



Petite Maman

Director: Céline Sciamma

Country: France

Date: 2021

*A review by Peter Bradshaw for **The Guardian**:*

Céline Sciamma's beautiful fairytale reverie is occasioned by the dual mysteries of memory and the future: simple, elegant and very moving. I fell instantly under its spell, and found myself thinking of classic English tales such as *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce, or *The Child in Time* by Ian McEwan. And there is an extra-textual pleasure in wondering exactly what its child stars thought about it during filming – and what they think about it now.

Joséphine Sanz plays Nelly, the eight-year-old daughter of Marion (Nina Meurisse). The latter is under enormous stress. Marion's mother has just died in a care home, from long-term complications of a hereditary bone disorder, which Marion herself had to avoid with a painful operation when she was about Nelly's age. Young Nelly artlessly asks her mum if she can keep her grandmother's cane, and Marion blankly agrees. Then Marion and her partner (Stéphane Varupenne) take Nelly on a



difficult journey to her late mother's home, where she grew up, and the memories come flooding back – particularly that of a secret hut she built in the woods adjoining the house. Marion is overwhelmed with grief and leaves Nelly alone with her dad. Nelly, being an only child, like her mum, is used to solitude. Her mother's absence, whether physical or emotional, is something she has had to deal with all her life.

Playing in the woods she comes across what appears to be a half-finished hut in a clearing. A girl waves happily to her, asking for help making it. She is the mirror image of Nelly (played by Gabrielle Sanz, evidently Joséphine's twin sister) and announces that her name is ... Marion. After playing together, they go back to Marion's house, which appears to be an eerie mirror-image of her Nelly's mother's childhood home. And there Nelly meets Marion's kindly, withdrawn, thirtysomething mum, who walks painfully with a cane.

It is a ghost story, or a parable, played with realist calm. The girls talk about the future and the past as casually as they would talk about anything else. I found myself holding my breath for long stretches, as the young stars insouciantly saunter in single file along the narrative tightrope. They are left alone on screen for long periods of time, just playing and talking together.

“Secrets aren't always things we try to hide,” says Nelly to her new best friend. “There's just no one to tell them to.” Their secret is confided to us: the audience. Perhaps Nelly's mum was as lonely as a child as Nelly is now. Perhaps Nelly has always wanted her mum to be a friend, to speak to her as directly and simply as she would a friend her own age. And perhaps the adult Marion has felt exactly the same thing.

I'm not being facetious when I say that this meeting of the two girls reminded me of Marty McFly's first encounter with his dad in *Back to the Future*, another brilliant film of a very different type. There is something eternally strange about the simple fact that your parents were once the same age as you, had the same worries and fears and thoughts as you; and crucially, the same inability to see into the future – the future which is you. Making these two characters vulnerable and delicate children is an artistic masterstroke on Sciamma's part. What a superb movie – a jewel of this year's Berlin film festival.

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