

Sins of Modern Parenting Are ‘What Maisie Knew’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – When mixing parenting responsibility, the separation of those parents and a legal system that cannot address the farce of human retaliation, the results become “What Maisie Knew.” Julianne Moore portrays a rock star, and the mother to the title character.

This is a poignant and relatable story, given the fly-by modern society that substitutes money and technology for responsibility and connection. Maisie is the child caught in the middle of her parent’s messy separation, but she is also caught in the web of “it’s not my turn to watch her.” The strange circumstances that result from such a emotional alchemy is fascinating to experience, but bitter in the context of empathy. It may be that Maisie eventually gets her satisfaction, but the price that is paid for it might never leave her psyche.

Susanna (Julianne Moore) is a fading rock star who is married to Beale (Steve Coogan), a somewhat shady international businessman. They have a 7 year-old daughter named Maisie (Onata Aprile), who experiences their constant arguing. Eventually the marriage disintegrates, and the legalities of custody falls upon Beale. It turns out that he had been conducting an affair with Margo (Joanna Vanderham), who is Maisie’s nanny.



Susanna (Julianne Moore) and Maisie (Onata Aprile) in ‘What Maisie Knew’
Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

This begins the ping-pong effect of who will take care of the child. Margo continues her caregiver role as she becomes Beale’s wife, and Susanna counters that move by “marrying” a bartender named Lincoln (Alexander Skarsgard) to legitimize her claim to Maisie. Neither parent takes the gauntlet of responsibility, and more often than not Maisie ends up with Margo or Lincoln. This begins an alteration of the child’s universe, as in the humans who bring a person into the world are not equipped to guide them through it.

This film is set in modern New York City, even though it is based – amazingly, given its context – on an 1897 novel by Henry James (“The Turn of the Screw,” “The Bostonians”). The screenplay adapters Nancy Doyne and Carroll Cartwright wrote a modern version 18 years ago,

but so much has happened in culture with the addition of technology, that it had to be rewritten further. Co-directors Scott McGehee and David Siegel ("Bee Season") communicates the disconnection with all our connections, especially in a custody war where both parents want to win – not for Maisie, but for themselves.

Julianne Moore and Steve Coogan portray those disconnected parental souls, and they are both chillingly terrific. We are used to Moore's exacting detail and emotional sense in the characters she creates, and her as fading rock star is yet another persona she completely owns. Coogan is surprising. He takes his detached comedic character and flips it to tragedy. His spirit is barely there as he seeks the next deal, and he projects absolutely no warmth, even in the seduction and eventual marrying of Maisie's nanny. It is a familiar role model for American culture, which values the art of the deal over everything else.

The supporting cast adds another layer of mystery to the process of Maisie. Alexander Skarsgard's Lincoln seems at first to be the most inaccessible of strangers dragged into Maisie's world, but he slowly unfolds as his responsibility becomes more (and unfairly) necessary. Joanna Vanderham – as Maisie's nanny Margo – goes along in her seductive beauty at first, but her true self becomes starkly evident when she ends up dumped. The evolution of these two characters is as fascinating as Moore and Coogan, if only to counterpoint the dissolution of Maisie by her real parents.



Lincoln (Alexander Skarsgard) Warms Up to the Title Character in 'What Maisie Knew'
Photo credit: Millennium Entertainment

But the best performance belongs to Onata Aprile as the innocent named Maisie. Instinctively, the child is a survivor, and puts the clues together in her 7 year-old mind to stay relevant in her small world. The sensitivity that Aprile has in several scenes is heartbreaking, and she is able to communicate a range of emotions more deftly than actors with years of training. Her character gets an eventual satisfaction, fraught with many question marks. Yet even this flicker of joy is laced with the black hole that continues to exist with her parentage.

If there is a lesson in "What Maisie Knew," it's about the monumental responsibility of being a parent. The tipping point of what a parent has to give up in caring for another is so subtle, that it can actually determine their progeny's future in security or further disconnection.

"What Maisie Knew" continues its limited release in Chicago on May 24th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Julianne Moore, Steve Coogan, Alexander Skarsgard, Joanna Vanderham and Onata Aprile. Screenplay by Nancy Doyne and Carroll Cartwright. Directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Rated "R"



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