Maid on Netflix: A single mother struggles to extricate herself from poverty and abuse

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Maid is a 10-episode drama series created by Molly Smith Metzler (best known for her writing on *Shameless* and *Orange Is the New Black*). It premiered on Netflix October 1 and has been one of the streaming platform's top-rated shows for the past several weeks.

The miniseries follows a financially hard-pressed single mother as she strives to extricate herself from an abusive relationship and in the process establish her personal independence.

Based on Stephanie Land's 2019 memoir *Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*, the series features Margaret Qualley as Alex, playing opposite her real-life parent Andie MacDowell as Paula, her character's mother.

Maid opens with 25-year-old Alex grabbing her young daughter Maddy (Rylea Nevaeh Whittet) and escaping from her alcoholic partner Sean (Nick Robinson) and their trailer-home north of Seattle. With only a few dollars in her pocket, she and Maddy sleep in their broken down car.

The next morning, Alex seeks help from social services (She imagines that the reaction might be: "So you're looking for a big fat government handout because you are a jobless, white trash piece of shit, am I right?"). A social worker informs her that she needs a job to qualify for subsidized housing. The agency then sets her up with Value Maids, a low-budget operation run by the cut-throat Yolanda (Tracy Vilar).

Desperate for employment, Alex must rely on her "undiagnosed" bipolar mother Paula, a self-centered "free spirit," for childcare help. The house-cleaning job pays $12.50 an hour, out of which Alex must pay for supplies and a uniform. With each deduction from her check, she is that much closer to homelessness.

Alex suffers numerous humiliations and setbacks. When she hands a supermarket cashier food stamps as payment, the latter insensitively calls out "Cleanup on aisle poor!" Alex first cleans for the snobbish Regina (Anika Noni Rose), who owns a palatial home in a wealthy island community. The gig ends disastrously with Alex fainting from hunger and Regina refusing to pay for her services. To make matters worse, Sean is suing for custody of their daughter.

Now living in a shelter for battered women run by the empathetic Denise (BJ Harrison), Alex meets another young mother, Danielle (the feisty Aimee Carrero), who helps her begin tackling her difficult situation. Unfortunately, Danielle eventually goes back to her abuser, which—according to Denise—is more the rule than the exception.

Trying to find an apartment, Alex runs up against landlords who refuse to accept TBRA (Tenant-Based Rental Assistance). When one proprietor agrees to take her voucher, the accommodation turns out to be blighted by mold, jeopardizing Maddy's health.

Meanwhile, Alex suddenly and vividly recalls her mother Paula fleeing a batterer, Alex's father Hank (Billy Burke), now a recovering alcoholic. As a result of this painful memory, she refuses her father's succor even at her most precarious, down-and-out moments. *Maid* implies that the past abuse is responsible at least in part for Paula's mental instability and her succession of bad relationships, including a current husband who gambles away her assets.

The emotionally wounded Alex sabotages several opportunities to alter her circumstances, including the one provided by a gay couple who offer her a stunning apartment with an address that would allow Maddy to attend a decent childcare center. Alex proves incapable of preventing a drunken Sean from destroying that arrangement. (Sean too suffers from a traumatic childhood—a mother's opioid addiction.)

Even when the immensely promising Nate (Raymond Ablack), a single dad willing to help, enters the picture, Alex proves that she remains trapped in the cycle of abuse. Her free-fall into the abyss can be reversed, from the series' standpoint, only by coming to terms with and overcoming her personal demons and history.

Shot in British Columbia, *Maid* is set in Washington state, which has one of the highest levels of income and social inequality in the US. The miniseries has clearly struck a chord with audiences because the characters and their problems are familiar and recognizable. Poverty, domestic

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violence, substance abuse, low-wage and insecure employment, government indifference, lack of a social safety net—not to mention the attendant mortifications and psychic difficulties—afflict wide layers of the population.

Of course, the official figures on poverty are derisory; a clearer picture, for example, emerges from a 2018 United Way survey (and there are many such) that found 43 percent of US households unable to afford basic necessities such as housing, food, child care, health care, transportation and a cell phone—and that was before the medical and economic cataclysm of the pandemic.

At the same time, the media and much of the entertainment industry remain obsessed night and day with billionaire oligarchs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. The general atmosphere is venomously hostile to the problems of the working class and the poor.

In that context, both the appearance of *Maid* and the response to the miniseries have a certain significance. Its success is one of the indirect means, in a country where everything is done to bury the truth about social misery, by which to gauge the actual state of affairs in the US, along with the actual state of public opinion.

Nonetheless, how social reality is approached, how profoundly, where the focus lies, what is implied by the totality of the imagery and drama, all this remains an issue. There is no need and no reason to exaggerate *Maid* 's accomplishments in this regard.

The gravitational pull of gender politics can still be felt here, as well as a healthy dose of middle-class wishful thinking.

One critic—certainly no Marxist—pointed out: "The limited series' depiction of the hardscrabble poor may prove more controversial. Though it takes place over the course of a year, *Maid* isn't really about chronic or inescapably systemic poverty; there's hope for a way out by the end that might resonate more with middle- and upper-class viewers than with Alex's real-life cohort."

Audiences, no doubt bored and even sickened by the endless succession of comic book/superhero "blockbusters," are looking for something different, closer to life, more compelling. However, the themes and concerns the creators of *Maid* have in mind only intersect to a limited degree with those that would produce a deeply realistic portrayal of American life.

According to the logic of the miniseries, even Alex, economically downtrodden and emotionally imprisoned, can break free and make her life a success story with the aid of wealthy benefactors and through her own tireless efforts. In fact, hers is a highly unusual outcome. What about the vast majority left to suffer intolerable circumstances?

Maid is not animated by outrage at the existing social order that produces the ills it unevenly depicts. The filmmakers tend to argue for a purely individual solution through self-help and self-discovery. Moreover, their obsessive attention to the particular issue of intimate partner violence (the series is bookended by public service announcements for victims of such abuse) comes at the expense of the broader social and historical context. Such an approach has an almost inevitable consequence, inadvertently or not, of shifting part of the blame for the social ills onto the victims—as well, of course, as the immediate perpetrators, who, as in the case of Sean, are themselves victims.

In short, with too much of the lead characters' dysfunction blamed on spousal abuse, the more generally disastrous conditions tend to be pushed into the background or taken for granted, particularly as Alex evolves. In the end, the protagonist turns the drudgery of being a "maid" into a benevolent (she helps out hoarders) and lucrative enterprise.

Furthermore, there is the issue of the source of domestic violence. *Maid* itself, at its most objective, presents life for many under capitalism as a brutal affair, in which a layoff, for instance, can affect someone's ability to survive. Life as a whole for millions is increasingly difficult, tense, stress-filled. The exploited and vulnerable can pass along the essential brutality of their situation to the even more vulnerable. Generally speaking, domestic abuse is a channeling, a re-direction of the greater social and economic violence.

Audiences are responding to what they take to be the sincerity of the miniseries, but are still marking too generously on the curve and not demanding enough of film and television work. This is not yet "An American (Working Class) Tragedy," as it were, the truly significant social realism that we need.

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