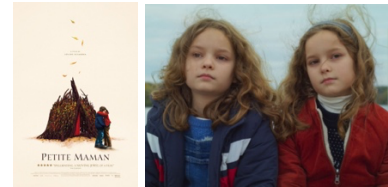


REVIEW

Review of Céline Sciamma's *Petite Maman*

2021, Lilies Films/Canal+/France 3 Cinéma, 72 min

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Following the international success of her acclaimed *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), Céline Sciamma's *Petite Maman* (2021) marks a delicate and introspective shift, delving into the complexities of childhood and grief through a lens of magical realism. This beautifully understated film was received to near-unanimous critical acclaim on the festival circuit – further solidifying Sciamma's place and influence in contemporary feminist filmmaking. Departing from the themes of adult and adolescent desire with which she built her reputation, this film delicately depicts the complexities of childhood, almost nudging the viewer to remember that we were all children, too.

Twin actresses Joséphine and Gabrielle Sanz, who portray Nelly and her mysterious friend Marion, deliver enchanting performances that capture the innocence and emotional depth of pre-adolescence. Their natural chemistry draws the audience into a world where grief is met with curiosity and reflective exploration, using the past to cope with the present.

Equally captivating are the film's visual choices, with Sciamma and cinematographer Claire Mathon (*Saint Omer* 2022) using color and composition to emphasize the emotional undertones of each scene. The low-angle shots, mimetically recreating the perspective of a child, highlight the wonder of a world that feels both vast and intimate. Whether capturing the shadows of tree branches at night or the warmth of wallpapered hallways by day, these visuals bring to life the beauty and nostalgia of childhood.

Crafting a narrative, as Sciamma does here, that affects children and adults alike is no small achievement. Unlike many contemporary films aimed at younger audiences, *Petite Maman* avoids unnecessary innuendos or misguided adult commentary. Instead, it tastefully harnesses surrealism and childhood whimsy, making it broadly accessible while maintaining a sophisticated emotional core. Its subtle, powerful storytelling creates a uniquely child-centered and multigenerational mother-daughter drama that will awaken memories of childhood play – whether it's "house" or "dress-up" – as vividly as the film's backdrop of fall-time leaves.

While some may find the film's lack of explicit recognition of its time-travel elements disconcerting, this omission actually works in the film's favor, allowing the plot to develop alongside a child's active imagination and its role in processing grief, rather than getting bogged down in a fantastical explanation. As the camera is unquestioning of the narrative, its audience is encouraged to embrace the unique perspective a child offers to the adult-world; that of curiosity and acceptance, where judgment has yet to preclude the full range of human feeling. *Petite Maman* respectfully invites us into a space where unfiltered emotion blooms to foster understanding.