

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2022/23 SEASON**



**PETITE MAMAN**  
(Language: French)

Director: Céline Sciamma, 2022. Running time: 72 minutes  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2023.

“Céline Sciamma’s luminous *Petite Maman* is a once-upon-a-time tale with a twist. Set in present-day France, in an isolated hamlet made for solitude and imagination, it is a story about family ties, childhood reveries and unanswerable questions. It’s also a story about finding someone who, like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle — the piece you knew existed but just needed you to find it — completes the picture. Put differently, it is a story about love.

Soon after it opens, the 8-year-old Nelly — the extraordinary, self-possessed Joséphine Sanz — and her parents travel to pack up her grandmother’s house. Nelly’s mother grew up there, and like all childhood homes, this one has become a haunted house, though its rooms feel steeped in sadness rather than fear. It’s a domestic time capsule of a kind, a modest, Spartan, poignantly forsaken place with faded wallpaper. Nelly regards it all with sober curiosity. And, as she moves through it, you note the white sheets draped over the furniture and the medical hand-bar over the grandmother’s bed, a mournful reminder of past difficulties.

With delicacy, minimal dialogue and lucid, harmoniously balanced images, Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*) invites you into a world that is by turns ordinary and enigmatic. Part of the mystery is that it’s unclear what kind of story this is and where — with its charming child and restrained melancholy — it could be headed. Sciamma doesn’t tip her hand. Instead, she asks you to watch and listen, and to cozy up with Nelly. By withholding information, Sciamma is also encouraging you to look at this place and story with the open eyes of a child, which means putting aside your expectations of how movies work.

Like many fairy tales, this one really begins in the woods. As Nelly’s mother (Nina Meurisse) and father (Stéphane Varupenne) start packing up the house, Nelly explores the surrounding area, with its bare trees and quiet. As a child, her mother built what she calls a hut in the forest and now Nelly would like to do the same. So, she wanders the pretty woodland, scuffs its carpet of vividly

colored leaves and uses an acorn to fashion a whistle. When she blows on it, the wind gently picks up, as if answering her call. Later that night, nestled in her mother's childhood bed, Nelly and her mom whisper as shadows gather on the walls.

The next day, Nelly returns to the woods and sees a little girl in a bright red sweater dragging a long, heavy branch. The stranger hails Nelly, waving and beckoning to her: "Can you help me?" Nelly does. With silent, serious purposefulness and to the sounds of distant, rumbling thunder, the girls carry the branch, which now draws a straight line between them. The other girl leads them to a hut that she has already begun building, a ramshackle, teepee-like structure fashioned from tree brush and twine. Nelly scrutinizes the other girl and then, without a word, picks up a piece of wood and adds it to the makeshift shelter.

As she does throughout *Petite Maman*, Sciamma guides you to observe this scene with the same focus as Nelly. As it discreetly keeps step with the girls, the camera remains tethered to Nelly's point of view, so you see what she sees. This creates a bond between you, and it raises prickles of tension: You're concerned about Nelly, and you're wondering, too, about this stranger. But you're also watching Nelly make smart decisions as she cautiously sizes up the other girl, who introduces herself as Marion (Gabrielle Sanz, Joséphine's sister). At one point, you notice that the children look remarkably alike and that they are dressed in similar colors.

As these two little strangers become friends, the story crystallizes... It's delightful and weird, and eventually very moving. Yet even as she slides the strange pieces into place and the movie seems to shift into recognizable genre terrain, Sciamma keeps a lid on the filmmaking, retaining the steady calm that's characterized it from the start. There's no shouting, no shrieking, from the wind or from the children. The emotions aren't amped and there are no loud jolts (only revelations), an absence of heightened inflection that keeps your attention on the world — makeshift, welcoming, private — that the girls create together.

The exact quality of that world remains mysterious, even as Sciamma normalizes it. This feels right. *Petite Maman* is a coming-of-age story, but not every moment needs explanation. Some things, like love, Sciamma seems to say, are ours to discover, nurture, share or not, which feels like an ethic and an auteurist (and feminist) statement of intent. Like Sciamma's other movies, this one concerns women and girls, their rituals, bonds, ways of becoming and being, how they are seen and how they hold their own."

Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022.