

## Mothering Sunday

Many English novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. had a restrained, guarded tone, where disclosures and motives were quietly or elliptically revealed: dramas of hidden secrets meted out in small gestures or coded language. I'm thinking of works from Virginia Wolff and Anthony Powell, through Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, to Julian Barnes and Ian McEwen. Another one of that lineage is Graham Swift who made his novelistic debut in 1986 and is probably best known for his work "Waterland." Swift's latest fiction is "Mothering Sunday," published in 2016 and now a feature film directed by French director Eva Mussen. Its current version in theaters finds it a cinematically exquisite if occasionally torpid drama of the privileged.

We are in the English countryside, in lolling landscapes dotted with mid-sized mansions of the aristocracy. The film takes place on March 30, 1924, in that "Downtown Abbey" world changed by the trauma of World War I, which has decimated family lines and their future male heirs. The Sheringham family lost two sons to the war, and their eldest son, Paul (Josh Cooper) is studying for the law but seems wayward and unfocussed.

Paul does have his easy pleasures in a long-term affair with the maid of the Nivens, neighbors and close friends of the Sheringhams. Jane Caulfield (Odessa Young) is a reserved orphan who has come to care about Paul, even though he is engaged to be married to a young woman of his class. On "Mothering Sunday," a day in which servants are permitted the afternoon off to return home and spend time with their mothers, we see the couple enjoying their standard liaison, for the first time at Paul's house, Upleigh. When Paul leaves for a family picnic, Jane, who is just discovering her literary bent, lingers around the house in the nude, examining the secrets of the toffs, caressing book spines in the library, and eating delicacies from the kitchen.

At the picnic, the Sheringhams wait for their son Paul with their neighbors, the aggrieved Nivens (Colin Firth and Olivia Coleman). They have also lost two sons and been terribly wounded by the experience. It is only later that day, when June arrives back at the Nivens' house, that she learns of a terrible tragedy. She soon leaves service for a job in the city and starts a new life.

All of this story spins out in a leisurely—at times torpid pace—punctuated by abrupt flash-forwards of Jane's new life, where she is involved with an older, erudite figure who develops a debilitating disease. The time switches can be disruptive and hard to follow, making the narrative more sluggish than it needs to be. Adding to the confusion is the uneven development of Jane's character, who comes across as fitful and uncertain.

What is not uncertain is the stunning cinematography by Jamie Ramsay, whose lens captures the mood of languid leisure perfectly and in ravishing color. He typically opens a scene with a gorgeous set piece—in a manse, at a picnic

table, over a field---then has the protagonists move wanly through them, in a state of elegiac grace.

*(Opened on April 1, the film runs 104 mins and is rated "R" for nonchalant nudity).*

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