


**MAGGIE GYLLENHAAL** DIRECTOR/ACTRESS

INTERVIEW BY SIMRAN HANS

**The acclaimed actor-turned-director offers a vision of motherhood rarely seen on screen with her first film, *The Lost Daughter***

For her directorial debut, the actor Maggie Gyllenhaal adapts Elena Ferrante's 2006 novel *The Lost Daughter*. In the film, Olivia Colman's Leda is an academic and mother of two whose solo vacation on the Greek island of Spetses is rudely interrupted by a rambunctious American family. She becomes quietly obsessed with them, as well as their youngest member's toy doll. "I'm an unnatural mother," she tells Nina (Dakota Johnson), whose tender interactions with her young daughter trigger Leda's memories of raising her own children. Like many of Ferrante's women, she is smart, funny and selfish, her voracious appetite for life at odds with the domesticity expected of her. The film won writer-director Gyllenhaal the award for Best Screenplay at the Venice Film Festival 2021.

ABOVE  
Olivia Colman and  
Dakota Johnson

BELOW  
Maggie Gyllenhaal



**Q** One of *The Lost Daughter's* key themes is motherhood. Did you feel you brought a maternal aspect to your role as director?

**A** I think the many skills that I have come to have after 15 years of mothering really served me. You do come to realise pretty quickly that if you don't have an organised diaper bag, you're fucked. My DP [Hélène Louvart] has five children, and one of the things she taught me was prep! I kept saying to Hélène, "Look, I'm an actress, I'm never gonna say: here are our shots, and actors, here's where you stand." But because we were so well-prepped, really, it was like jazz, we just rolled. Most importantly on my set, and I knew this both from mothering and acting, I think in every job there is no question that people do a whole other level of work when they're respected, seen and loved. Part of being a director is not just making people feel like [that], but actually hiring people you are curious about so that you *can* respect them and love them. I also believe that mothering massively stretches and grows your heart so that you become a more loving person and I felt the same way with directing. Here I am, holding in my hands the hearts and minds of these people who are offering that to me. It was my responsibility to hold that. It's very like mothering.

**Q** The novel is extremely psychological. How did you go about translating the narrator's inner world into the language of cinema?

**A** Elena Ferrante is a mix of a lot of things. Yes, there are times when she writes, "This is what I'm thinking about," but there are also things that she writes that are un-analysable, which are totally from the unconscious – for example, the doll. It's a perfect cinematic offering that doesn't need too much talking about.

**Q** The film contains "a toast to cruelty". That scene isn't in the novel, but it feels fitting of a Ferrante antiheroine.

**A** It's not actually a celebration of cruelty. It's maybe a celebration of being brave enough to look at the ways in which we

can be cruel. I read the Neapolitan novels first and I felt like [Ferrante] expressed things I had never heard expressed before. What's happening in these women's minds are things we have agreed, as a culture, not to talk about. I had started to wonder: are the edges of my experience normal? Or are they aberrant in some way? Reading Ferrante, I was like, no, no, no! There are other people who think and want and feel very similar things to me, which is comforting. I can't even remember anymore what's in the book and what isn't.

**Q** It sounds like your version of the story has fused with your memory of reading it.

**A** I think that's what Ferrante wanted. She said she feels it's really important that this film be good and the only way it'll be good is if it becomes mine. The movie is in conversation at every moment with the book. It's its sister.

**Q** Something you and Ferrante have in common is the way both portray female desire. Intellectual hunger and sexual appetite are knotted together.

**A** One of my favourite moments in the movie is right in that section where Jessie [Buckley, who plays the young Leda] is talking to her husband on the phone and she says, "No, I haven't even read his recent work," and we're super close on her, and she says, "It was all my own thinking". To me, desire, real intense desire, sexual desire, but all sorts of desire, is connected with your mind. That masturbation scene, for example, yes there's a sexual element but it's also a general hunger and a general kind of anxiety. It's not just about sex, that scene.

**Q** Can you talk about the fragmented structure of the film?

**A** Did you ever read Rachel Cusk's *Coalition* (2019), the book of essays? There's an essay in it called Shakespeare's Sisters, about women's writing. One of the things she talks about is a kind of circular narrative. I had written my film, I hadn't shot it, but I was done [writing] when I read that essay, and I thought: I created a circular narrative that begins where it ends. I have a pretty classic thriller plot, but that is not the way through the movie, right? It's not the kind of plot where you're moving and gathering pieces of the puzzle. The way through the movie is her mind. I think when you're on vacation and there's space, memories come in and they take over. This is a story about a woman who's being taken over by memories. So the structure was just trying to be honest to how that feels, while at the same time moving a story forward, not being goofy about exposition but to explain how we find her here. It's a different kind of storytelling.