

## Martin Eden

Director: Pietro Marcello

Country: Italy Date: 2019

## A review by Peter Bradshaw for The Guardian:

The terrible loneliness of success is the subject of this absorbing movie, equal in some strange way to the loneliness of failure; it's also about the secret and shameful feeling that failure is the one truthful state of being, which the successful person has had to renounce. Martin Eden is also about capitalism and enterprise and the great 20th-century promise that hard work and an audacious gamble on a certain career path at the start of one's life can carry anyone, however lowly born, on to riches. And more importantly, it is about the dizzying promise that the mass communication made possible by commerce will make art itself lucrative: that actually writing novels, capturing the imagination of millions, could exalt you to heroic celebrity.

Martin Eden is a free adaptation of the 1909 novel by Jack London, author of The Call of the Wild and himself one of the first authors to make a fortune from writing. Director and co-writer Pietro Marcello has transplanted the action from California to Naples, but kept the English name of his hero. The action is interspersed with archive footage, some evidently colourised, some shot by Marcello himself; although set before the first world war, these dreamlike archive moments are taken from any time in the century, evidently up to the 1960s and 70s, as if Martin's story has been a premonition of popular history. Marcello used this newsreel-collagist technique in his recent documentary For Lucio, about singer-songwriter Lucio Dalla.



Luca Marinelli plays the somewhat vulpine figure of Eden himself, a fiercely committed autodidact, making a living in the merchant navy but dreaming of being a writer, with angry, gloomy tales of the wretchedness of working people's lives. When he rescues a well-born young man called Arturo (Giustiniano Alpi) from being beaten up on the waterfront (the film leaves it up to us to wonder why exactly Arturo was hanging around there), Arturo brings Eden home to meet his wealthy family. Eden instantly falls in love with Arturo's elegant, beautiful sister Elena (Jessica Cressy) and begins a heartfelt courtship. Eden also starts

the dispiriting business of sending off his stories to publishers who send them back by return of post; he also falls under the influence of the charismatic socialist Russ Brissenden (Carlo Cecchi), who fiercely demands he stays loyal to the class struggle; Eden becomes enamoured of the social Darwinism and individualism preached by Herbert Spencer.

Inevitably, Eden's uncouth rage at the ruling classes is the key driving force of his imagination and his eventual literary triumph; the point at which Elena and her family finally decide they approve of him now

that he's a big success is the same point at which he angrily and despairingly rejects her, tormented by his bewilderment at how little he understands or enjoys the success he longed for. Perhaps if he had got rich the way his putative in-laws got rich – in business – he might have not been so agonised. But literary success is premised on some supposed superior wisdom or insight into the human condition, which to Eden feels like an existential fraud. And he has, after all, made a selfish fortune with stories about poverty.



This film has been compared to Bertolucci's 1900, and there are points of comparison; I also found myself thinking of Dickens's David Copperfield and his yearning for the writer's vocation, and the sudden wealth of William Dorrit. There is also Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel Oil!, the basis of Paul Thomas Anderson's film There Will Be Blood, or indeed the story of Charles Foster Kane in Welles's Citizen Kane, based on the life of WR Hearst. There is the eternal, toxic fascination of immense wealth, the success that most people might dream of while quite certain that they could never attain or deserve such a thing. And it's even more potent in the case of a writer who might dream such a thing into reality.

There's also an interesting echo of Elizabeth Taylor's 1957 novel Angel, about a young woman who becomes a bestselling author through sheer force of will and, like Eden, must angrily and ungratefully reject demeaningly unartistic job offers early on in her life. Martin Eden is a sad story of a sad man who lacks the capacity for happiness and who is astonished to find that artistic success is as compromised as any other kind. But there is a kind of thrill in tracing his progress from rags to riches to annihilation.

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