

Is she bad?

## **Both *May December* and *Eileen* are meant to make us a little queasy as our moral judgments come up short.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

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Natalie Portman and Julianne Moore in *May December* (Photo by Francois Duhamel / Netflix)

“Is she bad?” my 13-year-old asked as he wandered into the living room while I was watching *May December* (directed by Todd Haynes, streaming on Netflix). On the screen Natalie Portman was sitting silently in a stairwell, lost in private ecstasy. But the score conveyed danger: minor chords on the piano hammering over swelling

strings.

“Well,” I said, “it’s hard to say.”

*May December* joins *Eileen* (directed by William Oldroyd) as two brilliant additions to a specialized genre of films we might call movies of moral queasiness—films that generate unsettling sympathies, introducing a kind of ethical vertigo as the ground shifts under our feet.

In Haynes’s story, Natalie Portman plays Elizabeth, a famous TV actress who is researching her next role, a biopic about the illicit love affair between Gracie (Julianne Moore) and Joe (Charles Melton). Gracie and Joe began their affair when she was 36 and he barely 13. (The story is loosely based on the real-life story of Mary Kay Letourneau and her sixth-grade student Vili Fualaau.) Gracie gave birth to their first child while she was in prison, and they later married and had twins, who are about to graduate from high school when Elizabeth shows up to study the family for her role.

Calling their relationship “an affair” already muddies the moral waters that swirl around the family. We only meet them after they have built a conventional life for two decades. Joe is 36. They insist that their present happiness more than justifies whatever complications mar their origins. But it doesn’t take long to see the cracks in this facade.

Gracie is prone to extravagant and outsized emotions, weeping when Joe comes to bed smelling like smoke from their BBQ, collapsing in tears and anger when one of the longtime customers for her cake business cancels an order because she is leaving town. As Joe soothes her it is impossible not to see him as a child placating a difficult parent, even as she demands to be treated like an overwrought child. Everyone in Gracie’s life, from her friends and neighbors to her children and Joe himself, cocoon her in reassurance that she is not a monster who has wreaked havoc on their lives. But that damage grows more monstrously clear as we watch them swaddle and appease her.

Elizabeth assumes that she must get to the heart of Gracie’s motives to compellingly tell her story, but the film refuses to excuse or explain her. Every time Elizabeth assumes she understands, the explanation is yanked away. This does not dissuade Elizabeth, who is convinced her voyeurism is art and her mimicry is understanding. She grows absorbed in her own self-importance in choosing a “serious” role. “It’s the

complexity, the moral gray areas, that are so interesting,” Elizabeth answers, when asked how she chooses her roles. As the movie progresses, we begin to suspect that the moral gray areas Haynes is most interested in are not the ones Elizabeth is pursuing.

As Elizabeth shadows Gracie, learning her mannerisms and mimicking her slight lisp, even starting to dress and style her hair in the same way, the camera repeatedly frames them in doubling positions: side by side directly facing the camera like a pair, Elizabeth slightly behind Gracie, face-to-face like mirror images, or even shot through a mirror so that Elizabeth seems to be Gracie’s reflection. Reflecting each other’s self-justification and self-importance, they blur into each other. The music swells ominously; the camera pulls away dramatically. Is this a horror movie? Is she bad? Yes, Haynes answers.

The camera is also our guide in *Eileen*, another story of two women entangled in a web of family secrecy, lies, and violence. Eileen (Thomasin McKenzie) is a functionary at a boys penitentiary in 1960s Massachusetts, where she makes photocopies and performs perfunctory body searches on the mothers who come to visit their sons. In her off-hours, she buys booze for her abusive, unstable ex-cop father and eats hidden candy in the attic of the house she shares with him. Then Rebecca (Anne Hathaway), the new prison psychologist, arrives, a firecracker in a bleak night—Marilyn Monroe hair, red lips, high heels, dangling cigarette—and Eileen can’t take her eyes off the bang and the light.

We don’t need swelling music to signal danger as Rebecca wraps Eileen around her finger. Rebecca knows exactly the cocktail of adoration, fascination, and envy she inspires, and she happily pours Eileen drink after drink. “Is she bad?” we can’t help but ask.

Rebecca has new and somewhat controversial ideas about psychotherapy, and she is attracted to the most notorious case in the boys prison, a teenager who stabbed his father to death while his mother slept nearby. When Rebecca’s methods take a dramatic turn, she pulls at the strings she knows have ensnared Eileen, entangling her in a dangerous scheme. Things do not work out the way Rebecca is expecting.

Whether or not we are surprised by the ending depends on how carefully we have been watching. Ordinary scenes cut away to shots that reveal the startling contents of Eileen’s inner thoughts and fantasies. The camera almost never frames the two

women side by side but stays close to Eileen's face, tracking the subtle revelations and transformations of her inner life as she takes in the abusive words of her father, the shocking secrets of her town, and the brave new world Rebecca offers.

As with *May December*, the story is meant to make us a little queasy, our initial judgments called up short. But it is a mistake to think that our own discomfort implies that these films have only vague or shallow moral vision. The vision of each filmmaker is startling, bracingly clear if we pay attention to what they want us to see.