brannaman, the man who inspired *The Horse Whisperer* (1998). Community bonding and family are also central, as nonhuman animals unite humans, sometimes creating makeshift families that succeed where biological families had failed. However, only the documentary *Buck* acknowledges that human efforts to rescue and rehabilitate nonhumans, when unsuccessful, can have devastating results.

**Big Miracle**

Based on the book *Freeing the Whales* by Thomas Rose, *Big Miracle* follows an unlikely collection of human rescuers, including TV reporters, a Greenpeace activist, native Inupiat, an oil company CEO, the National Guard, the Reagan White House, and the Soviet Union, as they rally to free three California gray whales—two adults and their calf—who are under threat of being frozen in by Alaskan ice. Uniting in a common cause to help the whales enables everyone to shed, at least momentarily, the thought traps that define their rivals. Underscoring this message is that *Big Miracle* is a period piece of sorts, set in 1988 Alaska, which reminds us that antagonisms come and go. The Cold War is over, for example. Reinforcing this theme is how freeing the whales changes the human characters. For example, protagonist Adam Carlson, a TV reporter, begins with a crush on a visiting reporter but shifts his affection to former girlfriend and Greenpeace activist Rachel Kramer. Closing the film is a where-are-they-now montage that suggests how the lives of the central characters changed for the better because they helped the whales.

*Big Miracle* is also about the role of the media in promoting awareness and action. The plight of the trapped whales gains attention almost by chance, after a report by Adam catches the eye of the national news. This leads to a cascading effect, as outsiders descend upon the town—a migration that *Big Miracle* mostly plays for laughs as fish-out-of-water reporters complain about frozen toilets, and natives capitalize: the one hotel in town requires cash, and breakfast costs $80. Punctuating the national attention is a scene of show-and-tell in which no students raise their hands in answer to the question “Does anyone have a report that’s *not* about the whales?” Such moments balance out what might have been a dour spectacle of whales trapped in ice.

More seriously, *Big Miracle* also shows how the media pressures some to change their behavior. The governor of Alaska declines Rachel’s plea to call in the National Guard until reporters press him. In the face of national scrutiny, even the native Inupiat shelve their plan to “harvest” the whales for food; an elder says ruefully, “They will see us as killers,” rather than as people carrying on a subsistence way of life that has existed for centuries. The wife of an oil company CEO convinces him to donate an ice-breaking barge and his own