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Petite Maman (U)

Dir: Céline Sciamma

Starring: Joséphine Sanz, Gabrielle Sanz, Nina Meurisse, Stéphane Varupenne

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Synopsis: 8-year old Nelly and her parents are packing up her recently deceased grandmother's house in the woods. Nelly's grieving mother Marion leaves for a spell, during which Nelly befriends another girl who turns out, mysteriously, to be Marion at Nelly's age. When adult Marion returns, the mother-daughter bond is illuminated by new understanding.

An extremely small and exactly perfect film, Céline Sciamma's *Petite maman* might at first appear dwarfed by her last title, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. But come closer - and this is a film that beckons like a forest path - and there is much that is similar. There's the luminosity of the filmmaking - an introvert radiance made extrovert by the unshakable assurance of Claire Mathon's camera work and Sciamma's own directorial certitude. And there are the stories, one about romantic love, the other about a mother-daughter bond, but both about the beautiful tragedy of love, even when fully reciprocated: that you can never truly know anyone, however much you care for them. *Portrait*, more epic though it was, hinged on the tiny revelation of a finger marking a significant place in a book, and *Petite maman* may yet turn out to be the page 28 in the ongoing novel of Sciamma's career.

Nelly (Joséphine Sanz) is 8, and her maternal grandmother has just died. With her mother Marion (Nina Meurisse) and her father (Stéphane Varupenne), Nelly has taken leave of the other residents of her grandmother's care home and is being driven to her grandmother's old house, where Marion grew up. From the back seat, Nelly wordlessly pops snacks into her mother's mouth while she drives, even offering her a sip from her juicebox - mute acts of care that speak volumes about their closeness, and about Nelly's unusual empathy for her grieving maman.

The current flows both ways. Later, when Nelly confesses her feelings of confusion and guilt at not having said a proper goodbye - this story is also a superb evocation of a child's first encounter with death - she and Marion act out a farewell, with Marion as her own mother's proxy.

In the house, a kind of fairytale nook next to a forest, Dad's presence is peripheral but kind. There are lovely scenes in which Nelly helps him shave or ask him to tell her a secret, but mostly this is about Nelly and Marion. Nelly is fascinated by stories her mother tells her about her life at Nelly's age - in particular, a hut she built in the adjoining woods around the time she had an operation to correct an inherited condition.

When Marion is gone before Nelly wakes the next day, her father tells her it's not for long, and so she swallows her worry and goes to play in the woods. There, she meets an eight-year-old girl who looks a lot like her (Gabrielle Sanz: the young actresses are twins) and is building a hut. Her name is Marion, and she lives in the same house Nelly is staying in, only accessed a different way, fully furnished and inhabited by a younger version of Nelly's grandmother (Margo Abascal).



The children, often colour-coded in primary hues amid the blazing russets and oranges of the autumnal forest, recall Red Riding Hood or Hansel and Gretel, and like many fairy tales this story has wish fulfilment aspects, as when child Marion reassures Nelly that she is not responsible for her adult mother's sadnesses. But alongside moments of precocious wisdom, there is a precise naturalism to the girls' interactions. They both accept their little miracle unquestioningly, and behave like any girls whose sudden friendship blossoms over the course of an afternoon. They muck about with rowboats and pancakes and act out hilariously intricate make-believe scenarios.

This gives the film some joyous scenes, but never at the cost of Nelly's curious, wondering and occasionally fearful interior life. There may be a lot of knowledge about the world that she has not yet accrued, but her heart - like the hearts of all the children in the films of Céline Sciamma right back to *Tomboy* (2011) - is fully formed, and fully as able to break or heal or beat in time with someone else's as any adult's.

"Secrets aren't always things we try to hide - there's just no one to tell them to," says Nelly, perhaps voicing the vague loneliness of many of us who have had fewer people to tell our secrets to lately. In addition to all its other bright polished pleasures, Sciamma's film embodies a scintillatingly simple solution to the conundrum of filmmaking under lockdown conditions: if circumstances dictate that the scale becomes smaller, zoom in. *Petite maman* is a tiny suspended moment within time, magnified at high-resolution until the microscopic becomes momentous, and the mystery of a child's love for her mother becomes the mystery of all love.

Credits

Nelly	Joséphine Sanz
Marion (child)	Gabrielle Sanz
Marion (mother)	Nina Meurisse
Dad	Stéphane Varupenne
Grandmother	Margo Abascal
Director	Céline Sciamma
Screenplay	Céline Sciamma
Cinematography	Claire Mathon
Music	Jean-Baptiste de Laubier
Editor	Julien Lacheray
	France 2021. 75 minutes

Another view.

After the gorgeous, windswept *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire*, Céline Sciamma returns with a story that is just as

elegant and compelling, and even more microscopic in its focus. Made under lockdown conditions with a tiny cast and barely 75 minutes long, this packs in more human emotion than films three times its length.

Nelly (Joséphine Sanz) is a quiet eight-year-old who travels with her parents to empty her grandmother's house following the older woman's death. Nelly is processing her loss, as is her visibly struggling mother (Nina Meurisse), when Nelly meets Marion (Gabrielle Sanz), in the woods behind the house. She quickly realises, and seems instantly to accept, that this is her mother at her own age. The pair become friends, and Nelly grasps that she has a chance to learn more about her reserved mother and explore some of the missing pieces of her own life.

Not that the film explains itself in such crudely obvious terms. Even more so than in *Portrait*, Sciamma comes across as a supremely confident and graceful filmmaker here, resting her film entirely on careful shot selection, mood and her two young leads, rather than any expository bumph. Reunited with cinematographer Claire Mathon, Sciamma keeps the camera at her young heroes' eye-level, framing the shots for their convenience rather than that of adults. If the colours pop around the girls and the framing is perfect, their own windblown hair and unstudied reactions scream of naturalism and stop this from feeling too clinically composed. The sibling relationship between the Sanz twins helps immensely: neither shows any child-actor eagerness to mug, but they have an ease with each other and a casual understatement that works beautifully.

Everything beyond the girls is left deliberately vague. The story seems to be set in more-or-less the present day, though it could take place in any time period back to about the 1980s, and that timelessness contributes to a dreamy sense of possibility. Maybe this is all happening in Nelly's head, maybe it's a sort of ghost story for the living — but either way it's important, in the way that even imaginary things can be when you're young. Sciamma seems to understand childhood better than any filmmaker out there save perhaps Miyazaki (to whose work this has rightly drawn comparisons), and like him she turns her camera to little girls, largely overlooked in American cinema, and their relationship with their mothers, a hugely underexplored issue next to the ubiquitous father complex.

Arthur C. Clarke — or possibly Thor — once said that sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic, and there's something similar going on in Sciamma's filmmaking. Sciamma's cinematic storytelling is so finely tuned that she can take a science-fiction concept and strip it of every unnecessary explanation and every scrap of technological gadgetry until she is left with magic, a miraculous chance to know and understand your loved ones better. It's a wistful idea, that it might take magic to know one another better, but there's something hopeful at the heart of this film that never lets it become too heavy.

Helen O'Hara: Empire

Our next film

Friday November 11th, 7.30pm
After Love (UK 2021. Cert 12)

Joanna Scanlan plays Mary, happily married to Ahmed and accepted into the Muslim community in Dover. But when he dies suddenly, Mary is shocked to discover he had been leading a double life which she is compelled to investigate. Aleem Khan's impressive first feature won numerous prizes in the 2021 British Independent Film Awards and mark him as a talent to watch