

## Interview: Author Joyce Maynard for New Film ‘Labor Day’

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CHICAGO – She has had two of her books adapted by top modern directors – Gus Van Sant directed “To Die For” (1995), and Jason Reitman is just about to release “Labor Day,” starring Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin. But the journey of author Joyce Maynard extends even beyond these accomplishments, affecting literary history.

From an early age, Joyce Maynard knew she was a writer. After winning several student awards while as a teenager, and writing regularly for “Seventeen” magazine, Maynard was featured in 1971 on one of “The New York Times Magazine” most famous covers – “An Eighteen Year Old Looks Back on Life.” This caught the attention of another author, the reclusive J.D. Salinger (author of “Catcher in the Rye” and other classics). The then 53-year-old literary legend wrote Maynard 25 letters, and they eventually had a live-in relationship that lasted about a year. Salinger broke up with Maynard when she published her first book, the memoir “Looking Back.”



Kate Winslet, Gattlin Griffith and Josh Brolin in ‘Labor Day’

*Photo credit: Paramount Pictures*

But that was just the beginning for Joyce Maynard. She worked as a newspaper reporter, broadcaster and as a columnist during the 1970s and ‘80s, and published her first work of fiction, “Baby Love,” in 1981. Her prolific period began with the publication of “To Die For” in 1992, and in total she has published 13 books, including the memoir “At Home in the World” (which included her liaison with Salinger), and the novel adapted into the soon-to-be-released film, “Labor Day.”

HollywoodChicago.com had the opportunity to interview Joyce Maynard, as she spoke about the film, her literary career and even a bit about J.D. Salinger.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Ernest Hemingway once said the way to handle Hollywood is to go to the edge of town, throw the book at them, they throw you the money back, and you run in opposite directions. What is your philosophy in regard to your book-to-film adaptations as far as how a screenwriter or director interprets your work?

**Joyce Maynard:** [Laughs] Well, there were plenty of times when I sure needed people to throw money at me, even some loose change. I've had the exception, I think, because I've had two completely different novels adapted into two completely different films and experiences. But both films are wonderful.

I do believe that my moment to create my art is when I write. And as painful as it is when a production takes over the task of making a film adaptation, I have to step back, and let them do what they do. All I can do is entrust it to the right person, and I feel that that 'Labor Day' couldn't have been entrusted to a better person. Jason Reitman contacted me first, and I didn't have to look further. It's different than what he has done before, and basically I trusted him. I did my thing, and the film was now his.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the inspiration for 'Labor Day'? Was it based on a real life story you read or a complete story you made up?



Joyce Maynard as Young Cover Girl  
Photo credit: The New York Times

**Maynard:** If you would have asked me 12 hours before I wrote the first sentence of this book, I couldn't have told you what it would be about. It came to me. Then I couldn't stop writing, I wrote straight through for ten days, and there was my book.

I lived the story of being a single mother – not the woman in the book, but in a small New Hampshire town. I raised my three sons there, and I watched them watch me. They were just coming into their adolescence, and I have feelings of my own, but I had to take care of everyone else when no one was taking care of me. So that part of the book is something I hadn't ever seen told, and I wanted to honor that story. I'm in all of the characters, not just the mother. I'm the convict, the younger girl and the son.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What were the circumstances of the book's publication?

**Maynard:** When the novel was first published, my career was in the toilet. It was the period after I had released my memoir, 'At Home in the World,' for which I was condemned for telling this forbidden [Salinger] story. I had no agent, no publisher, and the agent that I found – who read it and loved it – submitted the book without my name on it, which was hard to hear after I'd been published many times before.

There was a bidding war on the book, and everyone thought it was written by a young man – there was even a rumor that it was James Franco's first novel. And then when they heard it was me, a bunch of publishers withdrew, but it was my 'ha-ha, I told you so' moment.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your novel of 'Labor Day' is described as a coming-of-age for the Henry character, and in the film the focus is also heavily weighed in the love story of the mother and escaped convict. Which character, in your opinion, goes through the most transition in your interpretation of the story?

**Maynard:** Take your pick. These are three damaged people who heal each other, and I like to imagine that this goodness exists and is still possible, and I also believe in redemption. They had to wait a long time for it, but they all got it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** We all have a notion, like a fingerprint, for the definition of love. As an author of several types of fiction and non-fiction, do you think your definition of love is involved in the themes of all of them?



**Maynard:** Yes, and it's not just never having to say you're sorry. [laughs] I've essentially been writing about love for 41 years, and I haven't run out of ideas yet. I'm really interested in the nature of love, and I would define it as caring for someone else more than you care for yourself. When we see the Josh Brolin character at the end of the film, as much as he yearns for the woman, he does not want to disturb her life. It is experiencing that selflessness, which I believe we experience more with our children than a partner.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What in your childhood spurred your interest in writing? When did you know you would pursue a life in letters, at an age when most kids are dealing with identity?

**Maynard:** Read 'At Home in the World' is all I can say. I grew up in a boot camp of writing. My parents were both brilliant, but totally unacknowledged frustrated artists. And for as long as I knew, it was my job to lay at their feet the success they never knew.

'At Home in the World' is often called the book about Salinger. It happens to be a book about me, that just included him. It is a book about my development as a writer, so there is no way to encapsulate the answer to your question. I've written all my life, and I wrote for 15 years before I even discovered the joy of it. It wasn't a choice for me, it's what I did.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had notoriety at a young age with the famous "An Eighteen Year Old Looks Back on Life" article. If you could go back in time, what advice would you give that cover girl about the life she might encounter?



Joyce Maynard in Chicago, December 2013  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Maynard:** I make a point to not imagine going back in time. [laughs] It would have been a very good thing to write in obscurity for awhile, and development my craft slowly, and not write for the marketplace. And as disastrous as the Salinger experience was – it didn't ruin my life, but continued to take a hunk out of it for a long time, and everyday of my life it seems to come up – he did give me some good advice. I never should have left college. I had a full scholarship to Yale University, and I left it for a man. And a man who would not tenderly nurture me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Of course you have chronicled your encounter with J.D. Salinger, and appeared in a recent documentary about his life. Do you think the literary and media culture has been too intrusive regarding their pursuit of trying to understand Salinger? Why do you think we can't fathom a person who wants privacy or just wants the works to speak for themselves?

**Maynard:** I totally respect privacy. What I do not respect is a man in his forties, fifties and sixties who claims all he really wants is privacy, but serially writes a number of letters to teenage girls, then laying out the dictum that nobody should say it's happening. That is not about a pure spiritually enlightened person in pursuit of his art. I won't say what it is about, but it's a totally different story.

And that story isn't told in the Salinger documentary, but if a person wants to know that story – and a bunch of other stories about me – there is a book that will tell about it, and it's called 'At Home in the World.' Many people said many nasty things about that book, and never read or knew what was in it. I have strong feelings about this, and I do not conceal it. It has been a theme of my life. I'm sixty years old, I've published 13 books, and I'm still known as 'the girl who slept with the great man who just wanted privacy.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Woody Allen once said we create art because we can’t get it right in real life. When you are creating life for fictional characters, what purpose do you want for them that can allow them to always get it right?

**Maynard:** That’s an interesting person to quote. [laughs] I love to imagine what could have happened. I did have a correspondence with a man in prison at one time, and it didn’t end up very well. So yes, I can imagine other outcomes. Write about what you know, and what you’d like to know.

I don’t think that dreaming up a wonderful scenario – even a hard and painful one – and getting through to the other end of it is a bad idea. It’s a very comforting part of my life to tell stories, and not necessarily have easy endings, but create the endings that they should have.

*“Labor Day” opens everywhere on January 31st. Featuring Kate Winslet, Josh Brolin, Tobey Maguire and Gattlin Griffith. Screenplay adapted and directed by Jason Reitman, from a novel by Joyce Maynard. Rated “PG-13”*



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