

# *May December*: Todd Haynes' new film inspired by a famous scandal

David Walsh  
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Todd Haynes' new film *May December* is loosely based on the case of Mary Kay Letourneau, which made tabloid and other headlines in 1996. Letourneau, a teacher, had a sexual relationship with a 12-year-old student, Vili Fualaau, which led to her eventually being sent to prison for a number of years. Letourneau's first child was delivered while she was awaiting sentencing. After her release from prison, she married Fualaau and they had two more children. The marriage lasted 14 years. Letourneau died of cancer in 2020, aged 58.

Haynes has made a number of intelligent films and television series, including *Safe*, *Dark Waters* and *Mildred Pierce*. He is a sensitive filmmaker, with an instinctive opposition to the status quo. However, intellectually shaped by semiotics, postmodernism and radical sexual politics, he sees opposition largely in cultural and psychological terms, as the revolt against "heteronormativity," middle class suburban conventionality and related matters. *May December* suffers from a lack of angry social critique and substance. It identifies various mental conditions and forms of serious dysfunction, but does not make enough of them to create more than a ripple on the surface of things.

*May December*, written by Samy Burch and Alex Mechanik, takes place more than 20 years after a scandal erupted when Gracie Atherton (Julianne Moore), 36 at the time, was caught having sex with 13-year-old Joe Yoo (Charles Melton) in the storeroom of the pet store where they both worked. Gracie was eventually sentenced to prison, where she gave birth to a child. The couple later married and had two more children, twins. They now live in some degree of comfort, in Georgia, having lucratively sold their story to the tabloids.

The well-known actress Elizabeth Berry (Natalie Portman) arrives at the Atherton-Yoo home. She is set to play Gracie in a new, "independent" film. She has come to research her role and study her character's original. The Atherton-Yoos are at a moment of transition. The twins, Charlie (Gabriel Chung) and Mary (Elizabeth Yu), are graduating from high school. Their parents will be alone with one another for the first time.

Elizabeth begins her investigations, assuring Gracie that all she wants is for the other woman "to feel seen and known." Hardly a neutral observer, however, the Hollywood actress, star of a popular television series, seems primarily interested in her

career and how her appearance in such a role will be received. She is carrying on with a married colleague and has some degree of control over who will play the young teenage boy in the upcoming, not very promising film. Her self-involvement is intense, including in a scene where she re-enacts on her own, in the original pet shop, the incriminating sexual encounter.

Gracie is also self-centered and domineering. Hyper-feminine, hyper-conformist, she tells Elizabeth early in the film that "my brother, Scott, is a rear admiral in the Navy, and he says that order is its own reward." Gracie continues to insist that her relationship with the teenager was a sort of Romeo and Juliet affair, or a matter of her being rescued from a loveless marriage by a young, heroic prince.

As her lawyer explains to Elizabeth, Gracie told him at the time, "We're in love ... I didn't mean it to happen." She was and remains, the lawyer suggests, in denial. "She didn't think she did anything wrong. She was head over heels. ... She thought she could just explain it all to the judge and that'd be that." Gracie endeavors to inflict her views of society and gender on her daughters in particular, pressing upon them the need to be thin and attractive to men.

When we first see him, Joe, half-child, half-man, remains persuaded by the same myths about their relationship that Gracie continues to believe and promote. "People... they, like, see me as, like, a victim, or something. I mean, we've been together for almost 24 years now. ... Why would we do that if we weren't happy?" Elizabeth's unsettling presence and the imminent departure of his children, along with what seems to be a budding extramarital relationship with a fellow butterfly enthusiast, lead to Joe's unraveling, in a generally healthy direction.

In one of the sharper scenes in *May December*, as part of her research process presumably as much as anything else, Elizabeth has sex with Joe. She then tells him not to worry about Gracie: "Your responsibility, ultimately, is to yourself." When he reacts angrily to her selfishness and her callous reference to "these stories," i.e., his life history, she tells him that there's no need "to get so worked up about it." He responds, "I thought you actually liked me, and that we had a connection." "I like you." "Then what was this about?" "This is just what grown-ups do."

Gracie remains throughout an unappealing picture of unreflectiveness, obliviousness. Regarding the original scandal 20 years earlier, “I don’t really think about all that. ... I have my plate pretty full.” She rejects the very idea of looking back and considering her actions, or thinking about the past in general. When Elizabeth admits that the “past weighs on me,” Gracie scoffs at this: “So you just sit there and you think about your history and your behavior.”

Joe begins to confront the painful history. “What if I was too young?,” he asks Gracie finally. She insists, “You seduced me.” “But I was 13 years old.” She takes the offensive: “Don’t give me that. ... I don’t care how old you were. Who was in charge? ... Who was the boss? Who was in charge? Who was in charge?”

Attempting to initiate a conversation about their past, Joe says, “If we’re really as in love as we say we are ... Shouldn’t I be able to talk about this with you?” “If we’re really in love as we say we are,” she repeats, outraged. There is no opening, no progress possible with her. The departing children, we sense, still have the opportunity to break away from this realm of self-deception and self-delusion.

In an interview with *Deadline*, Haynes commented that he hoped his film “trusts that you’re going to be OK not knowing what you think, and grappling a bit, and that there might even be a quotient of pleasure involved in that vacillation around your sort of moral certitude around these kinds of themes.” The filmmaker continued, “You’re observing life and you’re observing these people who don’t have a very keen sense of self-regard. They don’t really know how to examine themselves. We are there to examine them because they can’t. They are ill-equipped to do so.”

Uncertainty and instability may be preferable to conservative, smug sureness, but as things in themselves they do not constitute much of a program or perspective either.

It is not a very radical notion that many people, especially middle class people of an unself-critical bent, do not think deeply about their actions and the consequences of those actions.

Nor is it groundbreaking in this day and age to criticize “gender culture” and fixed notions about sexual identity and roles. Julianne Moore told an interviewer, “Todd has always been interested in identity, and culture, and how we’re shaped by it, and who we are, in terms of how we live, and when we live. Our identity is not shaped out of nowhere. It’s shaped by the world, the culture, and the time that we live in.”

Yes, but what precisely has he concluded?

Speaking for Haynes, one would imagine, Moore further suggested that *May December* “makes you question the nature of storytelling and how we present our stories to the world. What do we believe? What actually is the truth? Are we ever going to get to the truth of anything, or of any human being? ... Again, what is real? What do we know? What is truth? Is

everything performed?”

This is the type of banal and stereotypical relativism, second-hand postmodernism that pervades artistic circles. In fact, in its better moments, *May December* insists quite strongly on the ability to get at the harsh truth about these lives and the social milieu. Why else the edge, the recurring sharp thumps of satire, if we can’t know anything about anything? It’s tedious and limiting.

(One question about the original affair that the film’s script never raises involves Mary Kay Letourneau’s father, John G. Schmitz (1930-2001), an extreme right-wing figure, fanatical anticommunist, racist and antisemite. Schmitz managed to get himself kicked out of the notorious John Birch Society for his “extremist rhetoric.” He considered the Rockefeller family to have financed the Bolshevik Revolution and to be controlling President Richard Nixon. Why not consider the emotional impact of that sort of fascistic background and upbringing?)

Haynes seems to have in mind as well landing certain understated blows against officially sponsored identity politics, as it were, and perhaps even the #MeToo campaign. He told British Film Institute that *May December* is “a potentially explosive or disturbing [film] for today’s identity politics culture, which wants to know who’s good and who’s bad. There’s volatility, impenetrability and moral ambiguity here.” And to *Screen Daily*, the director commented that in the contemporary “culture and world, we’re so cocksure about our morals. It’s immediate—you’re in, you’re out, you’re black, you’re white.” He went on, “All these agendas have to be confirmed. It’s identity politics. That means it’s such a death of that great muddled anxiety that all the best movies stir up in you.”

Again, this is very limited, and not truly “explosive” or “disturbing.” To argue for “great muddled anxiety” against being “cocksure about our morals” or to express pleasure, as Haynes did in another interview, about the fact that “people are comfortable being uncertain and asking big moral questions about things,” is setting the bar quite low. In fact, in its own way, this is an accommodation to the prevailing, reactionary establishment culture and political climate.

There are intriguing and subtle observations here about the self-centeredness of certain social layers, but not much more. And, in its own fashion, *May December* itself expresses one aspect of the same problem, only in a somewhat more “transgressive” form: the distance of many petty bourgeois intellectuals at this point from the critical questions of the time.



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