

The Wife: A Nobel Prize winner exposed

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Directed by Björn Runge, written by Jane Anderson, based on the novel by Meg Wolitzer.

“All you are going for is what feels human, and it transcends a political moment, it predates a political moment, it’s like what happens between people, in this case between women,” Meg Wolitzer, author of *The Wife*.

The Wife, directed by Swedish filmmaker Björn Runge, has generally been met with accolades. Virtually every film critic has given Glenn Close—playing the part of Joan Castleman, the “Wife” in question—rave reviews and many have predicted she might win an Oscar. The new film is adapted from American writer Meg Wolitzer’s 2003 novel of the same title.

At a time when “blockbuster” horror, comic book-fantasy and juvenile animation are the rage, it would be a welcome relief if a serious and intimate film about the dissolution of a marriage could make it to the screen. However, there is much that is not credible or convincing about this film.

The plot of *The Wife* is fairly straightforward. In the early hours of the morning, a man of 70 or so is waiting restlessly in bed and devouring food. He seems a bit of a glutton. He is impatiently waiting for a phone call from the Nobel Prize committee in Sweden. He is a prominent writer by the name of Joe Castleman (Jonathan Pryce). Joan (Close), his wife, is much more reserved and introspective. She follows his words and movements as though carefully studying him. She exudes an unspoken tension.

The phone call finally arrives, and Joe is informed that he has indeed been honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature. With sheer joy and disbelief, the couple bounce on their bed, while Joe in a sing-song manner barks out, “I won the Nobel, I won the Nobel.”

That morning, friends and family gather at the pair’s quaint country cottage by the edge of a lake in Connecticut to toast and celebrate. Mention of Bill Clinton sets the period of the film. We begin to understand that Joe is pompous, arrogant and reservedly narcissistic. His son David (Max Irons), who aspires to

write, can barely get his father’s attention when he asks the older man if he has read his recent short story and if he has an opinion of the piece. Joe is rudely dismissive and evasive, while Joan is always conciliatory and thoughtful.

These preliminary scenes and conversations are only a prelude to what amounts to a journey toward the collapse of their marriage, and more.

During the couple’s trip to Stockholm and rehearsals for the award presentation, we are given glimpses into their past in flashbacks. As a younger man, Joe (Harry Lloyd) is a handsome, well-spoken but married professor at a women-only college in the mid-1950s. Joan (Annie Starke), apparently a gifted writer herself, falls for the brash professor. They begin having an affair after he makes a pass at her.

Then follows a scene at a faculty party where a published female author and graduate of the college (Elizabeth McGovern), who hears of Joan’s talents, attempts to dissuade the latter from writing by asserting that women authors are never read. Disheartened, Joan responds she is only interested in being a wife. We then encounter the couple in Greenwich Village where Joe sets out to write his first novel, *The Walnut*.

It is impossible to discuss the film seriously without treating the “mystery” that lies at its heart, so the reader should beware.

Joe’s first attempt at writing his book is an abject failure. Joan tries to give him constructive feedback, but he rebuffs her and threatens to end their relationship. To save their marriage, Joan tells him she can fix the work and sits down to rewrite the manuscript. We have been privileged to learn their secret—Joan has been writing the books published under Joe’s name while he has been cooking, cleaning and caring for the children.

A perfidious biographer, Nathaniel Bone (Christian Slater), accompanies the couple and their son to Stockholm. He functions as a catalyst in this drama, having long speculated that Joan is the ghostwriter of Joe’s acclaimed novels. He attempts to seduce a

confession out of her after inviting her for drinks at a bar near the hotel. Though she parries his attack, the encounter sets in motion a final, decisive crisis.

The Wife is being celebrated, in the context of the #MeToo movement, as further proof that brutish, overbearing men largely exist to crush deserving, talented women's hopes and dreams.

These snippets from a few reviews provide a taste of it: "Glenn Close is female resentment personified in *The Wife*"; this is "a marriage corroded by male vanity and female complicity"; the film is "a devastating dissection of a woman sidelined for male glory, in what proves an all-too-recognisable situation"; and "'Behind every great man there's a great woman?' In this case, it would be more apt to say, 'Behind every great man there's a far greater woman who has given up who she was and what she did to ensure his greatness.'"

Runge's film plays up disgracefully to sentiments of upper middle class female resentment and self-pity. How hard done by such people feel! Much greater suffering—the suffering of the working class, the suffering of populations around the globe—does not arouse or agitate them.

Many contemporary artists, damaged by postmodernism in one form or another and various strands of identity politics, have a skeptical attitude toward and disparage rational, comprehensive explanations of social and historical processes. Far too often they care little for conscientiously working through objective facts and their implications, including what they would mean for their own artistic attitudes. Their conclusions tend to be fixed a priori, and the drama, as in *The Wife*, is "reverse-engineered" to force a supposed congruity. Such limited artists also often employ extreme situations to give these conclusions an almost absolute character making it apparently impossible to criticize them.

Neither the author nor his or her art can be hermetically sealed off. Artists are not immune from the influence of the world and events, nor are their ideas capable, for better or worse, of escaping the impact of objective reality. The basis of their stories, constructed in whatever form they employ, is rooted in the material, class-divided social order to which they indelibly belong.

Along these lines, one wants to ask: Concretely, who are these characters in *The Wife*? On what basis did they begin and carry on a relationship? To what extent do the circumstances of the period in which they met and their social standing affect them or motivate them in their choices? What of their politics and their intellectual

influences?

Joe and Joan met during the period of McCarthyism and the emerging Civil Rights movement. But any references to events in *The Wife* are simply ahistorical clichés lacking purpose.

An intimate story does not absolve the filmmaker from understanding the characters' social situation. It is precisely through illuminating this larger situation that the selected intimate and personal details can take on real meaning and help reveal the underlying motives and forces at work in a couple's (in this case) eroding relationship.

Moreover, the film essentially makes a serious, if perhaps metaphorical charge. Are Wolitzer and Runge suggesting that there is a major American literary figure, or that there are figures, to whom the situation in the film corresponds? If so, they should speak up. If not ... ?

By and large, *The Wife* offers only shallow impulses moving the characters, which are false and devoid of any compelling logic. The script rings hollow because the words are stuck into the mouths of the protagonists to force the obvious conclusions—women have always been subservient and self-effacing while men have always been indulgent and self-consumed. Inevitably, the performances become stifled and stilted, the story one-dimensional and ultimately insufferable to watch.

Given the current political climate, it was predictable that *The Wife* would garner such praise. Nonetheless, the false plaudits of the critics are not convincing either.



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